

Selection of poems by Gilbert Sorrentino from Douglas Messerli, ed. *From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry 1960-1990* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1994).

### Land of Cotton

One remembers hysterical laughter  
a summer night, when no one was happy

Sam, come from the town, come the fire  
consumes you, the trees are ablaze, the church  
the money  
is burning, any old photo

will prove it so.

The guernseys, the holsteins,  
brahama bulls screaming in terror!

(Cold, ice cold sauternes  
through all the whisky  
fog, the dawn near.

Sam, the town is burning,  
your Byronic scarf  
will not save you. Here, *phlox* is not  
the decorative flower,

come from the town Sam, you are  
burning. I call you Sam to  
come, gazing at the photo where you stand

while all around you rages.

(from *Corrosive Sublimate*, 1971)

### Magic Composer

Who knows what the moonlight means?  
Shake shake sonora!

Gripped in the leafy leaves  
or tendrils green and tender  
certain creatures of the glens and glades.

Shake shake!

A pinch of tergamoom, one teaspoon  
bajji, add plenty of water. And a rock  
on the lid.

A glass of beer? A glass of beer  
oh magic in the loony light. Note how  
the color glows amber, copper. A new penny

helps settle the sediment.

Fame is the spur, oh! Soft waters.  
How hold anything anywhere for long  
and long. In the moonbeams  
tears of acid. A good old wagon

but he done broke down. Shake it.

(from *Sun & Moon: A Journal of Literature & Art*, 1976)

September in Kittery

Those were the lobsters  
many poets write of, compare  
to us and our lives: blindly  
crawling, dark in the dark.

Whereas I write: vanilla, then  
lavender, then—anything.

What is there to compare  
with what? Here is sun the snow  
is melting. Here a crow  
of memory. Old Valentines.

Priests who were afraid and  
those who drank too much.

Bad wine, blended whisky, the special  
on beer. A white sail  
on the Sound off Connecticut, breathless!  
Ask the maniac, Artaud.

(from *White Sail*, 1977)

Across this water sits a shore  
patched together out of dim and smudgy colors.  
It brings to mind a cartoon oddly porous.  
Static on a worn-out sponge. Yet a core  
of translucent light seems to spring  
from the center of what looks a town or market  
and drenches the lime-green haze of the park  
I put there. One seesaw, one fountain, and one swing.

Mothers and children in blue  
filled with good humor, china blue  
eyes and the rest, plus the sky is blue.

You can see I'm trying to get there  
seriously. When I get there  
I'll be young again. I forgot orange. There.

(from *The Orangery*, 1978)

She was all in black. A statement  
to take its place in "The History of Ideas."

We know black here in America  
Why, it's a scream.

Stick a point of orange in it  
just for fun. Just to see what comes of it.

After which: Prove that the light  
of bowling alleys is romantic.  
Is the very gravy of romance.  
"The crème!" yells a voice.

Then, years later, drones the comic,  
I recall standing on a corner  
in the Bronx waiting for a bus.  
Yes, yes. Waiting for a bus.

(from *The Orangery*, 1978)

Zukofsky

Who  
was that who  
saw  
his father  
in  
his shorts,  
mother laughing?

Who  
decided in  
the pattern?  
Of  
oranges?  
On white.

Who was that?  
Who  
saw his father?  
In his shorts!  
Mother  
laughing.  
Who?

Who decided?  
On the pattern of  
oranges  
on  
white.

(from *The Orangery*, 1978)

### The Oranges Returned

In a disingenuous letter  
sent from a quiet snowy place  
an old friend asks why I returned  
a gift of oranges.

I am too old to answer such questions.  
Even the words sat numb. His was always  
a brilliant mind yet he asks about  
his gift of oranges.

I put him in a poem once. God knows  
he's had his slow shock in the mirror.

Perhaps it was the grey head sent  
the gift of oranges.

It is maniac time, friends cast about  
to touch. To reawaken. Meaningless gifts.

(from *The Orangery*, 1978)

"Good Night!"

She was blushing in the misty green of August  
and I tell you that's a lapidary recollection  
although the pitch and cadence of her voice is lost.  
A lot of Christmas trees have occurred since then  
and ice-skaters by the thousands dead and buried.  
There shone softly a bathing suit of pastel stripes  
and her thighs "kissed" so that young orthodontists  
leaned and leaned smiling on her doorbell.  
There is a use in shoveling through these eggshells  
orange peels greasy paper bags and stinking bones  
from which are stitched together songs to stun the  
drunkards.

One sees by the stars and the date on the paper  
that the old year is as usual vanishing.  
The dim and unintelligible smile in the department  
store  
a vague and cryptic memorandum. "Get ornaments and  
tinsel."  
"Have loving cup engraved." It falters in men's  
haberdashery  
and the heat is too oppressive to be borne.

(from *Selected Poems 1958-1980*, 1981)

Razzmatazz

Young and willing to learn (but what?) he was the boy  
With the sweaty face the boy of the *Daily News*  
The boy of bananas peanut butter and lemon-lime  
Who read Ching Chow waiting for the punch line  
Who watched the sun more often than not a bursting rose  
Swathe the odd haze and clumps of the far-off shore.

Who watched the sun more often than not a bursting rose?

"Things" were in Greek, as: the unmixed wine; thalassa!  
Tears dropping into head cheese and boiled spare ribs  
Lacked that notorious piquancy of the delicious tragic.  
There was something to be concocted of all this trash  
(But what?) if he could but avoid the stable clerkships.

The boy of bananas peanut butter and lemon-lime  
Decided on certain girls beautiful in starched blouses  
And imagined their confessions in the dirty dark.  
And everyone grew older to A String of Pearls.  
Some rings slid soft and creamy into creamy haze  
He reached that shore and found it was only Staten Island.

Ching Chow, waiting for the punch line, grinned  
And read book without a title on a unicycle.  
The jokes were mixed into the wild perfume of wives  
And honeymoons and girls a country fair of lusts.  
All this in the days when nuns were nuns and ageless  
Yet somehow almost all the fathers abruptly disappeared.

With the sweaty face the boy of the *Daily News*  
Was not real, spoke no Italian, never dined  
And was in actuality Kayo or in all events his derby.  
Old women with that little mick under their oxters  
Crossed themselves a frozen trolleys passed Our Lady  
Of Popeyes chipped plaster and a spooking babe in arms.

The odd haze and clumps of the far-off shore  
My God! were buildings fallen into disrepair  
And complete with rats slaving to keep their teeth short.  
Quite wonderful how it all was simply there  
Just there and devoid of any meaning or portent.  
In the mirror he honked a saxophone and conjured thighs.

Young and will to learn (but what?) he was the boy  
Who found that those fabled dreams were fabled  
In that their meaning was their own blurred being  
Who suddenly found his alien body to be the material  
From which could be made a gent or event life. Life?  
Young and willing to learn oh certainly. But what?

(from *Selected Poems 1958-1980*, 1981)