

NEW ORLEANS VARIATIONS
poems by Paul Pines



New Orleans Variations

a selection of poems
by Paul Pines

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for Dalt Wonk

The Mystic Krewe's subject for 1858 was *The Classic Pantheon*, and the transparency which announced it read: *Marry, but you travelers/ May journey far/ and not look on this like again. Here/ You do behold the gods and goddesses;/ presently you shall see them/Unfold themselves.*

Mardi Gras, New Orleans, by Henri Schindler

Bio and Acknowledgements

PAUL PINES grew up in Brooklyn around the corner from Ebbet's Field and moved to the Lower East Side of New York in 1960. He shipped out as a merchant seaman, spending '65-'66 in Vietnam. In 1970 he opened his jazz club, *The Tin Palace*—located



on the corner of 2nd Street and Bowery—which became a cultural watering hole for the better part of the 70s. It provided the setting for his novel, *The Tin Angel* (Wm. Morrow, 1983). During this period Pines traveled in Central America where he became aware of the genocidal policy targeting the Guatemalan Mayans—the basis for his second novel, *Redemption* (Editions Rocher, 1997). Pines has published five books of poetry: *Onion*, *Hotel Madden Poems*, *Pines Songs*, *Breath*, and most recently, *Adrift On Blinding Light*. Selections from the last two have been set to music by composer Daniel Asia and appear on his two CD's, *Songs From The Page of Swords* and *Breath In A Ram's Horn*, on the Summit Label. Paul's poems have appeared in *New Directions* #37, *First Intensity*, *The Cafe Review*, *House Organ*, *Pequod*, *Ironwood*, *IKON*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Mulch*, *Contact II*.

Paul presently lives in Glens Falls, NY, with his wife, Carol and daughter, Charlotte, where he teaches at Adirondack Community College, practices as a psychotherapist and hosts the annual Lake George Jazz Weekend.

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First and Last Things at the Croissant D'or

1

One man seeing her naked
on the chair might be

drawn to the ripeness
of her breasts and want

to touch them
another

thinks she must be cold
and wrap her in his arms

to stop the stuttering flesh
he confuses with

the winter light
that shudders in a courtyard

at dawn on Ursulines St.
following 12th Night

knowing that where
a god erupts

into the world he leaves
a scar

visible as a comet
or wake of smoke

in an otherwise
clear sky

Everything waits to be read
in the book of the world

footsteps in the sand
stains on a table cloth

the bush rattler's venom
as a cure for aches

originating on the left side
of those who would

reduce the world
to a heap of ashes to relieve

the bitter sweet burden
of their hearts

"Knowledge without courage
is sterile," Gracian

calls out from his Jesuit cell
as if to warn us against

what the age of reason
never realized

that the world might become
so crowded with proofs

there'd be nothing left to feed
its hungry mouths

starving for mystery
or the will to rise refreshed

from a sleep so thoroughly
soaked in after-birth

*Death, he said,
is a kind of healing*

*through which we repair
(as in "going forth")*

*to a greater intention
(in which we nest all along)*

*though many feel
otherwise some sense it*

*at the end
and it eases them to realize*

*even in their last breath
they express*

*the explicit order
of an implicit world*

At the end of the river walk
cormorants standing wing

to wing on the bow lines
of a cargo ship watch a pelican

follow the curved bank
of the Mississippi

as it flies south toward
the crescent city where

lights against the fading
dusk spill like sparkling wine

on the lap of Algiers—
remembering this

we will drink too much
tonight and dream

of birds' eggs hatching
again in the wetlands

wake to a Harley revving
its engine

on Bourbon St.
then toss in sleepless

reverie
as the President of

the free world prepares
to bomb Iraq

Glimpsed in the mirrored columns
of the *Croissant d'Or*

light over white tiles
on *patisserie* under glass

like a soft crust
a lustrous invitation to believe

in the *brioche* and *tartiere*
inlaid with candied fruit

a man with a grizzled beard
growls his order in French

Billy Goat Gruff
suddenly becomes a Supreme

singing in falsetto,
"Oh Baby ..."

before sitting down
to feed multiple personalities

as the Filipino counter-girl
rolls her eyes

her hands forming
unruly shapes

in an attempt to defuse
this otherness

The idea was to rescue Napoleon
from exile bring him back

to Louisiana where
they gathered in the dark

of what later became known
as the Napoleon House

in the Port of New Orleans
the Mayor Girod

and several others dedicated
to the cause

actually set off in three ships
across the ocean

for St. Helena only to find
the Emperor they revered

had died before
they could spring him

would never live
to mount a new offensive

from a town that has since
become famous for

gumbo politics
and funeral processions

and as a launching spot
for mercenary adventurers

and the assassin's
assassin—Jack Ruby

We are informed
by vectors

that sometimes take
the shapes of gods

we recognize as Hermes
selling lucky dogs on Royal St.

