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soot and spit

by CHARLES L. MEE

All soot and spit
all black and white:
there is not a bit of color anywhere
until toward the very end of the piece
when some very, very faint reds and blues and greens
begin to seep and bleed into the set and costumes
a bit at a time.

We are inside and outside at the same time:
the entire stage is covered with dirt.
There are three walls of an old ice house,
a back wall and two side walls,
and inside the walls
the floor is also dirt—
so the dirt is continuous from outside the icehouse to inside—
and on the dirt floor are four items:
a chair, a narrow bed, a table, and a pot bellied stove.

As the lights come up slowly
we are hearing John Hartford's Short Sentimental Interlude
from his crackly 1969 recording.

Short Sentimental Interlude
Short Sentimental Interlude
Short Sentimental Interlude

Short Sentimental Interlude
Short Sentimental Interlude
Short Sentimental Interlude

The Narrator enters,
takes a seat at one side of the stage
at a simple wooden table
with a wooden chair.
We are not in any haste here.
He wears a black suit, a white shirt, no tie.
He speaks into a microphone
over the music.
We hear a deep, rich, gentle voice
always speaking slowly and deliberately
and, as it were, with compassion,
but, still, matter-of-factly.

THE NARRATOR

James Castle,
born September 24, 1900,
Garden Valley, Idaho
the fifth of eight children.
He was two months premature,
"deaf and dumb,"
or,
as we have come to think in hindsight,
autistic.

Frail,
known to the other children
and to members of his family
as The Dummy,
he refused to learn to read, write or sign
but he copied down alphabets and numbers
and spent his time obsessively
drawing.

[James enters, uncertainly, looks around,
goes to his chair
sits
and begins to sharpen a stick.]

He was inspired by the things that came into his home,
which also served as the post office
and general store for his home town:
Sears and Roebuck catalogues
almanacs and periodicals
devoted to animal husbandry, agriculture and gardening
The Catholic Sentinel and liturgical calendars
postage stamps
picture postcards
newspapers containing cartoons and comic strips.

Sent away to the State School for the Deaf and Blind
in Gooding, Idaho
where students were taught broom making,
shoe repair,
the care of animals in barns, coops, and hutches.

Unhappy, difficult,
he stayed at the School for less than a year and
was returned then to his family
with the instruction from the headmaster
to keep paper, pens, and inks away from him
not to let him spend his time drawing
but to make him spend his time learning to sign and to speak.

So
James made his drawing pens
from sharpened sticks
and his ink from fireplace soot
and his own spit,
and he drew on old brown paper bags
from the grocery store
and match boxes that he flattened out
and in this way he made art

because
he needed
to make art.

Now we hear John Hartford sing
"Boogie"

JOHN HARTFORD SINGS

Uh uh uh uh uh uh uh uh
Hey babe ya wanna boogie?
Boogie woogie woogie with me
Hey babe ya wanna boogie?
Boogie woogie woogie with me
We can boogie over here
We can boogie over there
Come on baby we can boogie everywhere
Hey babe ya wanna boogie?
Boogie woogie woogie with me

[and James tries to sing along from time to time—
singing as those who cannot speak or hear sometimes do,
making the sound of a sheep bleating, and occasional crooning—
as we see him
mixing soot and spit.

And, now, while we hear this song
six people with Down Syndrome cross
from one side to the other
slowly and awkwardly
in a gunny sack race.]

Uh uh uh uh uh uh uh uh
Hey babe ya wanna boogie?
Boogie woogie woogie with me
Hey babe ya wanna boogie?
Boogie woogie woogie with me
We can boogie in the living room

and boogie in the yard
Come on baby it ain't very hard
Hey babe ya wanna boogie?
Boogie woogie woogie with me

Uh uh uh uh uh uh uh uh
Hey babe ya wanna boogie?
Boogie woogie woogie with me
Hey babe ya wanna boogie?
Boogie woogie woogie with me
We can boogie on the floor
We can boogie on the table
We can boogie on the lamp
at least you think you might be able
Hey babe ya wanna boogie?
Boogie woogie woogie with me

[James remains, drawing.]

