# SATURDAYS WITH NORMAN, CIRCA 1981

ALLEN SPEED

Angels of unsuccess, we floated over molten pavement
that poured downtown to shimmering towers
where we did the small things we did then, for money.
And touchy about it too, some of us!—hunting and pecking
in the scriveners' way, hunting and pecking
like small river birds, hopping along the croc's open jaws.
Express trains scarcely ran that summer, and the slow local home
was jammed, hot, scrawled all over. Cheapskate uptown
evenings simmered: radio, paperbacks, damp sheets, fan.

We only half knew how lucky we were when the old man
idly took us up, proposing almost without a word
a return to the body. Saturdays he opened the once-storied gym
and his merry vicious profligate eyebrows led the way
up sagging stairs. He'd long since grown stout
with prodigious works, and his face was seared by early fame
and canyon-scoured by flash floods of money
that sluiced to his delta of family trees.

In the rotting gloom we were mostly quiet as we wrapped
each other's wrists and hands, mummy fashion, and set about
thudding slow tattoos on leather cylinders filled with sand.
Breathless in no time, soaking, heavy-armed, we conjured mayhems
fiercer than any we'd ever committed even to paper,

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snorting the reek of glories as dead as the sharp-shouldered boys
peeling above us, who'd kept their hands up round after round
until the second or fifth or fifteenth in fights few people
alive remembered yet down they glared still, fierce as tenements,
with a street-corner gospel of no second chances.

Crouched before headless, armless trunks we struck out
harder, over and over, making the chains that held them rattle,
making the dead men twitch and jump, half aware that each feint
and gesture bowdlerized verses in a language near death,
paid tribute to heroisms dubious now and anyhow
unavailable to us, but we didn't care as we slugged it out
each with his own collection of phantoms, as immortality,
shock after shock, traveled from fist to elbow to shoulders
and out to the half-formed, laboring wings.