



God of the Poets

by Robert Nichols

Dedication

To those who listen;
those who read the words with minds
and hearts perceptive;
those who sense the forms and textures
of canvas and wood and stone and image
resonating within their own essences;
to those who feel the music with the sway
and truth of their own souls—
to those by whom Art is given purpose.

PART ONE

LUST AND DELIVERANCE

Chapter One

It was two-wheeled madness the night of near-death. He was the motorcycle man and he roared through the constraints of mortal fear with tears streaming down his face.

He wasn't crying.

Wildly he rode the highway of death.

And what of his baby children far across the night-cloaked city and far across the abyss of failing love? What of their young hearts in the presence of this death so madly pursued by their loving father around sliding curves and full blast down tear-blinded straightaways? What of their questions and the answers he alone could give?

What of neglect and compassion?

For the sake of his daughters he would not have ridden that moment of the road and the dizzy truth and the dark speed of it all. For them he would have veered from the reckless hilarity of guilt and honesty and stayed steadfast and safe upon the most confining of paths.

But the night he rode the motorcycle after drinking beer and whiskey and after being forgiven his sin by Reverend Tom, truth had come like a sudden storm upon the calm of denial. What could he have known of the mortal danger of a burden removed?

The killing danger of sudden freedom.

Ironic, don't you think?

How he sought the taunting laughter of death down the speed-blurred rural lanes only to round a curve and know the screaming terror of his prey confronted—the slaving jackal cornered, red-eyed and fanged. And how, in that instant, with fear dispelled by certainty, the demon was banished and, alone, he knew the absolute silence of Death's resolution. There was no turning. All that lay before him was the certainty of a wild ride terminating in a barbed wire fence.

It was so very calm.

No fear, no panic, no regret.

So calm.

But no need for sorrow now. He lived to write this letter:

Dear Jack,

I know I still owe you a motorcycle for the one I ran through the barbed wire fence years ago. You've been a good friend and have never mentioned it to me, but I haven't forgotten and someday, if I ever quit being broke, I just might buy you a new one. (Or, maybe not—those damned motorcycles are dangerous.)

Your Friend,

Bill

I'll tell you about some of it. My name is Omni, I'm a God and I see most everything that goes on—at least around here. Most writers secretly believe they are Omni—perhaps I too am a product of ego, imagination, and hint of art. It matters not—believe what I tell you in this context and leave My Divinity to the contemplation of others. Words are but crude hints at the real awareness that dwells within you anyway. And Me, I'm just manifested here as a metaphor suspended between myth and incomprehensible Truth.

Nice to meet you, too.

I'll begin this story of William and his love and his art, and, mostly, his humanity. I know it well: William and the art that could destroy him, the love that could save him, the humanity that made it all worthwhile.

The night of the motorcycle began years earlier when a young lady named Luci asked Bill if he had any qualms about adultery. Always ready for life to take a shot at him for the sake of yet another humiliating joke, defensively, he showed none of the instant excitement he felt (I mean she was one nice looking young lady with such smooth white skin and such large round breasts and just a hint of such a sexy, secret laugh that probably not too many people had heard) and casually answered her salacious query with, "I don't believe in it."

It was the seventies, that wildly promiscuous glimpse of Olympian abandon ephemerally wedged between the new-found liberation of "the Pill" and the stifling curse of herpes simplex and AIDS. There weren't too many of you human types turning down the not-too-subtle nuances of a lust-hearty proposition back then, regardless of marital status.

Luci was shocked at Bill's guarded reply. He was a party guy, a published poet, a Democrat—how could he be so prudish as to reject the warmth of her willing and Pill-protected loins?

Taken aback, she whispered the only words a child-woman of the seventies could have uttered in such a situation. "Well, fuck you, Bill," she said and started to storm away to the opposite corner of the Fellowship Hall where her husband, Tom (the reverend) and Bill's wife, Rachel (the holy-lady) were discussing more wholesome issues.

