

Lawrence Lipton

Selected Poems



Lawrence Lipton

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Lipton was born in Łódź, Poland, the son of Rose and Abraham Lipton. The family moved to the United States in 1903 and settled in Chicago. Lipton worked as a graphic artist and journalist for the Jewish Daily Forward, a Yiddish-language daily socialist newspaper. During the 1920s, he associated with Chicago writers Edgar Lee Masters, Sherwood Anderson, Harriet Monroe, Ben Hecht, and Carl Sandburg and wrote for Atlantic Monthly, Quarterly Review of Literature and Chicago Review while co-authoring several mystery novels. In 1957, he produced and directed a series of poetry-and-jazz concerts that became the first West Coast Poetry and Jazz Festival, dedicated to Dylan Thomas, becoming the Southern California counterpoint to fellow Chicagoan Kenneth Rexroth. In 1959, he wrote *Holy Barbarians*, a study of the Beat poets living in Venice (where he had since moved), a book that, on the one hand, brought several writers (like Charles Foster and John Idlet) to Los Angeles to escape mainstream culture, but on the other fed the many caricatures of Beat life that proliferated in the media. *Erotic Revolution: An Affirmative View of the New Morality* followed in 1965. He was married several times, most notably in the late-30s to the mystery writer Craig Rice (Georgiana Ann Randolph Craig). He published two literary novels, *Brother, The Laugh is Bitter* (1942) and *In Secret Battle* (1944).

Rainbows at Midnight. Francestown: Golden Quill Press, 1955

Bruno in Venice West, and Other Poems. Van Nuys: Venice West Publishers, 1976.

On Instruments

1.

And even as inwardly the compass veers
Now here now there, so in the upper air
Valved heart of racing steel with fire-blood fed
My brain the figures on a dial, fog-blind
I ride the storm to where the finger points.
O I have come with trembling to this hour.

It well may be that in some ultimate North
Beyond. the reaches of our farthest flight
The great auroras of the future write
Their pure equations toward a final sum,
But here as yet within this narrow room
The figures blur and all the gauges dim,
The needles tremble in the feeble light.

This much is plain, the fearful hour has come
When certain dread decisions must be made.
The moontides of our years no longer run
Their measured course with even ebb and flow;
The Questioner will brook no more delay
Nor let us off with sly evasions now.
These questions must be answered Yes or No.

2.

Our yoke is fastened with a Gordian knot;
What shall it profit us if some impatient
Alexander cuts the knot again?
This is a knot that bleeds, and war a sin
That leaves its mark upon the guilty brow
(In words of every language save the one

In which the law of love is given) steeped
And stained in custom like a painted grin.

Our age is pivot of the wheeling eons,
More than fate of empire or the war
Of classes is at stake; the sanity
Of man hangs in the balance. Cities tremble
In the shadow of the Bomb. Rockets,
Radar screens and guided missiles, these
Shall be our homeopathic charm against
The Bomb. And what shall save us from ourselves?

Bruno in Venice West

For Giordano Bruno
burned by the Inquisition
in the year 1600

Velvet and warm sweat under the torches
the Procession entered the city, tall bronze men
on the bronze great horses and the boys
carrying banners, the fat prelates wheezing
under the icons, and the musicians

Up Main street, pausing to erect
the great crucifix in the Circle
before the U.S. Post Office, turning
into Windward avenue to St. Marks
Hotel, their flags and vestments, clowns

In motley, peddlers hawking live birds
and Turkish sweetmeats, drunks and tarts
lurching along under the colonnades
like any Saturday night, the P.A. horns
blasting rock 'n' roll, sob ballads

At the tavern doors, the winos
wandering in and out of the alleys,
blinking in the neon lights, and you
Giordano Bruno between the halberdiers
and the smoking torches wandering

In the wind off the Pacific, here
in this our Venice by the western sea
as when, hooded, under the marble
colonnades of old Venice once
you walked, cursing the Doges; burning

Sapphire and crimson under his golden umbrella
the merchant prince, over the pigeon droppings,

among the trash cans, Kinney's dream
of gondolas and gondoliers, his
picture postcard Venice, chicken wire

And Pittsburg Pipe and Iron, the columns
plaster, peeling now, the Grand Canal
fouled up with oil, the derricks taller
than windmills, we too, O merchant prince
live on to see the dregs and ravelings—

Tall steel and glass, high windows,
greed piled high on pride, the blessed
percentages; in vaticans of wealth
the popes and antipopes give audience
to the press, the old putridities,