As the Down Syndrome racers exit,
they leave behind a single young fat woman,
Elmira,
in a fluffy pink dress
just standing there.
And, after a moment,
she speaks.]

ELMIRA

Who is it gathers in the apples?
Who is it makes great cider?
Who is it makes great tippie?
What is the man who produces on earth Sea?
What is the woman who produces on earth Sea?
What is the man who lights up the daylights?
What is the woman who lights up the great Nights?
What merit has the man who devours?
Where does Normandy actually start?
What is meant by a cliff?
Where was queen Mathilda born?

Where is Bavent? Deauville?
What makes us start singing?
Which is more intelligent: the dresser,
or the one who needs his wound dressed?
What is a packet of bandages?
What meritess has a Mother who watches over children?
Why does a lad run after 36 girls?
Why is it a young girl ought not to?
At what age can a girl get engaged?
To whom should her heart be opened?
Why can't a Ram swim for very long?
Why can't a ewe swim for even less long?
Would a mare swim less long than a stallion?
Would a nanny swim less long that a billy?
What's the point of this difference?

[John Hartford sings "I Wish We Had Our Time Again,"
while Elmira dances solo.

And, as she dances,
people come in one by one
carrying shoes and hammers
uncertainly, not sure what to make of her dancing
but making their way to a place where they can settle down
on the ground
and repair the shoes.

Or else they bring in the materials of basket weaving
and weave baskets.

There are six of these folks, finally.]

JOHN HARTFORD SINGING
The Roads We Ran and The Folks We Knew
The Risky Things that We Use To Do
Now It's Over And I Know We're Thro.
And I Wish We Had Our Time Again,

I Wish We Had Our Time Again
I Wish We Had Our Time Again,
I Wish We Had Our Time.

I Couldn't Go To Sleep Got Up and made A Life
Tried To Write it Down In The Middle of The Night
Looking For The Words But It Won't Come Right
And I Wish We Had Our Time Again,
I Wish We Had Our Time Again
I Wish We Had Our Time Again,
I Wish We Had Our Time.

Oh me oh my how the years do fly
and it makes no difference and we all know why
dear old friends have turned their eye
And I Wish We Had Our Time Again,
I Wish We Had Our Time Again
I Wish We Had Our Time Again,
I Wish We Had Our Time.

The very thing that I knew you'd say
was the thing you told me yesterday
it was what you meant it was just your way
And I Wish We Had Our Time Again,
I Wish We Had Our Time Again
I Wish We Had Our Time Again,
I Wish We Had Our Time.

If not for love could hardly see
I looked at you and you looked at me
oh memory love oh memory be
And I Wish We Had Our Time Again,
I Wish We Had Our Time Again
I Wish We Had Our Time Again,
I Wish We Had Our Time.

[Somewhere in the midst of the song,
Elmira dances on out,
leaving the folks repairing shoes
and James at his drawing.

Mr. Taylor enters, sees James,
and scolds him.]

MR. TAYLOR

I'm afraid, James,
I can't let you waste your time.
I can't let you grow up to be
some sort of animal
living in the ice house.
Worse than that.
A completely useless leech.
Taking your mother and father down with you.
Because why?
Because you have no sense of gratitude
or consideration.
It's going to be important for you
to develop one or two rudimentary skills
so that you can achieve some semi-independence
and not completely waste your life
and the lives of others
with this inconsequential ink scratching
living the life of a worm
worse than a worm
of a grub.

[Slowly, on the back wall of the theatre,
which is, of course, partly obscured by the ice house,
a projection fades in to sharp black and white:
25 or 50 identical pen and ink drawings
of a man standing alone
outdoors,
earless, armless
his mouth agape in a silent scream
can be seen around the edges of the ice house.