"Wait... please," he said, touching her arm and turning her face and her breasts and her hips and her intimate regions and all-manner-of-parts-and-pleasures-there-upon to him. "You don't understand," he said with eagerness barely suppressed by the demands of decorum appropriate to the First Presbyterian Fellowship Hall Marrieds' Social. "What I meant was, adultery is an old Jewish law—Luci, I'm neither old nor Jewish. Hell, yes, do you want to try a little adultery?"

"Maybe," she said with a delightfully wicked flash of a smile. Then with a whisper of sensual laughter she departed him, saying, "Give me a call next week, Billy. I'll be all alone."

Of course she wanted to try a little adultery with him.

And, of course, he called her the next week. And, of course, they did have a round or two or twenty or fifty of nasty old adultery over the next year or so. It was his first and only go at an extra-marital fling, his sole transgression of love's requisite marriage vow. Though at the time he rationalized the relationship would be beneficial to his sexual psyche and to the experiential base upon which he, as a writer, endeavored to build literature—you know, just doing a little research. In fact, the guilt that emanated from such unabated acquiescence to the dastardly "urge" nearly led to his demise. You see, though not apparent considering his actions, or should I say interactions with the minister's wife, the problem with Bill was that he was a much more decent person than his environment would ever allow him to be. Many of you human beings are. Regardless of the mythic misconception of My "holy" essence as a God, I clearly understand that in the face of unbridled temptation there is no course of action to be taken without dire consequence. To feign piety and reject that which is pleasurable and beautiful is a dangerous form of self-deception; to cast aside sensibility and the dogmas of decent judgment and partake of that which is so wantonly desired is a form of moral alienation.

It doesn't give the average human a fair choice, does it?

And to this standard mix of lust and loyalty we must add another strata of complication to the blessings and curses of William Mason. While leading a life of apparent normalcy, replete with an unexceptional domestic and vocational identity—a married white male with two children and a steady job; in truth, it was all a sham, a hoax perpetrated by love and decency. Bill, and I say this with considerable gravity, was an artist: a person haunted by a gift for seeing and saying. A poet to the core, there was nothing trivial to any of his pedestrian endeavors. With

intense clarity of observation and expression, he filled notebooks with vignettes of the sunsets and the sorrows and mundane ecstasies of life unfolding about him. To maintain the status quo yet and know the beating of an artist's heart within one's being creates a seeming contradiction most difficult to bear.

But, contrary to the bleating of Bohemians and the raging of recluse navel worshipers, it is in such a common crucible as the prosaic vessel of day-to-day reality that the finest art is synthesized. It's just not easy.

Bill was an artist, born to off-kilter and disproportionate realms of brilliance and sentiment crowded awkwardly into the confines of the normal life he attempted to sustain.

Don't pity the poor artist, though. Believe me, on some level, in some application, you all are artists. Did you know, artists are God's windows and as such, all eyes that see, participate in the creation of a Divine image? You don't need to know this yet, but what harm to plant the idea.

In any case, to return to the subject of sex, whether aspiring spirit or respiring couch potato, once the pretty person steps into your life and says, "Hey, big boy/Hey, little lady..." and once you realize that deep within the biological cortex of your being it sounds like a fine idea, you don't have a chance of remaining a physically and morally balanced individual any more. You're doomed by the happenstance of carnal opportunity to either biological frustration or moral condemnation for the rest of a whole phase of your life.

Perhaps one could simply avoid temptation. Good luck—the convents and monasteries of the world all have such ostriches and self-flagellating fools among their ardent populations. In the real world temptation is as common as Kool-Aid.

Bill thought he was avoiding temptation. Luci (luscious, horny Luci) was the wife of his minister. He had only known her in casual and polite situations—the lady-girl who looked so good as she poured the innocuous nectar of church-brewed punch into countless cups along a serving line of numerous holy-do's held in the basement of the house of worship. Granted, he had become addicted to the fruit-tangy sweetness of her special "elixir of fellowship" and had come to crave the cup as a druggie might his needle, a drunk his bottle. And, true, he was likely to be found repeatedly visiting that segment of the buffet table behind which she dwelled. "Why, William, I do believe you enjoy my famous, three-fruit punch. Do you want some more?" she would say.