And men go gibbering to themselves
aloud, hearing nothing, bereft
of all the simple certainties.
“When the first button's wrong, all
are wrong,” you said. Bruno, Bruno,

When the iron key turned in the lock
and the door clanged shut and the iron hand
moved in the darkness, Bruno, was there
sword play in the streets, the torches
of the Night Watch lighting up

Cut purse and slit gullet, perfumes,
pomades, the stinking armour,
rapes, vomits, silk brocades?
Here the century that began in plush
and diamond stick-pin elegance

Explodes grotesquely beyond fire and ice
orbiting in vacuums of space
mathematics of disaster, madmen
trapped in spidery black geometries.

Do you remember Tintoretto's

Mounting circles within circles?
Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus, Dominus.
The bible shouter on the corner
speaks in tongues (I hear bullroarers
drums of Africa!) The nee-Platonist

Newly dead, dumbfounded by his immortality,
Newborn in worlds he never dreamed
where life steams out of methane gas—
Bruno, Bruno, pinned to the center of
the burning wheel, Adam Cadman

In his mystic circle—"All is good
and tends toward good," you said.
I walk beside you, unseen by
the halberdiers, up Ocean Front,
wind whipped, slat-beaten, leaden-eyed

Past Dinty's hot dog stand, a lush
holds out a spastic hand, a junky
hustling for a fix; the moon
is coming up a size too large,
smog orange over the mountainous east.

Is it true the end is fire and ashes
and no phoenix cries? Bruno, in
the cold wet sea wind mountainous
words tell out the last dark secrets,
what is there to hide? I know

Four hundred years have not sufficed
to cool those fires; the gentlemen
of Florence, Genoa her ships at anchor,
blood and incense rancid in the Roman sun,
the poisonous wines of Florence, serpent

Women walk with hooded eyes—what
was old Venice but a tourist trap,
city of traders, merchants, speculators,
middlemen, promoters, bankers-jeweled
slippers in the pigeon shit.

This, Bruno, is the Grand Canal,
swamp scum, litter; that's old Michael
toting a six-pack to his rented room,
the window shades are drawn on Teena
and her lesbian lover, tears will flow—

O Sappho of the golden eyes—this door
conceals a love of three; those eyes
in the window, broken mirrors in an empty
room; rags and ashes, old newspapers, doors
rot on their hinges, and the old go mad

Numbly contemplating death; hand
reaches out to hand, a child
dreams in a fever; old Cap in his
tiny shack reads by a ship's lantern—
upturned faces under water, eyes

Like a stunned carp's. This bridge
has no approach no destination,
hung between two hells. Was there
thunder in your heart the night
you pulled the crystal vault of heaven down!

And Tintoretto's angel hosts lost
endlessly in endless space
with Thor and Adonai—they burned
you for it Bruno. This Venice
of the West was born a bastard

Misshapen in the womb out of
some old world whore of Commerce

by P. T. Barnum bred—when business
and the arts are mated,
money takes the Muse to bed

Bonds debentures title deeds wrapped up
in flags and sermons, stamped
with the Great Seal of the State;
the Laws and Statutes are his alphabet his
capital all upper case, cock o' the walk

Three gilded balls his ensign out of
Calvin Luther by the dark satanic
mills now white supreme, on every
dotted line his X has sealed
your doom—and mine—

He'll kill you for it again, Bruno,
the Xian Gentleman, his
AM FM TV movie image multiplied
is stinking up a continent—
the commercial more arid more becomes the show.

The wind has changed, the dry Santana
hot breath of the desert; it's the Hyperion
sewer you smell: your Venice was no rose bed
open sewers and tanners vats the fish wives
haggling, sweat and fear, the smell that money makes.

The windows darken, only the street lights
and the torches now, our Venice sleeps;
Your eyes burn, Bruno, scanning the heavens,
vacant now; no angels hymn
the heavenly court, we are rational men;

Those are landing lights, a Constellation
blinking to a touchdown, that was not thunder
but a sonic boom, our safety
lies in speed, they tell us, death on wings

the enemy is crafty, never sleeps

And godless, cobalt is his brain
and poison gas, his heart burns liquid
hydrogen, his breath is solar flame
his fingers are a million secret spies
we are his image—sanctified.

