

# Henri Coulette

## Selected Poems



# Henri Coulette

November 11, 1927 [Los Angeles, California] –

March 26, 1988 [Los Angeles, California]

Coulette was born in Los Angeles, California, and earned a bachelor's degree in 1952 from Los Angeles State College, now known as California State University, Los Angeles. He earned a doctorate at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. His first book, *The War of the Secret Agents and Other Poems*, was published by Scribner in 1965 and won the Lamont Poetry Prize. His follow-up, *The Family Goldschmitt*, was published in 1971, but the publisher accidentally pulped the volume, possibly contributing to its relative lack of attention. This was the final book published during his lifetime. Coulette spent nearly his entire career as a faculty member at California State University, Los Angeles where he was an influential teacher. Donald Justice and Robert Mezey edited and published Coulette's collected poetry, including work planned for a third volume in 1990.

*The War of the Secret Agents and Other Poems*. New York: Scribner, 1966.

*The Family Goldschmitt*. New York, Scribner, 1971.

*The Collected Poems of Henri Coulette*. University of Arkansas Press, 1990.

# The Junk Shop

The pride of wrights, the joy of smiths abide  
    In fallen things—  
    In tattered carpetings,  
    In blackamoors and chamber pots.  
Useless, they stay there in their show of pride  
    Under the naked watts.

Is that not childhood in the corner there,  
    Color and riot  
    So dark now, and so quiet?  
    To linger there would be unwise.  
What if the tongues of wagons beat the air,  
    And dolls opened their eyes?

O milliners, I see you in the hats  
    Your deftness made,  
    Imprisoned in their shade.  
I mark the cartwheel and the sailor,  
The toque, the cloche—these are your habitats,  
    Eternity your jailer.

The shoe forsaken is essential last.  
    The cobbler fled  
    Barefooted with the dead;  
    His cunning stayed upon the sole.  
Poor boot, your consolation is your past—  
    Now broken, you are whole.

Medusa must have looked upon these clocks,  
    They are so still,  
    With no time left to kill.  
They are like chimneys without lamps,  
Or keys forever separate from their locks;  
    They are like cancelled stamps.

Ah, this is the imperium of things,

Things in themselves.

These crammed and dusty shelves

Contain us in the things we wrought.

These bronze, unbarbered heads are not our kings

But subjects of our thought.

# Cygnets House

This is the last retreat that Graciousness  
Can call her own.  
It stands in brick and stone,  
Victorian to the very eaves,  
But for the servants who, I must confess,  
Are bloody modern thieves.

The daughters of the noble and the rich  
Are finished here.  
What polish, what veneer!  
These Helens have their father's nod:  
Ledean knows by instinct which is which;  
They know the bill of God.

They learn here what is pleasing to a man.  
From stock exchange  
To modern art they range;  
Of ancient houses, recent horses,  
They know the names; and of the Aga Khan,  
The size of his resources.

I ask you, Mrs. Rennie-O'Mahony,  
You, the Queen Swan,  
Inform me if you can  
What cygnets dream of when they sleep.  
Is it the wrinkled faces found on money?  
And do the cygnets weep?

Ignore the beggar, kick the sycophant,  
I love the class  
That paddles on its ass!  
The Begum comes, if Aga can;  
And if he can't, the Begum speaks of Kant,  
Or quotes the Alcoran.

# from The War of the Secret Agents

## VII. CINEMA, AT THE LIGHTHOUSE

I admire the driven, those who rise from choice  
as from a sick bed.

I was of that company,  
as you are, as he is whom you seek.  
“What little I know you must know, or have guessed.  
Prosper, I assume, is dead;

we last met beside the train that had brought us  
into Germany.

We came upon each other  
in the steam of the brakes, and his eyes  
were those of a blindman or a cuckold. We passed  
each other without speaking.

The other one I met once on an airfield  
my first night in France.

If I remember rightly,  
we did not speak; perhaps we nodded;  
perhaps his hand touched my elbow. I recall  
only the scent of the cut hay

and the overwhelming sensual delight  
I knew momentarily  
under the dangerous moon.  
Your prey was of the breathing darkness  
wherein, without father, Cinema was born—  
he was midwife at that birth.

A ghost of a cockney with a gift of tongues, ·  
what did I become?