"Just a taste more," he would reply. "Just a taste."

And, undeniably, he had come to realize a previously unaccustomed level of religious fervor during that portion of the Sunday service when Luci would perform her weekly solo in such soft and airy tones sung by lips which seemed could only inflect adoration for a God.

It was really his wife's fault anyway. It was she who orchestrated the circumstantial intersection of the psycho-biological cravings of her husband with the lovely seductress. Rachel is the one who took him to church.

Rachel was Bill's loving wife and also the dominant theological influence upon the ever-open portals of his awareness. In truth, during the good years of their marriage, Bill was more of an agnostic than anything else—a dormant skeptic who was passing as a Protestant for the sake of preserving an otherwise harmonious relationship. It wasn't difficult for him to be polite at church gatherings. Usually he agreeably trailed along behind Rachel's religious zeal, accepting holy obligation as part of the deal he had struck when he married her. He believed, as a condition of fervent adoration, one must be willing to subscribe to the whole package—even elements contrary to one's own inclinations.

Somewhat dishonest, perhaps, but it was just a phase he was passing through. I'd better tell you about phases. It's very important you understand the concept governing the progressive nature of life. A properly developed life is a series of interrelated but distinct phases; thus, eliminating the stigma of acquiring a psychological or spiritual burden for "the rest of your life" for all but the very old or the very stagnant.

So, if it weren't for Rachel and the phase Bill was going through at the time, he would have never been faced with the dilemma of temptation in the alluring form of the minister's saucy young wife.

Though it might begin to appear so, Bill wasn't a raging sex fiend. He was just like most humans, men and women alike, who are caught up by the complex enigma of lust, love, and marriage.

Perception by the senses provides the only access to physical reality afforded standard *Homo sapiens*. You folks have five senses feeding a three-pound mass of nerve endings called a brain. From the sight, taste, feel, smell, and sound of a world of sensual encounter you infer all matters moral and philosophical. It's a little like the blind man and the elephant's ass but, for now, for this phase of human evolution such limited perception will suffice. Even if I could give you the real scoop you wouldn't believe it anyway—it's just too obvious.

And Luci was such a pretty lady. She was soft and young. She had a look about her eyes and lips so captivating of Bill's attentions that, though devoutly committed to his wife, often he had fought unsuccessfully to banish lusty thoughts of Luci from his mind. Luci was a living paradox of voluptuous innocence. She had no qualms about hypocrisy—to her it was a part of someone else's vision of a world of impossible purity. She didn't have answers—she only had needs.

And how the needs did flow when, the following week, in the back seat of the minister's mega-Buick, she dug her fingernails into his back with searing passion as she crushed him against the heat of her naked breasts and sang songs to him that no Sunday God, in the best of hymns, had ever heard.

Do I sound like I'm getting personally involved in this story I'm telling you? You're damned right I am. Do you think that the Cosmic Love that drives the Divinity of this universe is insensate? There is a reason I see it all, I feel it all—a reason I am titillated, terrified, castigated, and caressed by ubiquitous involvement in the reality of this world: *The perception of God is the reason for it all.*

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It was months later, after numerous clandestine encounters. They were in a distant motel room. They had both fallen asleep and were stretched out across the bed in separate, satiated postures after a thoroughly gratifying session of uninhibited sexual pleasure. Their hands were touching lightly, more as a rote gesture than as an expression of storybook affection.

They were naked beneath a sheet, but, in the drowsy respite from passion there was more flesh than there was excitement about their bodies.

She stirred, and then he. Drowsily she looked at her watch. They had been dozing for almost an hour. They spoke. Their voices were subdued. There is always great risk of a harshness of honesty at that point of an illicit rendezvous.

Luci started talking about her husband. "Tom is a wonderful man," she said blankly.

"What?" Bill hated thinking, especially when he was in bed with Luci. Guilt and thinking were the same and he feared them both.

She went on, "He's so kind to me and to everyone. He really treats me nice. He talks nice around me, he opens doors for me, he buys me flowers for no reason at all. Such a nice person."

She was being mildly, teasingly cruel.

