

Jarrell's Little Lady and the Race Police

by [Samuel Hux](#) (July 2019)



You Are Dead Forever, Romare Bearden, 1945

Robert Lowell called **Randall Jarrell** “the most heart-breaking poet of our time,” that time being the twentieth century. I assume he was referring to the nature of Jarrell’s early death at 51. From my point of view, however, the most heart-breaking poet of that time was **Trumbull Stickney**, although he barely made it into that century, dying in 1904 of a brain tumor. Born the same year as **Robert Frost**, 1874, good god how he

would have changed literary history had he had, like Frost, 63 years of life in the twentieth. I've told Stickney's story before ([Demoting Wittgenstein, Mourning Trumbull Stickney](#)) and more recently have reflected on Jarrell's probable-to-certain suicide ([Random Thoughts on Randall Jarrell](#)). And pardon my insensitivity, but *choosing* to cut off one's productive life for any reason other than finding life unlivable after the death of the beloved I find maddening rather than heart-rending—and just not comparable to the heart-break of Stickney's body in murderous rebellion.

But if we're talking about the composition of heart-breaking *poems*, my tone toward Jarrell changes radically. I commented recently on the greatness to near perfection of perhaps Jarrell's two most celebrated poems, "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" and "Next Day." The richness and precision of the first is amazing.

From my mother's sleep, I fell into
the State,

And I hunched in its belly till my wet
fur froze.

Six miles from earth, loosed from its
dream of life,

I woke to black flak, and the
nightmare fighters.

When I died they washed me out of the
turret with a hose.

As I think of her I hear her telling
me

How young I seem; I *am* exceptional;
I think of all I have.

But really no one has anything. I'm
nobody.

I stand beside my grave

Confused with my life, that is
commonplace and solitary.

Also moving, this monologue. But unless one is an extraordinary person, one of God's Elect so to speak—as I would be embarrassed to claim to be!—one is probably thinking just as much (or more!) of oneself as of the narrator and being moved primarily by one's own fate.

Jarrell's most purely heart-breaking poem, it seems to me, was the introductory poem to his most heart-breaking book (my judgment), *Losses* (1948), in which so many of his World War II poems were collected—but not a war poem itself. "Lady Bates," which I have never seem anthologized; it if ever has been it's been decades. And that's a disgrace and I think I know why. In any case—to make up for its relative unavailability—here it is.

The lightning of a summer

Storm wakes, in her clay cave
At the end of the weeds, past the
mock-orange tree—
Where she would come bare-footed,
curled-up footed
Over the green, grained, rotting fruit
To eat blackberries, a scratched
handful—
The little Lady Bates.
You have played too long today.
Open your eyes, Lady.
Is it a dream
Like the ones your mother used to talk
away
When you were little and thought
dreams were real?
Here dreams are real.
There are no more dreams, no more
real—
There is no more night, there is no
more day.

After this stanza the reader senses that little Lady Bates, treated verbally so tenderly by Jarrell, is no more. But he or she is nonetheless not quite prepared for the next stanza.

When the Lord God and the Holy Ghost
and the Child Jesus

Heard about you, Lady,

They smiled all over their faces

And sang like a quartet: "Lady Bates,

Is it you, the little Lady Bates

Our minister, one Sunday evening,

Held down in the river till she choked

In a white dress like an angel's, red

With the clay of that red river? Lady,

Where are the two we sent to fetch
your soul:

One coal-black, one high-yellow angel?

Interrupting the stanza briefly: the reader now knows Lady Bates was a black child—although it is not clear that she drowned while being baptized as some critics assume: it strikes me as ambiguous. Continuing:

Where is night, where is day?

Where are you, Lady Bates?

They looked for you east, they looked
for you west.

And they lost you here in the cuckoo's
nest

Eating the sweet white heart of the
grass. . . .

You died before you and even had your
hair straightened

Or waited on anybody's table but your
own.

You stood there helping your step-
mother

Boil clothes in the kettle in the
yard,

And heard the girls go by, at play,

Calling to you in their soft mocking
voices,

"Lady-Bug, Lady-Bug, fly away home."

After this stanza, anyone not in love with this child has no heart. I know that years ago on my first reading I teared up, and I *know* that Jarrell did too.

You are home.

There is a bed of your own

Here where a few stones

Stick up in the tall grass dried to
hay—

And one willow, at the end of summer,

Rustles, too dry to weep for you,

And the screech-owl sheers away

And calls, *who, who*—you are afraid

And he is afraid: who else could see

A black ghost in the dark?

A black, barefooted, pigtailed,
trifling ghost

With eyes like white clay marbles,

Who haunts no one—who lies still

In the darkness, waiting

While the lightning-bugs go on and
off?