Pan on clarinet
playing for pennies

outside the Café du Monde
conversely we observe

that what is formed
by mind dissolves

into the twilight of
mind-before-thought

a paradoxical curve
of the Mississippi

where the sun
rises over its west bank

After the show
we discuss "The Women"

the players don't understand
how their parts were shaped

by women whom they
reduce to shadows in a *masque*

Claire Booth Luce's work
may have pushed the envelope

in her time but a line like
you can't trust a man

rings hollow in the hands
of a bad director

who doesn't know ghosts
must drink blood

to speak to us as eloquently
as our *post mortem* Pernod

Light from a certain angle turns
the Mississippi transparent.

*What I don't understand, he says,
and I've thought about it*

*long and hard...when Heraclitus
or Lao-tse have an insight*

*they tell us they saw it first
inside themselves?*

We agree the nature of mind
as an enfolded order

which unfolds in the play
of opposites is an idea

formulated by a man
in Ephesus

three thousand years ago
sitting by a river

reflecting on the action
of the bow and the lyre

Mr. Mardi-Gras Unveils His "Popearium"

1

Henri most at home where
meaning is revealed by masks

ushers us into his rooms
on Governor Nicholls

one of which he calls
The Popearium

a stalled processional
of embroidered garments

behind a four panel screen
on which is pasted

a Victorian collage of figures
in various attitudes

of "groping and grasping."
Busts and portraits

of Pontiffs robed in red
gaze down at this display

reassuringly sealed inside
their secrets. He points

to a white skull cap worn
by the last Pope Innocent

it's puckered surface
in a glass case resembles

a wingless bird
or silicon implant

then suggests the next
selection of an Eminence

be modeled after Miss America
let Cardinals walk a runway

and compete in a talent contest
to see who will be crowned

perhaps the one from Milano
or a Colombian who stood up

to the dope cartel and looks
wonderful in a skirt



Over wine
and shrimp hors d'oeuvres

we learn that number 80
in The Syllabus of Errors states:

*the Pope should not be compelled
to reconcile himself or the church*

*to the concepts of progress
or modernism*

a conviction at the beginning
of the last century embodied by

Henri's favorite Cardinal
the cunning Bagnini

code named *Charlotte, Michele*
and *A Friend of The Daughter of O*

traveled to Belgium and France
to spy on suspected modernists

who often assumed the miter
as John a name distinguished

for its brevity of service.
The last John died in 34 days

shortly after his first speech
in which he compared the soul

to a car and the church
to a salesman...

To sum up the Papal
state in this age

Henri contrasts Begnini
to Benedict XV

the dwarf Pope of 1917
whose feet never reached the ground

when he sat on the throne
or probably even when he stood up.

To witness Benedict's coronation
is to understand the meaning

of pomp which has a purpose
beyond sheer spectacle

though it is forbidden to say
exactly what that purpose is

except that it fills a vacuum
left by the absence of mystery.

But all those scarlet underlings
walking alongside his palanquin

fanned him with giant
ostrich plume fans like an emperor

the very likeness of Moctezuma
the soles of whose sandals

were made of gold to make sure
his feet also never touched

the ground...an apt comparison
considering that when the Pontiff

spent an earlier part of his life
in Mexico fighting against

rampant anti-clericalism
he had six parrots who would

scream in Latin at everyone
who entered the room

for an audience,
"The church will triumph!"

but became such a nuisance
they had to be suppressed

It was Pope Gregory the Great
who masqued the previous

centuries with another play
trumpeting the great cross-

dressing devotees of Cybele
her eunuchs and mutilated

lover Attis pinned to a tree.
Somewhere around 600 AD

Gregory shuffled the deck
of Pagan traditions

including the temple whores
of Ishtar and those Patrician

Roman women who spread
their legs for the Empire

into the inclusive carne/vale
"farewell to the flesh"

so that the Sunday after
the vernal Equinox marked

the resurrection of Christ
instead of the orgasmic

seeding of the earth with
blood and semen to prove

one should never
underestimate men in skirts

"Henri is a firm
supporter

of my decision
to have no more

birthdays.
He assures me

St. Gregory
will understand.