“Whatever Cinema did,  
and he did it well. And when I slept,  
I could hear the nations underneath my ear,  
and my dreams were of pure light.

This has the ring of nonsense about it, no?  
How can I tell you?  
How can I explain to one  
never there? I was a courier  
and rode the Metro, disguised differently  
every day. I was no one,

I was what I seemed, I did not have to think.  
This house is the grave  
of Cinema, and this light  
his epitaph. How can I explain  
the dead? The dead are an extravagant cheese,  
nor have the sad gift of tongues.

#### XIV. WULF, AT THE ASYLUM

The doctors regard me as a classic case,  
and that's the story  
that I've doctored up for them,  
or you, or any who come rooting  
among my hems and haws. I'm a specialist;  
I prescribe what you ask for,

and you ask for Kieffer. How will you have him?  
wriggling on a rope?  
or alone, the middle-aged  
dandy, mooning over a desk lamp?  
Kieffer, you know, could never cross his ankles  
for fear of spoiling his shine:

we Germans have been seduced by our tailors.  
We move, when we march,  
in an ecstasy of tabs  
and ribbons-the beautiful soldiers! **2**  
So Kieffer sat there at his great cherry desk,  
his ankles never touching;

*2 It must be noted that the speaker was not*

*himself a soldier,  
for he belonged, like Kieffer,  
his superior, to the Gestapo,  
though that organization was properly  
known as the Sicherheitsdienst.*

behind him, on the wall, framing his heavy,  
military head,  
the yellow map of Paris,  
the tacks glistening like caught insects.  
Gilbert stood among the shadows in the office,  
and the shadows were like dark

angels landing and taking off. They whispered,  
Gilbert and Kieffer,  
or was it the sound of wings?  
Desiree had turned against Denise,  
as sisters turn against sisters in a world  
carnivorous, but Kieffer

would delay, admiring his boots, and the tacks  
glistening all night long.  
Desiree was so lovely,  
I could not believe she had a twin,  
that that dark hair, those lost eyes, that crooked mouth  
had any equals ever.

So Desiree came to Kieffer now and then,  
and Kieffer would smile  
as a parent smiles, hearing  
a good lesson, and send her away.  
This all happened a long time ago, and we  
have all died, this way or that.

# The Academic Poet

My office partner dozes  
at his desk, whimpering now  
as he dreams his suicide.  
The November light kisses  
the scar of his last attempt.  
I open my mail: a plea  
for the starving Indian  
children of North Dakota;

a special offer from *Time*,  
*Life*, and *Fortune*; a letter  
from a 65-year-old  
former student, suggesting  
a gland transplant that will make  
a man of me: it hurts him  
to hear what they are saying  
about me behind my back

It hurts me to hear what they  
are saying to my face, pal.  
I circle two misspelled words  
and write, "Help, I am being  
held captive at Mickey Mouse  
State College," across the top,  
wondering, is this the one,  
or the fat woman, perhaps,

with the post-menopause craze  
for strict forms. "The sestina—  
can you use any six words?"  
Well, yes, but they should define  
a circle, which is the shape  
I describe, chasing my tail  
from class to class, the straight line  
disguised, degree by degree.

# The Blue-Eyed Precinct Worker

Liberal, blue-eyed, shivering, trying not  
to look like a bill  
collector or detective,  
I move through the slums in a drizzle—  
the slums of Pasadena, where-nutmeg, bronze,  
and purple-the Negroes live.

They look out and laugh-Mrs. Bessie Simpson,  
Miss Delilah Jones,  
the eleven Tollivers.  
They are extras in a bad movie  
starring no one they have ever seen before,  
no one that they care to know.

I am like a man rich in the currency  
of a lost kingdom,  
for this both is and is not  
what I sought. Somewhere, a screen door bangs  
and bangs, but in the half-light I can't see where,  
or give the sound direction.

A black and white sausage of a mongrel bitch  
follows me, sniffing;  
her obscene stump of a tail  
motionless. We go, the two of us,  
to the muddy edge of the dark arroyo.  
The street light blooms overhead;

our shadows burst forth monstrous and alien.  
There, on the far rim,  
are the houses of the rich.  
It is the dinner hour, and they eat  
prime rib of unicorn, or breast of phoenix.  
It is another precinct.

