

ON THE SENTENCING OF PHILIP BERRIGAN,
PORTLAND, MAINE, 1997

John Peck

On Chittagong's tidal flats
tankers and container ships
tilting or splat down, strewn in some titan's rummage,
at sundown bequeath rust gilding to the salvage magnates—
the brief bloom of an age.

A trained efficient killer

Berrigan's phrase for himself in the War,
artillery then infantry. Then the collar
on a Jospheite teacher of black kids in D. C.,
New Orleans, Baltimore—

sentenced once more in old age
for boarding a destroyer at the Bath Iron Works
in Lenten daybreak. Torches
of the Bangladeshi ship breakers slowly
sizzle off I-beams, leaving bite-size chunks
of flank and rib cage sawed
for the furnaces—not his scuttling
of nihilism, the smooth gray god.

It smashes before it builds,
his tool *le marteau* and its *martura* witness
brunted often—winter
dictates his wool cap, while our homes huddle
in a chill that bones the novus ordo
sæclorum of mid-July in the Hamptons
and August at Alamogordo.

My core Erasmus, pinned here in my lair
 seduously, stays intact,
 on both men the same profile,
 a hawk's through a chink in the night, its compact
 turbulence the sign
 that down in I'll not rot, nor dance free of the leash,
 but meet thee in the mass of the pile.

Here stones rumple woodlots
 once cleared by oxen: no trace of the browsers
 who nudged their pink lips low to them.
 Pattyquonck and Ponsett, brambles and vines
 festooning a wrecked shambles—
 thus Thou barrier brunt God!—though I climb through them.

Lumpy and absorbent through the long ebb
 of the Algonquians,
 thorns over them uncombed,
 their tons of withheld action bulging stents
 through those girdles
 or aiming a drawdown swerve that breaks out
 among the starved and the bombed.
 This fighter conned the idols
 crammed and moving, but also the descent
 whose harrowings promise a dear work.

Narrow steps steeply down,
 some packet boat it seems from the 19th century,
 risers drilled through for drainage,
 here it is, then, clammy cool below decks,
 the corridors in no hurry
 to uncoil, sheathed in creamy wainscotings,
 dwindling passage
 and a mirror's deep glintings
 at one tight turn.

His was the *Sullivans*,
 destroyer Aegis class, whose missiles pin
 a continent, tracker balls cueing its towers.
 It names five kin sunk together,
 rescue having been called off—the abandoned then
 standing for all at hazard now, all men
 held by all, ignorant or cold, under the powers.

By the time they booked him
 his innovations lay behind him: anointing
 beside his older brother
 with blood and jellyfire an altar of draft files
 sprawling a parking lot,
 celebrants drastically pointing,
 using only from one's own body and back yard
 what was being used on others.

The charges were construed
 as narrowly as the gangplank up which he led:
 damages to property,
 persisting in trespass, and contempt. They omitted
 bad manners:
 before dawn, the rummages of spirit
 out on the empty dock, impeccably rude—
 not waiting to be greeted.

Merton had warned the brothers:
You won't survive America unless
you hold to your disciplines—
 no outcomes to count on, love's arms callipered
 more and more outward, the back
 of a maestro riding the driving presto nailed there
 until it gives, as he had given,
 himself.

Knowing, too,
 that the world—*werold*, the time of humankind
 on the iffy shingle of being—
 is simply for the children, though human mothers
 have held their own by the throat
 in the Kenyan bush when Abyssinian stalkers
 in the slave trade were nearing,
 and stifled those who cried out.
 Pig, tiger, hedgehog, all our brothers.

The destroyers must not win
 yet they cannot lose: the aimed man squirming gets gulped
 by what he will not swallow,
 hap not to be helped,
 its sonar gut reaching the tilting parts of depth,
 that thick spin lodged in grounding,
 and with the shamed ultraviolet of North
 he torches its gut into liftoff
 and the whole mass creams breaching.