However,
I don't think he

will be able
to intercede

on your behalf
just now.

He is quite
busy

having bought
a blank

Papal ballot
on Ebay

which he plans
to reproduce

then flood
the Vatican

upon the death
of the current

Pontiff
with a mail-in

campaign
from Louisiana

the candidate
being

of course
himself.

To think we
knew him when."

Pretty Baby

She came to shoot a documentary
on the Crescent City where

Louis filmed his memorial to
the child whores of Storyville.

*When I arrived at the hotel
I thought someone would recall*

my father once made a movie here.
Justine Malle regards Cristoph

her husband who smiles sadly
because he has recently been bitten

by a caterpillar native to New Orleans
and is still on pain killers

and no one knows if this species
turns into a butterfly at the end

of its poisonous development
or remembers "Pretty Baby."



Walking Rampart Street

Degas the perfect *gentilhomme*
equally at home in Montparnasse

and Creole streets of New Orleans
an anti-Semite whose best friend

was named Halevi described woman
as the curse of wise men

but hung out in brothels sketching
the hilarity and sadness of whores

sprawled on a couch in the salon
waiting for patrons in bowler hats

with trim mustaches like his own
or celebrating the Madame's birthday

all this loose flesh in long stockings
around the seated figure of

a tonsured woman in a black dress
who most closely resembles

the prioress of a nunnery
or the candid image of a *poule*

scratching her ass another one
sinking into a mattress

as though she were melting
—it is a peculiar nakedness

he makes us feel something
invulnerable in their rawness

The Field From Which Form Arises

1

is not material but informational

sunyata

and the *pleroma*

as Buddha

and Hermes

have described it

as emptiness and

fullness

contained by each cell

and understood

by the intelligence

which composes our dreams

where it is sometimes expressed

in the sadness

of a train whistle

at night in

Pirates' Alley



In my dream the salesgirl
seated on the landing
of a wide stair case

a shawl over her legs
as though she were crippled

shoots the tyrant
chasing me through the toy store

at first her gun doesn't fire
which surprises
then delights

the dark man
who draws a pistol of his own
but is dismayed

when she fires a second gun
under her shawl
before he can discharge
the one in his hand...

even on waking
I feel relieved to be
free of him

though a certain grief
shadows me to the Post Office
on Bourbon Street

There is movement
in the drama

a resolution of what has been
set in motion

rises to the surface
as my willingness to let go
of the tyranny

of ancient conflicts
to arrive
at
Ta Yu

--- ---

fire in the sky

(a sign that combines
power with vigor
and elegance)

which allows one
*"to move in accord with heaven-conferred
nature"*

changing into
Chien

--- ---

--- ---

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(water,
the abyss
over the mountain)
*"seeing obstruction remain centered,
look within for difficulties?"*

and seek counsel
in silence

A small black bird
trapped in the eaves

flutters down
low enough to reach.

The Venerable Beade
likened the trajectory

of a life to a bird
that flies in through

one window
and out another but

what might be
the foundation of

such a house?
The mind is an idea

known only to itself
which we unreason

in the name of reason.
I fold this bird in a towel

then release it
into the magnolia night

At Adolpho's
 on Frenchman St.
 in Marigny
we decide the appropriate meal
for our Last Supper is
 Rack of Lamb

with us at the table
are the ghosts
 of Frida Kahlo
 holding Diego in her arms
and Emma Jung
in search of Parzival
 whose quest for the Grail
 will bring him to the castle
 of the Fisher King

 Amfortas

 at whose command
 our waiter
 pours cabernet
for the holographic images
of ourselves
 as we were
 when we first met
 forty years ago
who toast
to what we have become

Dalt's Dream

A few days before he collapsed
in Walgreens and was

rushed to Charity Hospital
with blood on the brain

ranting in French before losing
consciousness Dalt dreamed

he stood on the steps of a church
where a man holding his soul

in a box told him—
"There are some problems here,"

in a tone that suggested
irony rather than gravity

but the longer he waited
to hear the details the more

his heart sank until the man
finally went on to say—

*We have placed it in the waters
and it has been washed clean*

after which Dalt gazed in wonder
at this other who remained

standing above him with his
soul in a box until he woke up

thinking this the best dream
he's had since the one that ended

with a vision of the acropolis
in splendor at dawn.

I Am That Brahman Which Is Like Space

The Crest Jewel of Wisdom
suggests the psyche interfaces

with the universe
(Brahman /and I)

that the black hole
we will sink into

at death
is a pin point

that anchors
us to

the enfolding
field

of mind before
thought