Oddly enough, I am consoled by the thought

of the delicate  
small animals that move down  
through the arroyo: white coyote,  
masked coon, and the plumed skunk. Come, Citizen Dog,  
we have chosen the short straw.

## Table Fourteen

He lay there, our Babe Ruth, in a plastic bag.  
We opened the bag.

The skin is leather, the color of Playdough,  
And it is cold.

The hair has been removed with a blowtorch,  
Which leaves no marks.

We will not be working on the extremities  
For some time,

So we smear them—the head, the hands, and the feet—  
With Vaseline,

(In the left temple, there is a bullet hole;  
On the right, a bruise)

And we wrap them—the extremities—in white muslin  
To preserve them.

We have noticed, as we smear the Vaseline,  
The strange resemblance

To the King of Swat, who hit sixty home runs  
The year I was born.

. . . We're on the chest, removing the fat, which looks  
Like scrambled eggs,

When they give us another, a newcomer, an infant,  
Stillborn and green.

We put it, the babe, with the Babe's heart and lungs,  
Between his legs.

# Even Now

The whites of your eyes are blue,  
and you show them, evading  
my comic, desperate look.

Your nipples are soft, even  
now as you come, and you come  
so softly, without shudder,

without moan, that I must wait  
the coming of your boredom,  
and that sigh, before I know.

I am like a stranger, cold  
at daybreak, and you are like  
a sleeping house, warm and locked.

# An American Affair

On the headboard of a bed  
he'd never get her into,  
he inscribed her secret name.

No one knows the name for sure.  
America, Moby Jane,  
and Wilderness are good bets.

She was like a promised land:  
you can guess the fantasies  
he had about getting there.

And it's true, too, that his eyes  
had the look, findrinny, glazed,  
of one who pursues a beast.

She was like a wilderness,  
a tolerance of madness  
where he could become himself

He slept in that bed alone,  
profoundly, as a worker  
sleeps who can count on his job—

so profoundly rich men wept,  
dreaming the dreams their poor wives  
wanted frocks the colors of

# Last Effects

He was one of us, surely,  
for look what we have found here  
in the corners where he lived:

unpaid bills, pornographic  
playing cards, six love letters  
with circles over the i's.

He pretended otherwise:  
the photograph of Baudelaire,  
the Burberry, the XK-E.

But there were times, and I speak  
perhaps only personally,  
when everything coalesced—

one time, we had been drinking  
Chivas Regal all that night,  
and the eucalyptus burned

in the fireplace, and the dawn,  
or the false dawn- whichever  
it was-lighted the hawk home,

he said, *When I have kicked off  
and they cut me open, they  
will find a dime-store diamond,*

*worthless, but reflecting light  
where the heart is said to be.*  
And when we cut, we found it.

# Situation Comedy

Grandma arrives first, of course,  
In her chromium wheel chair,  
Her hat on, her one leg tapping.  
Mary Baker Eddy,  
She tells us, has preserved her.

And Uncle Lee, prospector,  
Who finds nothing, ever,  
But a few rocks, rocks  
That glow under black light,  
Worthless and beautiful . . .

And then, my mother-in-law,  
Who hated Adlai's shrewd eyes,  
Who hates Kennedy's hair-do . . .  
The crazy-quilt mantle  
Of the Republic offends her.

Hangdog, my father-in-law  
And I will wash dishes,  
And plate by plate argue.  
He's 1/32 Indian.  
He wants to blow the world up.

Later, flatulent, stunned,  
We'll all watch TV,  
And hearing the laugh track—  
Those tracks are thirty years old!—  
We'll laugh as the dead laugh.

# In a Bad House

“Amerika hat es besser.”—Goethe

—Honky, Whitey, Charley!  
His mouth is a wound, or a lid  
Dancing on a Dutch oven.

I sneak a look at my skin,  
And it's yellow, it's pink, it's white,  
But mostly yellow.

He smiles,  
That's all right, you're transparent,  
And he's right: I hold my hand up—  
It's a window!—and I see

Amerika waking. The white-gold  
Of her hair surrenders her face,  
And her mirror runneth over.

She studies the moons of her nails.  
They give off an eerie light.  
Her astrologer has warned her:

The twins are in a bad house.  
She shrugs and closes her eyes,  
And her fingers moveth downward...