Hard-won law assesses
 perpetual damage with its severe beauty,
 but also through ditto jaws
 and a cued tongue. So John Schuchardt, attorney
 and former Marine captain,
 knelt on the courthouse entrance stairs invoking
 Tokyo and Nuremberg
 while tapping a frame drum—

Nichidatsu's monks
 have walked it everywhere. The field it spreads
 it drums from the fields it destroys—
 rearranges
 iron filings to its slight current of mercy,
 I go, and it sends back the changes.

Actually to board her?
 whose forging my boyhood fantasy riveted then rode
 squally into swells,
 seam-welded and double-hulled at the urging
 of millennia—tossed under,
 scuppers spewing then gurgled, many vanishings
 sucking at her to claim her

for their sakes and mine:
 I am brash bone at grips with handrails corkscrewing
 to the engine room, I am the bucket
 of brains luminescing over the screens, I am the hand
 with hammer and red splatter
 unable to disarm it but covenanting
 with beginnings and with the end—

though in fact I have not done this:
 have only stripped to my allotment of borrowed
 integrity and stood naked, while the act,
 the free thing, like a wave
 breaks from mile-heaped billows pistoned by
 the salt-rumped moon.

And so to the bridge
 and pilothouse they went,
 gaining the aft gangway before daybreak,
 to the heli pad, to the missile hatch covers,
 banging the crew awake,
terrorizing, splashing it around,
 tracker ball dented, a red mess all over
 the panels and levers.

And yet search is also
 a downward teacher, zooming in on string
 or a coastline to unpack
 more and more length, past the border guards
 into an unfolding country,
 density's outward—the whole in ongoing
 announcement, my limit
 coming at me with the dissolving force of entry.

Aristotle's grown-up, *spoudaios*,
 tracking *nous* beyond names while present, urgent,
 searching, in our day though not only ours,
 not to stand apart but to sweat in darkly joyous
 turnabout: sucking it up, drenched while drained, dripping
 with the dew of the first hours.

The loud rooms in Gloucester
 taverns, their accordion jammers—as in Hamburg's
 dockside saloons and the dives
 where Brahms played whorehouse piano to win young bread:
 I bend close, the student listens
 for both our drone and the rare interplay
 of gold with tar—an Iron Works bar—then I leave,
 inhale wind off the inlet

and track one craking gull,
 his tilting glide scrupulous for food,
 then victory folded in
 as he tucks down rasping one Volsung cry,
wind age wolf age ere world plunges wide
 its rough size
 nerving the myelin wall of the sky's cranium
 and the seabed's ooze.

There is no going back behind
 fission's products, no shutting
 the empty tomb, no caulking the self-rupturing word.
 Depth gullies not only below welded keels,
 sinks not only through pitchblende,
 but also along the sweetening
 embittering gin swirl in the eye as sun uncoils
 buoyancy from basis. I have long been aboard.

The Tolstoy of horseflesh and behavior,
 the Homer of homesteads
 parked out in nostalgic floats of simile,
 you are that close: conjured substance, neuralgic
 phantasms of the real,
 through which spindle the victim, wilting in heat
 but haunting every last claim

and the March rains bead from air:
 where am I now, rare father and brother, edging closer
 by going with the dare
 that inserts least force, the ablative absolute
 of power, as the boulders of Pattyquonck
 pile bracken thirsty for the drink
 that they are not in the field of the world, unmet.

Sponge ice graying white rivers,
 somnambulist mist shearing at daybreak,
 moss agate's sunken lace—
 God gropes unfinished, the book of questions not closed,
 and process sheathes a cult
 of tom-toms past hearing at the roots of fire,
 for the trans-animal
 at large and at peace is the shatterer, the shock healer
 of anything too soon wise—
 silent, adamant, unsealing a fathom-fathering
 medicinal abyss.

Shock-shackled life hangs
 not from some rock in punishment or buckled
 into a casemate, the salvoes
 punching closer, but awake at the featureless
 clock face of obliteration
 and birth flooding the same meshes, murder
 and ardor pressing in order
 from one source—this, this total breaking the mold.

Ecstatic heaviness—so much that
grazing heads seek it here out of homing need—
slowly yet emphatic,
coming as duty comes to the ruminant hand.
And the dark head lifting
is any in this field, bull or human,
that forages the bending shine of courage
from the will's slivery chance.