The darning needles that sew bad
girls' mouths shut

Have sewn up your eyes.

If you could open your eyes

You would see nothing.

Poor black trash,

Interrupting briefly: The reader does not believe Lady Bates was a bad girl and justly punished, and is pleased—and saddened—that death was all a mistake. Continuing:

The wind has blown you away forever
By mistake; and they sent the wind to
the chain-gang
And it worked in the governor's
kitchen, a trusty for life;
And it was all written in the Book of
Life;
Day and Night met in the twilight by
your tomb
And shot craps for you; and Day said,
pointing to your soul,
"This bad young colored lady,"
And Night said . . .

Here I interrupt again, promising to tell you shortly what Night said—but also to insist that when Day calls her "bad" the tone tells one he doesn't mean *bad* but rather a tender

kind of baby talk that any parent can recognize. Now to the concluding stanza:

But Death, after the habit of command,
Said to you, slowly closing his hand:

afraid
“You’re a big girl now, nor even

Of the dark when you awake—
When the day you sleep through
Is over, and you awake,

evening
And the stars rise in the early

grave—
An inch or two over the grass of your

Try to open your eyes;”
Try to reach to one, to the nearest,
Reach, move your hand a little, try to

move—

You can’t move, can you?

You can’t move. . . .

asleep.”
You’re fast asleep, you’re fast

There is no taunting here by Death: he is not flaunting his power as if to say "Hah! You can't can you!?" but rather is himself moved as if to say "Sleep little one. Peace." Now I'll tell you what Night said when I interrupted:

And Night said, "Poor little nigger
girl."

This isn't exactly Jarrell using the "N-word" (Heaven protect us!). It is Night, at the hest of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and perhaps the coal-black and the high-yellow angels speaking a dialect appropriate to the occasion.

I find "Lady Bates" heart-breaking, yes, and a poetic achievement. I stopped reading literary criticism of "Lady Bates" years ago when one critic found it an exercise in "Southern gothic" and "sympathetic in a paternalistic way to its subject" (I suppose because a Southern writer could only be paternalistic toward a black?), and another thinks Jarrell "seems to mistake pathos for compassion" (one really has to be insensitive not to hear the compassion!) and charges Jarrell with an "inability to apprehend the reality of his subject" (which means I know not what!). So I am content to read again and again this beautiful, tender, loving poem with no further comment . . . save the following:

"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread." Alexander Pope was quite excellent on fools. In a sense his *Essay on Criticism*

was a study of them, especially the intellectually arrogant, whom he captures in the couplet “Go, teach eternal wisdom how to rule, / Then drop into thyself, and be a fool.” I’m sure it says nothing good about my character that I confess I take a positive delight in the politically correct foolishness of the scholar who would revise for all the proper reasons and thereby morally improve the language in the artistic work of the literary genius. For instance the editor of a 2011 edition of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, in which Huck’s friend Jim is never referred to as “nigger” but only as escaped “slave” to avoid offending black and white snow-flakes: this editor an English professor whose name I will omit in an act of courtesy he does not deserve. The old lit-crit rumor that Huck’s and Jim’s relationship was basically homosexual (“Come back to the raft, Huck honey”) was, while absurd, at least funny. But the spectacle of editors dropping into their foolish selves is a drama devoid of humor.

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Related to this nonsense. . . . Well, let me back up a moment. I’ve seen two great *Othello* films in my life. Laurence Fishburne was magnificent in 1995 playing against Kenneth Branagh’s extraordinary Iago (the best Iago ever, by the way); I’d bet my life Fishburne studied especially Laurence Olivier’s 1965 *Othello*—and I doubt he was in any way offended by Olivier’s disguise as an African. In any case, the officials of the Metropolitan Opera, who might have felt different about Olivier, announced in February 2019—after the revelation that a Virginia politician had donned black-face as a college prank years before—that whoever played the title

role in any Met production of Verde's *Otello*, if a Caucasian, would not offend anyone's sensibility by wearing black-face. How very, very precious!

The chances of a reader of *NER* being an emotionally wilting snow-flake are slim, so I probably will not enjoy some fool's suggestion that Jarrell should have written "Poor little African American girl." If context is not "all," it is the very next thing, and in context "Poor little nigger girl" is perfect: to miss its tenderness and broken-hearted respect one has to be an ice-hearted ideologue. These fools are not likely the same people who would tear down Confederate statues—but the same mentality: people who would cleanse history of its complex and moving subtleties, leaving us with a false image of the past and thereby *depriving* us, white *and* black.

Speaking of deprivation, I have never seen "Lady Bates" anthologized, and I doubt I ever will. That bears as much a chance as seeing on the reading list for college English majors Joseph Conrad's great short novel *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus.'*

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