Later, she'll get up, go shopping,  
Buy herself a new polish.  
She will not read this poem.

# About the Kennedys

1.

Bang! Bang! Bang!  
And always in the head.  
Gick, and we're watching TV:  
The Plane, the Widow, the Mass.  
We drive with our lights on.

2.

I wanted to write a poem,  
Personal, about these men,  
Public, I never knew—  
A poem real as newsprint  
Or the gates of Arlington.

3.

I told my next-to-last friend  
About this poem, and he said,  
I'm tired of the Kennedys  
And their getting themselves killed.  
This poem is for my last friend.

# from Private Lives

## 5. THE CHILD WAKES

Thursday, I make a thing in itself.  
I make Thursday a thing.  
I find all the things that are Thursday.

The grass as many as money.  
Dollars and collars and colors.  
She goes away like the Alphabet backwards.

I hide from the color of. I hide from him.  
last night, he had no legs.  
last night, Black and White on Color.

Chirps in a box. A chapter of teeth.  
He explodes like a jack-knife.  
They call him Rainbow. I am the colors of.

# The Land of Blue

Dick is in the Blue Room,  
With bourbon, bread, and cheese.  
He cries the whole night long.

Pat comes to the door, hourly,  
Cocking the dry sobs, clocking  
The life of the Republic.

We feel sorry for them all,  
Even Tricia, whose blonde hair  
Fans out on a blue pillow:

Blue Dick, blue Pat, blue Tricia.  
If the word heart were still used,  
We would say that the heart

Of this importunate land  
Was like an abandoned station  
Somewhere beside broken tracks.

We will say, though, that the light  
Falling on state documents,  
That strong light, has a blue edge.

# The Dragon

Truth is, we couldn't resist it.  
Thank heavens for two-car garages.

It's at home there, a classic  
like a Rolls-Royce-but breathing:

like having your very own  
Diamond Match Company.

A conversation piece,  
Except we don't talk about it.

Six nights in a row I've dreamt  
Of a wall-eyed crossbowman,

And only moments ago  
My wife came in, crown

Askew, arms akimbo,  
The great tears rolling down,

To ask, Are my ladies-in-waiting  
Still waiting? and ran to her room.

# Doors

The two-sided nature of doors  
Is disturbing to lovers.

They would have them have  
One side only as walls have.

We can forgive the lovers—  
And haven't we always?—

Their being so unhinged  
By hints of duplicity.

Trust, rather, the pensioners, .  
Who know that doors yawn

As friends do at daybreak,  
And that they close like wings.

# Today I Begin My First Novel

On my porch, the characters gather,  
Or wander the garden, gathering  
The sick rose, the shattered daisy.

Neglect, Neglect, they cry out,  
Meaning Knock, meaning Begin,  
The girl who is the sick rose,

The crone like a grey flag,  
My dead father coming toward me—  
Stop, I say, meaning Start,

And I start looking up plots:  
*A, who must eat his words,*  
*And is trapped in the city of X,*

*Befriends the mute A-2,*  
*An Unknown, who eats the berries*  
*Of a strange plant and goes mad,*

*While B, before her mirror,*  
*Discovers she has spent the night*  
*As she ought not to have done—*

Ridiculous, the crone cries.  
Child, my father shouts,  
Carrying the rose in his arms

As if she were my mother.  
The garden is filling with snow.  
Tomorrow I begin the sequel.

# On Mange L'Orange Et Jette L'Ecorce

for Henri Dericourt, double agent

1.

I had come to think of you  
As a fiction, like Zero,  
Infinity, or Ulysses.

Now, you confound me, dying,  
As fictions never do.  
Zero says, Hello, Henri.

Infinity says, Goodbye.  
Ulysses, that salt shadow?  
No comment, and turns away.

2.

It is the Forties, and you sit  
Outdoors at the Brasserie Lipp.  
The wind ruffles the pages

Of your book. Racine? No!  
No, it would be Baudelaire,  
And the wind, ruffling so,

On a certain dogeared page  
Shall find certain words  
Underscored, n'est-ce pas?

3.

In Auschwitz, in Belsen, in Dachau,  
It is the Forties, also,  
And the wind, the same wind,

A branch of the same wind,  
Ruffles the funny· beards

Of the Family Goldschmitt,

And the hair, the long dark hair  
Of the women standing there,  
Naked, with their secret beards .