We hear an old woman singing mournfully,
the sort of old woman from the local village
who has been singing in the village all her life
and when she sings
you think she comes from a thousand years of living.

She sings the old shape-note song
King of Peace
written by John Newton in 1779,
music by F. Price (1835)
and she is backed up by the recording made by
the Wooten Cousins of Ider, Alabama.
On this recording there might be almost 100 singers,
and, here, the old woman takes the lead,
and she might be backed up by some or all
of the cast.

And, from time to time, James tries to sing with them.

Lord, I cannot let Thee go,
Till a blessing Thou bestow;
Do not turn away Thy face,
Mine's an urgent, pressing case.

Dost Thou ask me who I am?
Ah, my Lord, Thou know'st my name:
Yet the question gives a plea
To support my suit with Thee.

Thou didst once a wretch behold,
In rebellion blindly bold,
Scorn Thy grace, Thy pow'r defy;
That poor rebel, Lord, was I.

And, while they sing
a little man with Down Syndrome,
wearing a dunce cap,
walks in and wanders around.

A mother wearing a sailor hat
and a red coat
looking lost
carrying a floor lamp.

A man wearing a large paper mask
made from a shopping bag,
so that he has a square head
and pasted across his mouth
is an ad
and three little movie tickets are pasted
where his eyes should be.

A small girl enters
hopping up and down over and over and over.

An extremely tall skinny naked guy with caked blood on his head
and his entire body charcoal black— -burned from head to toe
does lurching, stumbling, shuffling butoh walking
lurches on his tiptoes
falls over to the side
goes into a crouch
goes to the ground
writhing

The little man with Down syndrome
is brought back in at the end of a chain
by a guy with a whip
and the Down man has on large fake ears.

All these people, one by one, leave,
until the stage is empty.

James stops drawing,
looks up
and looks out at the audience.

The old woman's song comes to an end.

Four or five others come in.

James gets up,
puts his drawings into a folder,
and leaves.

The group reminisces.
They sit silently for a time,
glancing at one another,
as though there is an interviewer in the room
prodding them to remember,
and they don't remember, or don't think their memories are significant,
they are shy, or need encouragement.
Finally one of them speaks.]

FIRST

As an infant he was a "rocker"
he rocked from side to side all the time.

[There is a long silence.
Finally another person speaks.]

SECOND

His mother used to rub his body and legs for months
till he was able to walk.
Rubbed his legs with saltwater solution.

[Others nod in agreement.
Another silence.
Then a possibly significant thing is remembered....]

THIRD

Father was an orphan?

No one was ever turned away from our door.

Dad always said there was room for one more at the Castle table.

[While they speak,
black and white ink drawings are projected
on the back wall of the ice house,
so that now there are projections on the back wall of the theatre
and the back wall of the ice house.]

FOURTH

He didn't go to picnics
you know
others would go to picnics
and play horse shoes
and be in foot races

SECOND

He never took part in shivarees, or dances, or ice cream socials

FOURTH

though this was happening around him all the time.

THIRD

He would only do the dishes.

SECOND

He never did any other household chores.

THIRD

He only wanted to do the dishes.
That's all he would do.

SECOND

At school, the boys took up printing,
building,
repairing furniture,
shoe repair

FIRST

working in the fields, the orchards the gardens

SECOND

tending inhabitants of barns, coops, hutches

FIRST

carpentry, broom making,

SECOND

tailoring.

FIRST

He didn't do that.

SECOND

He made probably thousands of drawings.

FIRST

I don't think he cared whether anyone liked what he did or not.

He made, probably, in his entire life

15,000 drawings and books and sort of constructions

out of paper.

SECOND

I don't think he cared whether it was good or bad.

FIRST

He just wanted to do it.

SECOND

I think he was

maybe inspired by his sister Nellie's photo albums

FIRST

He walked around the town sometimes.

SECOND

And in the woods.

FIRST

But not so much.

[One or two of these people get up
go out
and return in a moment
with a home movie screen.
They set it up.