"Sounds kind of dull to me," said Bill in a like mood.

"Well, asshole, he's not so bad in bed either," she replied with some emotion.

"Nice talk for a minister's wife."

"Hey, Mr. Innocence, he's your good friend, isn't he?"

"When did I ever say that my good friends couldn't be dull husbands?"

"He's not a dull husband," she said and she wasn't defending him. "He's a wonderful

husband."

They had stolen an entire afternoon. They had shared wild pleasures, they had slept, and now she was talking about her husband.

"Do we have to talk about this now? I mean, I just finished screwing good-friend Tom's sweet little wife and now all she can do is tell me about flowers and opening doors and who-knows-what-else of God-almighty niceness. Hell, yes, this would all be so much easier for me if he were a colossal jerk or if he had lost his wang-o in the war or something, but the fact is he's your good husband and my good friend and we just had a good fuck. I never meant to like a Presbyterian minister, much less did I ever intend to end up in the sack with a Presbyterian minister's wife. It just happened, and you're so damned sexy it isn't until we've humped each other senseless that I realize maybe there's something wrong going on here at the Bluffview Motel."

She severed the contact of their hands and said, "Do you want to quit?"

"Didn't we try that already? A month ago maybe, or was it a week?"

"Yeah," she said as she turned on her side facing him and smiled. "It seems like we did and then you grabbed my bottom on the way to the parking lot after vespers and it started all over again." She touched him and smiled when she found him aroused.

"Damn," he said as he reached for her. "It's the scandalous way those church skirts of yours cling to your round little cheeks and unmercifully stir my lust to sin. It's not my fault," he said and her breasts were pressed against his chest and her warm lips were soft upon his neck.

"It's not my fault," said Bill and she kissed him.

"And..." he said and she was so damn hot, "besides, it's too late anyway."

She drew back slightly and looked at him and said, "What do you mean, 'too late'?"

"I mean it's too late for us to quit," he said as he rolled over upon her and moved within the sigh and song of her sweet heat. We've already started."

Chapter Two

Ring!

"Ring!" spoke the phone to the sleep-early morning through the dimness. And it spoke again and once more before he made his way to the kitchen and answered it.

"Hello," he said hoarsely.

"Hello," said the strained voice of his friend. "This is Reverend Miller speaking."

Tom Miller had been his friend for years. Their friendship had begun when Rachel insisted she and Bill be married in her church rather than taking Bill's suggestion that they simply purchase a few moments of the time of a local magistrate. When his plan was summarily and emphatically dismissed as nonsense, he told himself it didn't matter. It was a lie, but he was just entering his Acquiescent Phase and naturally was becoming accustomed to regular episodes of self-deception.

"You're going to love Reverend Miller," she had told him. "He's so young and handsome and strong and peaceful."

"This guy doesn't travel around with twelve friends, does he?"

"William!" she chided, half playfully.

* * * *

I'd better tell you about love.

From My, capital "M" My, perspective I have seen much love. I've felt it all, too. Like any good God, I'm not just an objective observer who watches the lives of My beings and keeps score based upon some arbitrary prescription for appropriate behavior. I'm right there feeling every moment that passes through all the senses of My domain. I've felt love but also I've felt babies by the millions as they've pressed the portals of their mother's wombs; I've felt the terror of impending doom through the eyes and minds of countless victims; I've stalked the innocent with the lusty shame of the demented; I've shouted rage and shuddered sorrow all down the tear-burnt face of death; I've heard the counting of five candles burning upon a clown-faced cake and known the smell of wax and wick blown out with glee; I've been with the chilled, snow-brushed flowers of early spring and with the fatally captured flies in the tortured entanglement of webs—I've been with the spiders; I've rushed through the selfish clamor of crowds to the special arms of waiting passion; I have clamored selfishly and blindly as a mob; I've tasted the finest morsel of mortal creation and I've spat out the maggots of rancid meat; I have known the feelings of a living world.

I'll tell you about love. I've been there.

I am the "Omni" of the Omnipotent. I am the Gatherer. I am the "All" and happily leave the "Powerful" to Others. Within this small realm of a simple planet I am as close as you are likely to find to being omniscient.