So long a line, the guards say,  
Dreaming of gold teeth,  
And the small rain down doth rain.

4.

A raindrop or two fall  
On the never-to-be-ciphered page.  
You snap the Flowers shut,

Get up, and disappear  
Among the black umbrellas  
Opening everywhere.

# Horace: IV, I

Is the cease-fire over, Venus?

Spare me! Spare me! I beg you to remember

I am not what I once was,

When under the gentle thumb of Cynara. Forbear,

Cruel mother of the Cupids,

To put the screws to one now pushing fifty,

Now cold to your hot breath.

Go whither the young are praying up a storm;

On purple swansdown go,

Revel in the house of Paulus Maximus,

And seek what you must seek,

That someone who would burn most hard, most gem-like.

Noble and handsome both,

The champion of the divorcee and the widow,

A youth of a hundred skills,

He shall bear your standards into the hinterlands;

And when some giver of gifts,

Some lavish rival, fails, Paulus, laughing,

Will set you up in marble

Under a citrus roof near the Alban Lake.

There you will breathe only

The best of incense, and there be charmed by a concert

Featuring the lyre,

The Berecynthian flute, and the reedpipe, too.

There a boy and a girl will dance

In your honor twice a day, day in, day out,

The dance of the Salian,

And shake the earth three times with a bare foot.

Nothing-nor girl, nor boy,

The credulous hope of being loved by either,  
Nor grape, the trials thereof,  
Nor flowers fresh upon my brow-delights me.

Nothing. Then, why, Lygurinus,  
Does a tear now and then trickle down my gray cheek?  
Why does my eloquent tongue  
Fall with an unbecoming silence among these words?

Now, in the dream of night,  
I hold you captive; now I pursue you in flight  
Over the grasses of the Campus  
Martius, O hard-hearted, through the whirling waters.

# Coming to Terms

Being French, being 19th century, we know about boredom.  
It is a glove, and having invented sex,  
We know that the sex of the glove does not matter:

A glove, a simple glove, over the, angry knuckles taut,  
Over the long fingers twitching, over the three  
Mad stars of the palm sweating, over the Devil's Workshop;

And where the glove opens like a wound, a bell, a mouth,  
The pulse tongues out the one word *All*,  
Which is to say *Absolute*, which is to say

*Everything in our grasp*, and we grasp the shoulder  
Of a chair like the chair we knelt on, bare-kneed children  
Saying our Aves, and the chair heard us out,

*O Mother of  $\pi$  and radii and the irregular verb,*  
*Of the Spitwad Wars and the elephants of Hannibal,*  
*Of Doctor and Nurse, two times, in the cloakroom—*

*O Mother, hear us now in the hour of our knees!*  
All that was childhood, and the typographical error  
Is not, repeat not, to be corrected; it is all

That remains of our innocence. We are grown-up now,  
Which is to say *metaphysical*, which is to say *bored*.  
On these long 19th century evenings, we walk the Boulevard,

Asking ourselves, What of the explosion in the desert,  
The one no one witnessed? Was there sound there?  
Or only the silence of Him in His long sleep?

And the chair? Does it become invisible even to itself?  
Or does it dance the grave, stiff-legged Dance of the Chairs,  
Our absence all around it like a strange music?

Or does it stand; faithful, in the desert of the mind,  
And shall we welcome it, happily, reverently,  
As wisemen an oasis, as children a mirage?

# Women, Women

What does a woman want? Sigmund Freud wondered,  
As the clocks hurried him to his final dream.  
Women laugh when they hear of the doctor's question.  
What does the laughter mean? I ask my doctor,  
And she laughs, tugging her hem over her knees.

# Confiteor

The blonde mane, the impossible blue of the eyes,  
The black velvet jacket, the four gold frogs,  
The white lace at the throat, at the white wrist,

And the blue vein, that small hammer at the wrist,  
Like squaring the circle, or a grooming of griffins, or a black rose,  
And the verdict in, kudos to the jury, the jury gone home,

And the judge shucking his black robe in his possible chamber,  
And the verdict is guilty, and the sentence forever,  
Forever the black rose, the blue eyes, the blond mane...