And we see a home movie of
20 small children in a Halloween parade
in a rural town in Idaho

while the Down Syndrome choir sings

Men All Want to Be Hoboes

Men All Want to Be Hoboes

Men All Want to Be Hoboes

Men All Want to Be Hoboes

Men All Want to Be Hoboes

Men All Want to Be Hoboes

Men All Want to Be Hoboes

Men All Want to Be Hoboes

Men All Want to Be Hoboes

Men All Want to Be Hoboes

Men All Want to Be Hoboes

As the song continues
James enters leading a chicken at the end of a string.

He sits in a chair, holding onto the string.

A man enters and
gently takes James by the hand
and leads him around the periphery of the stage

as a kind person would tend to a needy person
in any village in the world
taking them through the streets

and then he takes James on out

as two people pick up the movie screen
and move it across the stage to the other side.
And, from now on to the end of the piece,
one soot and spit ink drawing after another
is projected onto the screen,
one very, very slowly bleeding into the next

so that now
there are changing projections on the movie screen,
on the back wall of the theatre
and on the back wall of the ice house

as a hot young woman
in a minidress enters
and sits at a table with a telephone
performing sexiness
performing seductiveness
like Jean Harlow
crossing one leg over another
Music up.

YOUNG WOMAN

Hello
Hello hello

[she sings with music]

hello
hello hello

[she hangs up phone
crosses her other leg
then picks it up again]

hello
hello hello

[hangs up
crosses opposite leg]

ditto

ditto

ditto

ditto

ditto

from time to time
we hear guy's voice from the other end of the phone
and sometimes she says 'who is this?'
or 'is this raimondo'
or something of the sort
but mostly she
only sings

hello
hello hello
hello
hello hello
hello
hello hello
hello
hello hello
hello
hello hello
hello

hello hello
hello
hello hello
hello
hello hello

the young man with Down syndrome
enters wearing a crimson prom dress

Harry Nicholson plays guitar and sings
the John Hartford song

HARRY SINGING

I tried to keep from wanting you
I thought this feeling soon would end
then I could get on with this life I live
but here I am in love again

I started to call you twice today
I even wrote a note I didn't send
I tried not to think of when I brushed your hand
here I am in love again

[is he joined by a chorus???

here I am what can I do
I started out to be your friend
I never meant to feel this way
here I am in love again

I tried to get you off my mind
but it's so hard now to pretend
the more I try the more I find
here I am in love again

here I am again what can I do
I started out to be your friend
I never meant to feel this way
here I am in love again

the Morton Salt girl enters, stands stock still

THE MORTON SALT GIRL

James,
why don't you draw me?
You could always draw me.
I am standing still.
Do you see how I stand still?
I stand still for a long time.
I don't move.
You can take your time.
And while you draw
you can think.
Because I am not going anywhere.
Or, if you like,
I could sit.
And you could do my portrait.
And I won't talk.
I will be quiet.
Completely quiet.
So you can have some quiet
and some peace.

[Now, the sears and roebuck catalogue comes to life
while John Hartman sings

Good Old Boys
Good Old Boys
Good Old Boys
Good Old Boys
Good Old Boys
Good Old Boys
Good Old Boys
Good Old Boys

James's people
emerge from the backdoor of the icehouse
through a projection:

the Gerber's baby,
the Saltine girl,
the Nu Bora detergent woman,
Prince Albert
a man who quacks like a duck
a lingerie ad girl
Sugar Honey Maid Graham Cracker

a woman in an elegant black dress
with a blood red face
does a wild wild dance
and smears red lipstick all over her face
in time with the music
and then throws herself to the ground on her back over and over and over
she becomes covered with dust
as she kicks and writhes wildly on the ground on her back
like a cockroach frantic on its back

Several couples enter and dance to the song.
The young women are in cotton dresses
as though at a summer ice cream social.

