Re)Introducing Adam Hammer

Adam Hammer is a lost original. He was, as Genesis says of Ish- mael, “a wild ass of a man.” He was six foot one and lanky, with a long jaw and a great mop of black hair that sometimes resembled dreadlocks. He was left-handed and, in spite of his frequent abuse of every substance worth abusing, was a fabulous ball player and could throw a marshmallow through a brick wall. He was wry, quick-witted, often hilarious, and sometimes cruel, especially to those he thought too righteous or earnest or full of themselves or shy. Squarely in the tradition of the greatest surrealists, he courted scandal and frequently tiptoed along the edges of criminal conduct.

He once drove his car across a lawn into the middle of a religious ceremony, rolled down his window and said, “I’ll take two burgers and an order of fries.” Once at breakfast in Fort Collins, right after the Big Thomson dam tragedy, when asked by the waitress what he would have, Adam said he would like a couple of flood victims, over easy. I once saw him engage in a horribly bloody fist fight over a teddy bear he had found on a fire hydrant.

As his life demonstrated again and again his willingness to do anything to express his passion, humor, or delight, his poems abound with a child-like willingness to say virtually anything, leavened with a conviction that the world in general is not only entirely too dull, but almost entirely wrong. In this, as in other aspects of his life, he was following the precepts of the French Surrealists. In the first manifesto André Breton said, “The mind which plunges into Surrealism relives with glowing excitement the best part of childhood.” Adam lived this notion and also, occasionally, in his writing, turned it around, so that the child-like voice and point of view led to a surreal result, as in “Mark Climbs Trees,”

Mark climbs trees. He stands at the bottom of the tree and gradually works his way to the top of the tree, where he rests for a few minutes and then climbs down the tree.
Sometimes, if there is no wind, he climbs two trees at once, but there is usually at least a breeze. While he climbs trees, Mark wears thick shoes, to protect himself from the rough bark, and a wide hat, to protect himself from the sky. Mark is not one of those people who refuse to look up while climbing a tree; sometimes he looks up, sometimes he looks down, but never at the same time. Mark says, I climb trees better than a horse!

Though the poems can seem off-hand, they are products of an incredible compression. His drafts show him going over and over phrases, making long lists of permutations, possible wordings, puns, mini-historical references, rhymes, mock French translations. Some of this was the product of a restlessness evident in everything he did, but some of it was mastery at work. He knew what he wanted the poems to do, and anything different was something less. And if readers responded to the poems with outrage and invective, Adam considered this an excellent affirmation of his own esthetic barometer.

He satirized the death of Hubert Humphrey in “Fun with Death.” In “Understanding of Scotland,” he goofed on all of the conventional views of the subject, as he did also in poems about Alaska, Vermont, Africa, Texas, Belgium, nurses, intellectuals, hockey, romantic love, and romanticism of all stripes. What galled him to this mockery was not that the “real world’s” thinking and conduct with respect to these subjects, and life in general, was too serious, but that it was not serious enough. Its very conventionality proved that, by rendering the lives of millions almost unutterably dreary; and could there be anything that should be less dreary than life itself? And if you’re really serious about life, you’re serious about liveliness, about the fullness of life, rather than about parceling out your meager portion so, with any luck, it may last you to the grave.

What he did not want, ever, was to write what he called “normal honey,” the kind of poetry that affirms life as fully predictable and contained, that says, “don’t worry, things are, and will ever be, just as you suppose them to be.” Stay in line. Remember your number. Eat your spinach. Comb your hair. He wanted freedom and did not understand why so many others seemed to want safety (personal, intellectual, spiritual) instead. That their fear was profound and perhaps had its genesis in aspects of themselves beyond their reach or control did not move him in the slightest. He was quite unforgiving in this re-
gard, and the poems follow suit.

In his long poem “A Thousand Miles Away, Andy Williams’ Thoughts Merge with my Own,” he openly mocks Williams’ ex-wife, the actress Claudine Longet, who “accidentally” shot her lover Spider Sabage in a sauna in Aspen. The case did have elements of the grand ridiculous about it, but Adam used it to rail against the cloying insipidity of the public view, as represented by the media, and, correlatively, to assault the kind of “normal honey writing” this view is bound to engender.

Is this any way to begin a poem?
I could say “I”
and then immediately say
“was leaning into the door like a door…” or
“was screaming like envelopes to born again…”
but this is not real life. Real life is…
O Real Life, what a sad, hypnotic puzzle you are –
there’s death in the morning and there’s death all night, there
on the Ile-le-Kneesoe, you and I,
we kept careening off each other in great white waves.
But that was useless.
A strange force compelled us to pour Draino on each other.
Is this love?

Later Adam came up with this Little Miss Tuffet pastiche:

There once was a chick named Longet
who sat eating her curds whey.
Along came a spider and sat down beside her
And she blew the poor bastard away.

He took as gospel the Surrealist’s notion that no form of liberation could be achieved without liberating the mind, and that essential to this process was the courage to dig below conscious thought and discover language which could refresh and recharge the individual, a language necessarily bent one-hundred and eighty degrees from the boilerplate by which the world mostly operates, a language and usage always canted against expectation:

O Mimi, your eyes look so clumsy
When they are fresh-mowed and pierced!
That is why everyone thinks you are sisters.
Or clams.