I have no reason to brag.

It's not as if I assert any might. I am an observer—a compassionate observer. I wouldn't think of messing with the course of discovery that is the odyssey of existence. Such a concept of deity is the fiction of the fearful and the fantasy peddled by exploitative hawkers of myth.

Basically, you're on your own. But don't despair—I promise it's worth the effort to persevere the challenges of life. With proper awareness, the journey can be fantastic.

Take love for example.

Yes, love.

And, by the way, if you think for a moment that I don't care, then you need only to look to that part of your universe, or your species, or, most honestly, to that part of yourself that does not care.

Come to think of it, I'm not going to tell you about love, after all. Instead I'll tell you about Bill and Rachel Mason. They were much in love.

From early in his youthful days and throughout the rest of his life, whenever he thought of her he felt a stirring in his loins and a pleasant falling sensation in his heart. And for her, likewise, whenever her thoughts focused upon him she felt an exhilarating sensation in her heart and often a stirring in her loins. Though they didn't know it, they knew more of love than most may ever feel.

There was much laughter and friendship in their lust. When they made love they gave of themselves and thought of no one else and together they knew great pleasure. There were two lovely daughters born of this love and this pleasure.

And later, when lovemaking was lost to pursuits of divergent phases, there was still the falling of their hearts and the stirring of their loins for each other.

There was little hypocrisy to Bill's willingness to speak politely to Reverend Miller when it was time to discuss their marriage. He was in love, and love requires no rationale for its actions.

"Just call me Tom," he had said, and, unlike the pseudo-amicability of used car salesmen and other "Crusaders for Cash," it seemed his steady handshake and gaze were genuine. Bill, who had quietly prepared himself for a grueling session of manners and other deception, was surprised by a sense of openness in the man that he wished to match in himself.

They talked little about the wedding. Tom told them, "There are plenty of people who enjoy worrying about the details of a ceremony. All we need to worry about is that I ask the right questions and you mean the right answers."

The presence of many books dominated the decor of the minister's study. While Tom and Rachel were off talking to the secretary about reserving the church, Bill perused the titles and was pleased to discover, in addition to books of theological interpretation and scriptural sociology, works of humor and humanity. On the walls, in addition to a portrait of a kindly Jesus, there was a print of Salvador Dali's *Last Supper* and a couple of original sketches of rural scenes by an unsigned artist.

It was the study of a serious scholar and yet there was a lightness of spirit about the place that made Bill feel comfortable.

Upon their return, Bill and the preacher discussed social and political matters: the waste of war, the apathy of peace; the spiritual deficits of the modern world; and they spoke of the pleasures of watching great movies, reading great novels, and losing oneself to the vacuous escape of an occasional evening in the lotus land of television. There was an excitement as patterns of mutuality emerged from their separate paths. Bill was amazed someone who didn't drink beer could be so interesting.

It was, in terms of events, so long ago. Bill was in the infancy of his cynicism and Tom in the infancy of his faith, and they were both discovering in their countervailing views of life a common ground that was to become a friendship.

When they left that first afternoon Bill was smiling. "He's not half the jerk I thought he'd be," he said.

She knew her man's humor and she would love him forever. "Are you sure you should have used such strong language when you were talking to a minister?" she asked. "I heard a lot of 'hells' and 'damns' coming from you."

"Well, he got to say, 'Praise the Lord,' didn't he?"

* * * *

So, when Tom—his friend, intellectual companion and holy-buddy—phoned early in the morning and called himself "Reverend Miller," Bill knew something was terribly wrong.

"What's this 'Reverend Miller' crap, Tom?" he asked and his voice was weak and his heart pulsed with guilt. Inside he felt the seriousness of the time and the cold pain of his friend's voice as it spoke to him from the inordinate weight of the telephone receiver.

"I understand," said Tom (Reverend Miller who had been ever gentle and powerful, ever accepting and yet never naive), "that you've been fucking my wife for over a year now."

"Oh, my God," said agnostic Bill.

"That's my line," said Tom and he quietly hung up the phone.