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“To Mr. Jefferson on the Occasion of My ‘Madness,’” “The Campaign Manager Talks Shop”

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Two Poems

JON DAVIS

To Mr. Jefferson on the Occasion of My “Madness”

In that land of toiletries and fasteners,
the car wreck he kept calling marriage,
I wore a kind of greasy armor.
The children were black holes
where all our longing went.
I'd dress the girl like a butterfly;
the boy would dress himself in black.
I'd spin them till they faced the bus.
Then, I'd find myself—some time
had passed—walking the aisles
of whatever major department
store was nearest, or singing to myself
on an escalator—which was itself
a kind of accordion without results—
a rousing chorus
of “Baa Baa Blacksheep” in a voice
which approximated the starvation-
addled squalling of hyenas.
The Higher Education, Mr. Thomas
Jefferson, I plodded through
could not save me from the animal
I'd become. I was chained to my
“To Do” list, wore the bright insignia
of my gender smeared across my lips.
I paced the bars of my enclosure
until my husband, My-Dear-Beloved-Pillar,
brought home the videos in which
the ephemeral but overwhelming
heaving-slapping-gasping
was demonstrated in all its fervid excess.

Ah, Great Fathers of This Bounty,
as the late sun turns
the pickets into bloody teeth,
I've come to speak to you
of America. The chants are rising
like a swarm of gnats
from all your classrooms.
Oh, Land-That-I-Love, as the lamprey
scars your salmon, as the money changers
circle ducking under clotheslines, the milk
is gone from the doorstep, the churches
filled with stylish artifacts. On my TV screen
a man made of light was fucking
two beautiful moaning women.
He moved from one
to another and back again
like an ant with two breadcrumbs
to drag a hundred yards
to the colony uphill.
My husband, my Wallet-With-A-Brain,
he said he'd like to try that
would I mind? But Mr. Jefferson,
Thomas, I was just one woman,
one citizen, one humble servant.
I walled myself against such appetites.

The Campaign Manager Talks Shop

The man was no one till I made him up.
A stork of a man in green and plaid, I calmed
the North Sea of his haberdashery
and taught him not to blink.

He was so partisan, he'd insult an aunt
at tea before he'd compromise himself.
He stumbled through two local votes
on buffoonery and tactlessness—the townies

thought him "frank." But the TV's eye
made him look half Harpo Marx half
Richard Speck. The warmth the locals felt
in his handshake and dishevelment

was dampened in the kliegs. His frankness
turned to vacancy; his small town
turned to hick. Even his young wife,
professional and caring, fled the screen,

got my name from friends of friends.
Next day at lunch, I scoped him out.
He was genuine, all right. Just wanted
to help out. Old-fashioned, simple,

honest. We'd have to beat that out of him,
convince the voters he was simple-sly.
I had him measured for his blues
before dessert. Red-striped tie, black shoes.

I'm a seer not a manager, and the vision
that unfolded as we ate and chatted
was projected by the room—the voters
poking at their salads, swirling wine.

A candidate is half solid, half illusory.
The latter is my business. Over coffee, he poked
a finger gently in the air—JFK, I thought,
and made a mental note. His voice was shrill,

but we could soften that. His hair, untamed,
 recalled McGovern's unkempt mop—too liberal,
 cerebral, indecisive. I'd have it trimmed and sprayed.
 Some shyness leaned him forward, made

his shoulders round. "Eye the camera
 like a friend," I told him. "Step to the crowd
 and let your voice go soft." The women
 like a boyish tone. The step? Pure Kennedy—

something for the men. His bulbous nose
 we'd have to live with. I'd hire a boy
 to watch for glare, aim a fill-light at
 the shadows that made his nose

look comical or mean. It undercut
 the smartness in his eyes, the eloquence
 that gathered 'round his mouth.
 I'd feed him vitamins, keep him healthy—

one cold in that clown-schnoz
 and the campaign comes crashing down.
 After lunch, I shook his hand—it was,
 as all reported—hearty, warm.

He was genuine, all right. I spent a week
 laying out a plan. I brought it to him—
 a slick, impeccable assault. It couldn't miss.
 He turned me down. Said it wasn't image

that he wanted. He insisted on being
 something he called "real." I signed on
 with his opponent. We trounced him at the polls.
 I saw him at the grocery next day.

He smiled, shook my hand. He seemed
 completely happy to have lost.
 I was right, he said, about the suit,
 the tie, the lights. But about the nose,

he said, I'd gone too far. "I may
 seem half-buffoon and goofy bluster,
 this far from homelessness and drink.
 But failure—or the look of it—

keeps me humble, real. I'd rather lose
 than lose myself." He yanked a cart
 from out the stack; I yanked one, too.
 I liked the man, his principled

foolishness, and followed him awhile,
 as he drifted down the aisles, almost aimless,
 sniffing melons, sorting through the breads,
 as scanners beeped and checkers hustled,

and a muted, comforting music filtered
 down through thick fluorescent air
 on all of us—Americans,
 wheeling through the commerce of our days.