What was your motive? I don't remember. I refuse to remember.  
And the weapon? Guilty. And the weapon? Yes.  
And the blue hammer, yes, impossible, mine, and forever.

# Epigrams

## I. OVERTURE

Stand back and give me room.  
Cogito ergo zoom.

## 2. THE SINGLE LIFE

Being a bachelor's not so hot.  
I find I sleep on the wet spot.

3.

Caesar's seizures were all the same.  
He saw, she conquered, and they came.

## 4. THE WHOLE STORY

In Camelot, King Arthur came a lot,  
With two queens, Guinevere and Lancelot.

## 5. THE MILLER'S TALE

When Absaloun mooned Nicholas through the window,  
It was a right down case of outuendo.

## 6. COMEUPPANCE

Don Juan on the lap of darkness lies,  
And grins, and does not grin, and does not rise.

## 7. THE COLLECTED POEMS OF WHAT'S HIS FACE

Sixteen thousand lines, give or take sixteen  
And no two lines that you can read between.

8.

Everything here is Spanish but the fly.  
My name, Señor, she is Roberto Bly.

9. NEO HAVEN

When we cry Boo la, Boo la, don't be vexed.  
We dump the meaning, but we flush the text.

10. THE TRUE BELIEVER

No question marks for him! No hems, no haws  
The tail of Is inside the mouth of Was.

11.

He has as many wives as there are Fates.  
They are to him as parsley is to plates.

12.

I understand your tongue. I get the message.  
You are a good book open to the best passage.

13.

Everything still is as it was arranged:  
Bird song, and a green shadow on the sill;  
The lilac in its silver vase. Still. Still,  
It must be autumn, for your eyes have changed.

14.

Eurydice dies! The loneliness is grand.  
Still, were she to come back, dust rag in hand...

15.

When memory takes over from desire,  
You need a drink, and in the hearth, a fire.

16.

A one-eyed cat named Hathaway on my lap,  
A fire in the fireplace, and Schubert's 5th  
All silvery somewhere on a radio  
I barely hear, but hear-this is, I think,

As close as I may come to happiness.

# Petition

Lord of the Tenth Life,  
Welcome my Jerome,  
A fierce, gold tabby.  
Make him feel at home.

He loves bird and mouse.  
He loves a man's lap,  
And in winter light,  
Paws tucked in, a nap.

# The Garden

I do the crossword in my backyard garden.  
The clue is Age. Rags, my tattered companion,  
Barks at a mockingbird. The bird barks back,  
A rogue, in Rags's fabulous opinion.

Age is a lifetime, a chinoiserie  
Of aches and pains, is being slightly vague,  
The wit of the staircase while falling down,  
Wisdom, though wisdom may be just fatigue.

The great world rages at the garden gate,  
Crying my childhood name with siren voices,  
Pressing for one more go at plenitude.  
Too late, too late, for I have cut my losses.

To change as music changes, note by note,  
Recovering the theme, and come to closure—  
Now that would be an unofficial joy,  
A private substitute for the world's pleasure.

One has illusions even about that.  
The glories nod. A hummingbird whirrs by,  
Towing the purple evening in its wake.  
Venus regards the garden with a clear eye.

## An Obvious Point Well-Taken

That men of letters in their driest dreams  
Could ever let the spirit and the soul  
Go bare, go bare, no reader quite believes.  
The letter, crude, ill fashioned by a hand  
Crude with fashion, can have its hour apart,  
But spirit, soul, or nothing, if you will,  
Is nothing if the letter be not there.  
So, too, with love. Rainmakers without rain,  
The would-be lovers still exist, still thrive,  
But love, the shower and the torrent both,  
Would never fall did it not fall upon  
That outstretched and inquiring hand of yours.

# Quake

Jack Donne and Raymond Chandler, like shattered pigeons, fall,  
All thud and blunder, quintessential California.

A name like Richter gives a signature to fear,  
And palm tree rats now hearken to the lisp of God.

The swimming pools of Eden suddenly are empty.  
Bertolt Brecht's spectacles lie splintered on the floor,

For all the world is made of glass and makes to break,  
And shines like stars without a heaven, and makes to cut.

Alas, O children of paradise, it comes to this:  
This bed thy centre was, that is a midnight mouth.





























































































