About the journey toward liberation in this sense, Adam Hammer, the mad clown, was deadly serious, serious as DADA was serious, as Dali and Soupault and Desnos were serious. Deadly serious but light-hearted, the zen-like paradox at the spine of that movement all along.

Adam died in an auto accident outside Pensacola, Florida, in 1984. A head-on collision with a truck. The manuscript he left behind, some of it handwritten, and two and a half small books are all we have of him now. Perhaps he was the last Surrealist. Certainly he was an acolyte for the movement and its ideas, even the ideas of its dark saints, Lautréamont, Rimbaud, and DeSade who believed that morality itself, as the western world understood it, was immoral. Whether or not Adam was an immoralist to this degree, I wish he were among us still, to keep us guessing and tripping on our own tongues and our assumptions. When I think of his death, I think again of “Mark Climbs Trees” and send it back out in his direction.

Mark is happiest when he is in the midst of climbing a tree. Mark says: I am happiest when I am climbing a tree, and I am not as happy when I am at the top of a tree. I am also happy just to think of climbing a tree, and so when I am at the top of a tree I think about climbing another tree; then I am happy.

Mark wants to be buried in a tree, when he is dead. Bury me into a tree, says Mark, in the middle. That way I will be happiest.

In my head, at least, Adam is still climbing around.
A Few

A few dull events have occurred in my life
Though I have not minded
The dim Alps of Europe, their causing of mist in Asia
I have not minded.
The tepid lakes that dot all alps
Their small pale wave
I have not minded either.
I did not mind terribly the absence of ponies
At the pony museum in Wales
For there were European wight watchers
And other sad attractions.
I accidentally joined them
On hikes through the tiny skim Alps.
It was thin and bleak that I erred
In that way
As leaves on Welsch trees are thin and bleak & ablaze.
I did not & do not mind either
Of those things.
The leaden expressions on European youths
I minded not at all.
It did not enter my mind
That they were glowing like landmines
like Alps
Before detonating.
As Like

In times of the most extreme potatoes
My hair is very thin,
Almost ink-like.
Space is like an accordion,
Accordion-like.
But also, our fingers become accordions
And start dancing.

In times of the most extreme bossa nova
Your pants are very thin,
Almost transparent.
Space is very interesting to think about
But so are your pants.
But also, the wind is very cold
And we freeze, like accordions.

In times of the most extreme minnows
The windows are very dark,
Almost intransigent.
Water is harmonica-perforated;
The fish, of course, go back and forth.
But also, the little boats turn around
And around in the sink, like accordions.

In times of the most extreme unction
My name is very thin,
Almost zipper-like.
Space is very thin also;
And distance is that way too.
But also, the stars become very accordion-like
So we eat them.

In times of the most extremely long, emotional, blue lines
The rest of the lines
Get very thin,
Almost meaningless.
Vegetables arise out of nowhere and change.
But also, the letter V becomes invisible
And unpronounceable.
The Fragile Afternoons

We kiss the water occurring
on fragile afternoons
and the occurrence of steam
inside the wake blue lingeries,
the wearing of art in boats,
their urgent flags

and the things fish think.
The preparation of fish-astronauts
occurs also, what they will find:
one small step for fish
and for fishing rod manufacturers
one of which I am not.

Poems like this
usually veer off in
some unexpected direction
then come back.
One and one and one after another
the fragile afternoons
disappear
like Pez pieces
only faster.

I dreaded those awful bird noises.
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Pleiades—67
What Really Happened to Mimi

Mimi fell through the window.
Mimi fell through the wall.
Mimi fell through the bridge.
Mimi fell through the fence.

O Mimi, you are so clumsy!

O Mimi, your eyes look so clumsy
When they are fresh-mowed and pierced!
That is why everyone thinks you are sisters.
Or clams.
The Cold and the Careful

I.

In Virginia she is with flints
and wires, and the barefoot casts
still walk through the gauze
to the garden, to the river,
to the edge of the nails
they have placed beside her.

It isn’t enough that rangers wait
for the aspirin hope of
the soon, and the sooner, and the final
coming of the fire in the forest
or the girl, or the cold
and careful promise of things
that will be, of things
that haven’t reached them yet.

II.

Dangerous things begin to flow.

Something walks through the thoughts
of the moth.

Something betrays the train.

They try to see through her eyes
of smoke, but dark things ride them
like dots, in the night.

III.

One must wait, one must
wait for the man with leather.
in his eyes of trust, 
one must wait for the cave, 
for the electricity of thirst.

There is other waiting.

There is waiting for the day 
when it arrives, and it must 
arrive; and the cliff 
is not a cliff but a tunnel, 
though the sand above it 
and the sand and the glass 
beneath it and the lights in the houses 
are parts of the world she wants, 
the trees are tempted 
and surrounded and shocked.

But the reluctant wires reach far, 
farther than the arms of consciousness, 
farther than matches.