

DAVID RAY

Berryman's Father

"What happen then, Mr. Bones?"

—John Berryman

"Irregularities in the reports were passed over . . . e.g., while there were bloodstains on Smith's shirt there were no powder burns, impossible in the case of a self-inflicted gunshot wound."

—Paul Mariani, *Dream Song*

I

Year after year your father haunted,
obsessed. Or we could say
you came back to him, sought
him out when he was not
that latest loved one (or envied)
laid out in a casket (Only Dylan! . . .
Just Ted! . . . No, friend, that one
was Delmore merely, gone in the head!
And girls just don't count—
not that brash girl Plath,
or Rita!) And that was not
Dad on the phone
nor his greened corpse standing there
when you opened the door, though to be sure
you could not at first take his word for it.

II

Year after year he lay
there on the walk, gun by his side,
and the sun just coming up.
Through all weathers you made your way
back as if there might be a message,
something the small boy
might yet hear if he knelt

long enough—fifty years, maybe.
Grow a beard, let it go grey.
Check again daily, make the trip
drunk and sober, day and night.
Kneel by the face, press yours to his.
Ask what he knows. And when
did he know it? And what you,
little boy boozing, should do now,
long after it's far too late?
Should you do the same thing?
And that way, or some other?
Is that what he meant?
Or did you hear right? He swam out,
meant to save you. No, to drown you,
your brother too. Ask Mom. She lives on.
That lady *knows*. Charm it out
of her. Did you hear right
or was that something she told you?
Maybe he loved you,
had a thought after all of his boy.
And how did you take it?
How did you *act* in the car?
And when you stood gazing?
And when you thought you saw him
on the street, bellowing thunder
loud as . . . as Hamlet's father.

III

There's some truth in Denmark,
to be pricked out with swordplay,
with taunting of Gertrude.
And maybe in Holdenville. *Please . . .*
She should tell you now . . .
truth you could not bear. Yet
you bear all. Please tell everything—

about that summer, the only one ever,
what led up to his lying there.
And when did you first start to read—
with flashlight under the covers? Or crouched
in a closet? If she did it, thought Hamlet,
it must have been love for him too,
not just lust for the new king, whose bed
she had slept in that night, waking
at dawn, or not sleeping at all, whore
that she was. They had argued till one,
tried to work the thing out—damned awkward,
a woman in love, husband a nuisance
and two boys in the way. And nadir year,
the Great Depression, don't forget that.

IV

Mom's still the place to get answers.
She can throw light. She can tell you
what not even Bones dared to whisper.
Could she pinpoint some moment of joy,
write it back in a letter?
Did she have suggestions? From what
had been lost could she please structure
those early events, share at least
as much as a bitch would—
or a girl picked up on a train
after reading and weeping,
walking around in the snow?
Tell Bones more! Or could it be—
as some fool in A.A. dared to say—
God's will (Who was God in that Dust Bowl?)
he should pry or pray no more of those years,
not even that one, but rejoice—
in what? In the moment at hand—
something like that. And Kate, that's who!

The new child, that's what!
But ah, murder most foul. And why, John,
did you go back again and again
to that text—call it *Hamlet*—
when you knew very well it was you?
You hated Smith, your true father,
and Berryman too. Between lines
a man probes for secrets
while his great public gawks—
a strophe here, a love cry there
with a whimpering now-and-then chorus,
anti-strophal as hell!
Oedipus stood, made his vows.
Hamlet too, and you, John—
though Gertrude had vows of her own.

v

Hard to bear, a mere crime, secret
so dark. Unbearable that
which has not made its way
to the top of the mind! That's the foul
one, the one that can spin
infinite woe—whose critical mass
flames out in due time—
for a few billion years, not much more
(you'll be happy to hear),
becomes its own galaxy—
in the night sky, also in daysky
if you are cursed with bold eyes—
son of the father, who saw far too much,
who loved unwisely and not well.
It runs in the blood, and the blood runs.
And what might Gertrude have told you?
That she looked out the window that morning,
her lover standing behind her. (She lost track

of a few strands of the story.)
She had seen John Allyn Smith, Sr.,
her husband. You were John Allyn Smith, Jr.,
not yet renamed. Your father, then,
was sitting downstairs in his car,
six a.m. She had gone back up
for her keys, found the note—what passed
for a suicide note—easy that year.
It had been left on the dresser:
“Again I am not able to sleep—three nights now
and the terrible headaches.” Unsigned.
An open and shut case. Entrained,
laid to rest back in Holdenville,
body and secret. Then Mom changed
her name and yours, married
the man Berryman, upstairs all along.
Call him Claudius. Through her eyes
you learned to see Smith just as she did,
built of word-clay the same slippery man.
He smoked Camels, hoisted you up
in his arms, wore long boots and a cavalry hat,
and betrayed you with a gunshot.

VI

But there was always one way
to get even—betray yourself just a bit
more, same way that he did.
Or some other way. That’s one thing
you wished he would tell you. Or she would.
Such logic made sense
in Dublin and New York, also on Erie Place
and in North Hell where the phone yelled
all night and could never be trusted.
“We’re only as sick as our secrets,”
they say in A.A.—the bigger the secret

the sicker, and so forth. What's worse
than the crime lugged a lifetime
around the world in your head,
yet kept from you too?
Should you hide it his way
or scream out on your own? You thought
of yourself dangling from an unopened chute—
falling for years—yes, for years
clenched like a fist packed tight,
silk knotted up inside. And we know
where you fell, how you broke ice
and in what Winter—and how
the feathery chute floats
like a stilled blossom downstream.