HEMINGWAY REVISITED

NORMAN MAILER

Ernest Hemingway's later work did not impress Mailer. For example, he thought The Old Man and the Sea (1952) *was ruinously sentimental. But the early work marked him. At Harvard, Mailer wrote parodies of* For Whom the Bell Tolls *(1940) for two initiations into college organizations. He quoted from* Death in the Afternoon *(1932) in* Of a Fire on the Moon *(1971), and discussed* The Sun Also *Rises (1926) and* A Farewell to Arms *(1929) in* The Spooky Art *(2003). Innumerable comments on Hemingway's style and persona appear in Mailer's interviews. In a March 14, 2002 letter to the* Boston Globe, *he lambasted George F. Will for comparing the prose of President Bush to that of Hemingway, saying that "to put George W. Bush's prose next to Hemingway is equal to saying that Jackie Susann is right up there with Jane Austen." To drive his point home, he went on to quote the famous passage from chapter 28 of* A Farewell to Arms: *"Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage or hallow were obscene beside the concrete [. . .] numbers of regiments and the dates."*

The following suite of poems shows that Catherine Barkley and Jake Barnes were on Mailer's mind toward the end of his life. It appeared first in the Paris Review 50 (Fall 2003) under the title, "A Riff on Hemingway." They were numbered 1–7. When he reprinted them the same year in Modest Gifts: Poems and Drawings, *he changed the title to "Hemingway Revisited," and dropped the numbers. He also reversed the order of poems three and four and made a number of changes in the way the stanzas were divided and placed out on the page. And he added this stanza: "Slack the yaws/tight the jaws/hurricane/the air/of waiting." He never commented on why he made the changes, but he took the placement of his poems seriously, and they were not happenstance. "Hemingway Revisited" is Mailer's last word on the writer who, arguably, influenced him more than any other. Our thanks to the Mailer Estate for permission to reprint these poems.*

—J. Michael Lennon

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Jake pissed
with
stern
loneliness
leaving
a fierce
smell
of the past.
His future
was not
so empty
as he declared,
a girl with
music and grace
tender of face
was waiting
for him.

Hey—
you
sleep
deep—
but what a sight
see
you
soon
beautiful
I hope

Catherine
found this note
by her telephone
on awakening
in an empty bed
after a one night
stand and she called
her best friend
to say;
Guess what?
I feel like
Earth
Mother.

Catherine never blushed
until
she smelled
the fine cheat
in
the line
of the succession
and then
she flushed
furiously
for she thought
the smell
adorable,
it was
so
rich
to rise
from
the poor.

We really ought, Catherine said
to be able to stay together
without making love
all the time.

Yes, said Jake,
I'm sure it's my fault.

Yes, she said smugly
you smell so greedy
and good

Swarms and swarms
of love
smug, smug, smug

You may not love me
Jake said
but I love you.
Well, I love you,
said Catherine
so
bad luck.
They loved each other
very much.
They had not taken
a good wash
in three weeks.
It would have been
the next wrong
to murdering
a child.
What the hell
they were both
thirty
forty
tired, tried,
sad, foul
They thought they
had betrayed
something
forever,
And She forgave them.
Or thus they hoped.
So, bad luck
muttered the
horror
of old
habit,
We will die
if we lose
our love.

Mangled, morgued
birched and bruted
they were
hawks
upon the mood
of their
own blessing.

So they scattered,
waiting
for the
curse.

Slack the yaws
tight the jaws
hurricane
the air
of waiting

I feel
like
I've been
through purga-
tory, Catherine
said.

Sometimes
I think
it won't
be bad
when
we die
because
we've served
part
of
purgatory al-
ready.

Yes.
It's been
bad.
But
twelve years
ago
we were
good.

Oh, darling, good, she agreed,
so good.
I used to think
it would
be always,
but it wasn't, it
turned out
to be
such a little
taste
of
heaven
for twelve
long years.

A little taste
of heaven
is all we get, baby,
said Jake.
through the
microphone
and plate
glass
window
of the visitor's
room
under
the shotguns
eyes
bellies
and blue serge suits
of the guards
who guard
the sacred heart
of the Republic.