the lingerie ad girl
joins in for a duet with the john hartman voiceover

Good Old Boys
Good Old Boys
Good Old Boys
Good Old Boys
Good Old Boys
Good Old Boys
Good Old Boys
Good Old Boys

musical interlude
while
couples dance

and there are some solos
James's mother dances with a floor lamp
and his sister dances solo

a guy in overalls walks through pushing a wheelbarrow
full of leaves

The Down syndrome choir returns in their gunny sack race
and then stops to provide a backup singing chorus

Good Old Boys
Good Old Boys
Good Old Boys
Good Old Boys
Good Old Boys
Good Old Boys
Good Old Boys
Good Old Boys

while
James makes art of the materials at hand
meticulously
a paper bag folded just so
soot and spit
sharpening the stick
and he draws

they all dance out
leaving the lingerie girl alone in duet with john hartford
and then she leaves at the end
as the music dies out

Now, James's "people"
are lined up against the back wall of the ice house
like a Greek chorus.
They are wearing paper dresses
or paper shirts and pants
with drawings on them.

Or they just have flat cardboard fronts with drawings on them.
And they may wear flat paper or cardboard masks
with cut-out collage pieces pasted over their faces.

And, as they speak,
projections of pen and ink drawings
of people, landscapes, letters of the alphabet,
and interiors of the ice house
are projected on the back wall of the ice house,
on the back wall of the stage
and on the home movie screen.
One after the other, these drawings fade into one another.

Now, too, a little very faint color has just begun
to bleed and seep into the set and costumes
a bit at a time.

LAURA

The sky is overcast.
The nearer mountains are gray-melancholy.
And at this point I meet Me face to face.
Face to face I look at Me
with some hatred,
with despair,
and with great intentness.
I am rare - I am in some ways exquisite.
I am pagan within and without.
I am vain and shallow and false.
I am a specialized being, deeply myself.
I am of woman-sex and most things that go with that,
with some other pointes.
I am dynamic but devastated, laid waste in spirit.
I have a potent weird sense of humor -
a saving and a demoralizing grace.
I am scornful-tempered and I am brave
I am slender in body and someway fragile
and firm-fleshed and sweet.
I am distinctly original innately and in development.
I have in me quite an unusual intensity of life.

I can feel.
I have a marvelous capacity for misery and for happiness.
I am broad-minded.
I am a genius.
My brain is a conglomeration of aggressive versatility.
I have brain, cerebration -
not powerful, but fine and of a remarkable quality.
I have reached a truly wonderful state
of miserable morbid unhappiness.
I know myself, oh, so well.
I have gone into the deep shadows.
I have entered into certain things marvelously deep.
I know things, I know that I know them,
and I know that I know that I know them
which is a very fine psychological point.
Very often I take this fact in my hand
and squeeze it hard like an orange
to get the sweet, sweet juice from it.
Along some lines I have gotten to the edge of the world.
A step more and I fall off.
I do not take the step.
I stand on the edge, and I suffer.
I have reached some astonishing subtleties of conception
as I have walked for miles
over the sand and barrenness among the little hills and gulches.
Their utter desolation is an inspiration
to the long, long thoughts and to the nameless wanting.
But there are elements in one's mental equipment so vague,
so opaque, to undefined—
how is one to grasp them?
There are feelings that rise and rush over me overwhelmingly,
I am helpless, crushed, and defeated before them.
It is as if they were written on the walls of my soul chamber
in an unknown language.
I put Me in a crucible of my own making
and set it in the flaming
trivial Inferno of my mind.
And I assay thus:
I am quite alone as I live my life.