The latest satellite arcs across
the sky, a star whose manger is
a launching pad, the child a robot cradled
in steel arms, his halo liquid fire
his brain an electronic brain;

Our wise men bring no frankincense
and myrrh, no visions wrung from love or pain
but only slide rules plots top secret
plans; we do not stone our prophets, Bruno,
we give them target dates.

Agnosco, ergo sum; we've come
full cycle. Cohesion, color, sounds
waves and radiations: res extensa.
Giordano Bruno chemically
changed by thermal action, Jesus

On the cross: a rearrangement
of the particles. Our men
of science will define the event:
a thermodynamically stable
configuration known as death.

Why has the music stopped? Look back,
the Procession fades away, a slow
dissolve; you stand alone; your
lidless eyes are indrawn lost
in contemplation like a foetal sleep

Where are the drums and trumpets?
I had thought to hear the papal legate
read out your doom in bastard latin
hear a shout go up to heaven
with your flames. I should have known;

A dead God needs no crucified
to sanctify his name; no faith,
ergo, no auto da fe;
we have a choice of trivial martyrdoms:
if we must die for truth we die self-slain.

Your image fades and there is nothing now
only the blind window panes
of broken houses telephone poles
that lean against the moon cracked
pavements sinking into foul canals

I turn, retrace my steps to Windward
and the Ocean Front; the pigeons
of St. Marks Hotel are roosting in
the plaster niches, one lonely jukebox
whimpers from an open tavern door

“I love you baby, why do you treat me
so mean?” A single wino staggers
down the empty street, I cross
the beach and look out to sea. “Sophocles
long ago heard it on the Aegean”—here too

Many a truth-tormented Oedipus
has reached land’s end, walked in
for reasons Sophocles never dreamed
and made his last incestuous marriage with
the sea, as Bruno made his with the flame.

Homeward bound I stop for coffee at
the Greek’s, scan the morning papers—

This night's business may have meaning
for our time—a poem or a play? I have
work to do. I think (to paraphrase)

I shall not drown myself today.

Materia Poetica

1.

Psychoanalysis

Pursued by a tiger in his sleep
he turned himself into a horse turd
and woke up to find
he'd been eaten by sparrows.

2.

Success

Advice to a poet who would win prizes:
Step carefully around this ruin
and that rickety tower
lest you topple their gods.

3.

Quiz Program

For a billion dollars in cash
and a hatful of Purple Hearts
What is the moral equivalent
of a bayonet in the belly?

4.

Prescription

Said the old doctor to the young doctor:
There are three roads to success.
Per os, per rectum and per vagina.
Choose your orifice.

5.

Funeral of a Poet

Said the chief mourner to the gravedigger:
We don't suspect any foul play.
If he was murdered,

he was murdered by friends.

6.

Artist's Choice

Giotto drew a perfect circle,
freehand, with a brush.
When he finished he had two choices,
to sell it for a toilet seat,
or save it for a halo.

7.

Iconoclast

When the idol-maker lost faith in his gods
he put time-bombs in their bellies.
With the legacies from the pious dead
the priests built a new temple.

8.

Critic

When they came to take him away
he was measuring with a piece of string
the distance between the picture on the wall
and the picture in the mirror.

9.

Prophecy

When the knife was at his throat
the ram spoke to Abraham and Isaac:
Save a horn for Moses. He will need it
to proclaim liberty throughout the land
on the day of judgment.

10.

Trial Balance

Fra Luca Pacioli one day
met a young virgin in tears.

Balancing compassion against penance
he invented double entry bookkeeping.

11.

Divine Justice

When an ugly woman
is tried for adultery
God himself
grants a change of venue

12.

Theory of Value

Said the banker to the cannibal :
You will come to no good end;
The wise man does not devour his capital,
he makes it work for him.

13.

Theft

I do not wish to press the charges,
the girl said to the magistrate.
In Paradise the pear tree
still weeps for Augustine.

14.

Death of Li Po

Had I been drunk when it fell into the river
the bottle would have been empty
and I would not have had to dive for it,
starting that loony legend.

15.

Don Juan on Lovemaking

One piece of advice: Neither poetry nor song
can sustain indefinitely
a romance without money

or a love nest without toilet paper.

16,

Deodorant

Remember Antaeus.

One day we shall be conquered
by men who are not ashamed to weep
and women who are not afraid to sweat.

17.

Apocalypse

The world is coming to an end.
Newsprint is getting smaller every day
distances are fading
and sex isn't what it used to be.

“I Was a Poet for the F.B.I.”

Murder, suicide, mayhem. Wow! The stories I could tell. See my agent.

Even before God was insulted at Yale I was at the U of I picking up spondees and trochees in the Co-op and counting the condoms in the boneyard on Monday morning.

I was Ed Hoover’s man at YMCA College collecting free verse in the ladies’ room and once, disguised as Oscar Wilde, in the men’s toilet. Cash McCall is my co-pilot.

At the Green Mask, in the very shadow of the Tribune Tower-may I speak freely? the beard of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was burned in ritual -orgy, hair by hair.

In Chicago I joined the Escalator Movement under the name of Gertrude Stein and nobody suspected anything. From a poet named Rexroth I learned about six different kinds of sex, all of them subversive.

In dives on Rush Street we lay on divans in mixed company and talked about modern art, waited on by naked African pygmies. We sat on the floor and read Edna St. Vincent Millay, aloud. I could name names and places.

On orders from Ezra Pound I infiltrated the Saturday Evening Post and planted excerpts from Edgar A. Guest. One night I broke into the Saturday Review and lopped off Literature from the masthead. Nobody noticed it.

Four times I escaped from behind curtains-iron bamboo, dimity and shower, and once I barely made it by way of a bedroom fire escape clad only in pajama tops. Danger is my business.

I found an atheist in a foxhole and reported him to General MacArthur. Twice I was shot down in missions over Union Square, Waldorf Cafeteria, Camp Nitgedieget and the League of American Penwomen. Arthur Godfrey is my co-pilot.

I joined the Brownian Movement before it split with the Fourth
Dimensheviks. Big Jim Oppenheimer was its Party boss. I would tell
you about my affair with Tillie Zilch but that's still classified.

I was there when they dubbed the Communist Manifesto into the movie of
Charley's Aunt, and nipped the conspiracy to smuggle quotations from
Karl Marx into the popcorn bags. Now they're plotting to foul up the
rhymes in the singing commercials.

Ten grand buys my tale of horror at the Cotton Club when Louis
Armstrong sang Eli Eli on secret orders from the Elders of Zion,
and the borschteapades in the Holland Tunnel with Mickey Katz on
Walpurgisnacht. Commander Whitehead is my co-pilot.

For an extra grand I'll tell all I know about free verse, free love, free lunch,
free wheeling and free pop at barbecues of the American Academy of
Arts and Letters, a Dadaist front controlled by Tristan Tzara and Ogden
Nash.

Now, back in the free world, with my unexpurgated copy of Anne Morrow
Lindbergh's The Unicorn and the complete files of the Soviet Ministry
of Culture I am Poet in Residence at Time, Life and Fortune. Zsa Zsa
Gabor is my co-pilot.

Summa Theologica

When the monks boiled down the Dumb Ox
for the market in holy relics
they quoted the Angelic Doctor
on essence and being.

Friends, when you nibble your nails
be sure you swallow the pieces
lest the Liberal Clergy find them
and conjure with them.

They patched up Genesis with three hairs
from the beard of Darwin
who knows what they shall yet do
with Einstein's fiddle.

Inquest

Lock the door. Let no one leave the room.
A crime has been committed here. An old man
Stricken on his bed, his face turned to the wall
A derelict six days dead and stiffening ‘
In a rented room. The headlines in their short
And ugly words of violence report a miracle:
This morning at the Mass the wine turned water
And the bread to stone. Cold April comes.
The fruit is still-born in the seed.

Agnosco ergo sum. We’ve come full circle.
Velocity, cohesion, color, sound,
Waves and radiations: res extensa.
Giordano Bruno chemically changed
By thermal action; Jesus on the cross
A rearrangement of the particles.
The man of science with his final breath
Defines the event: a thermodynamically
Stable configuration known as death.

Signs and rumors thrive. In Africa
A gateway lonely and tremendous tall
Leaned one hour against the moon and vanished.
Divers drunk with rapture of the depths
Have perished with a strange compassion, and
Airfaring men have seen God’s murdered eyes,
Burned blind—such is the venom of our fears—
Dart between the tracers and the flak
and disappear. We take this testimony

From lips of dead demonic men whose eyes
Gaze inward on unspeakable things. And I
Who cannot witness to their truth record
These singular events for what they’re worth.
Let each come forward in his tum and speak
If he is innocent of the crime. Or guilty.

Tried, self-judged, self-sentenced and self-slain,
For who is guiltless? then let each confirm
The primacy of love, lest past rebirth
We die and leave these large ignoble ruins
To house the wild and innocent things of earth.