And I am unhappy -
a scornful unhappiness not of bitter positive grief
which admits of engulfing luxuries of sorrow,
but of muffled unrests and tortures
of knowing I fit in nowhere,
that I drift - drift -
and it brings an unbearable dread,
always more and more dread,
into days and into wakeful nights.
My Soul is not free:
God hung a string of curses,
like a little manacled chain,
round its neck long and long ago.
Always I feel it.
My heart is not free
for it is dead:
in a listless way and a trivial way, dead.
And my Body -
it is free but has a seeming of something wasted and useless
like a dinner spread out on a table uneaten and growing cold.
To-morrow
if I should meet God to know and speak to,
the first thing but one I should ask him would be,
"What was your idea, God, in making me?"
There are times when my Loneliness is a charmed
and scintillant and resourceful Loneliness
with a strange and ecstatic gleam in it.
The miracle of being a person rushes upon and about
and into me 'with lightning and with music.'
The spirit of me closes its eyes in turbulent dusks
of wondering and wishing
and leans its forehead against a mathematic dead-wall.
But when it lifts its head and opens its eyes
there are the melting mauves and maroons
of a dead sun across the evening sky,
and the small far wistful flames of always-hopeful stars.
My soul goes blindly seeking, seeking.
But when at last my happiness is given to me
life will be an ineffable, a nameless thing.

It will seethe and roar
it will plunge and whirl
it will leap and shriek in convulsion
it will quiver in delicate fantasy
it will writhe and twist
it will glitter and flash and shine
it will sing gently
it will shout in exquisite excitement
it will dance
it will glide
it will rush
it will swell and surge
it will fly
it will soar high—high
it will go down to depths unexplored
it will yell in utter joy
it will chime faintly
it will sob and grieve and weep
it will revel and carouse.

When it comes my turn to meet face to face
the unspeakable vision of the Happy Life
I shall be rendered dumb.

Sometimes the dusk is full of fire.

Some dusks I sit by my window looking out
and hotly and coldly want a Lover:
hotly with my Body and coldly with my Mind.

For any woman of any charm

the world is full of Lovers:

each and all to be had by the flutter of her finger,
the droop of her white eyelids,
the trembling of her pink-bowed lips.

The world is full of them -

facile Lovers, craven, potent, and pinchbeck.

And it's that kind I want hotly with my Body,
coldly with my Mind

in dusks of rippling warmth - rippling, rippling warmth.

MARY

When you get up in the morning
you have to know
when you got up
to know if you are right on schedule.

6 AM

And then recite
briefly
the main goal
getting fit
10 exercises
running
chinups, pushups
indoor track
weight machines
ten times swinging of the head
ten winks
ten nose-ups.
A good workout.

Then.

Washing.

Eau de Portugal
left temple, armpits,
face upwards. Nose.

Dressing toward the north.

Feng shui
dress in parallel, first right, then left,
doing it in order also
so that you don't forget to dress
one side or the other.

8 o'clock.

Hand practice—working out the kinks
42 glasses of water.

And then, with the other people in the park,
droll stories. Anecdotes.

Unforgettable characters.
Be sociable!
And so forth. And so on.

Later. Back home. Supper alone.
Eat soup in silence.
Dear little right finger plays at tasting.
Sit towards the right.
(don't cross left foot)
remember the circulation.

In the evening hours:
sofa—prone exercises.
make a little poem.
enjoy colors.

And then,
to bed at 8 o'clock
bed in northerly direction, head better towards the east.
Feng shui.

[stops, thinks]

Shui Feng.
Eye exercises: glossy spots, bright spots, distance.
Rest towards southeast.
Estimate star,
weather glimpse.
10 glimpses through the room (left, right, above).

Ten o'clock.

Midnight.

One.

Day's end.
Fetal position.
Left hand sideways.

Rectum.
Left ass cheek.

Four o'clock. Night's end.
Another day.

There needs to be love in the world.

HERBERT

Oh, yes.

Yes.

There does.

BOB

Tears or laughter, what does it matter.

It's life

that's the main thing.

Yes.

I suppose so

but it's the cushion round the edge I want to put back.

I the good for nothing.

No more shall you attend my new universities

to learn how to ridicule the weak

and swindle them every which way

and send them to their death

and grab all their property

which they've scraped together

through sexual love or all kinds of decent work.

Daddy allowed you some leeway for his leaven

that is some soft purgatives

to get rid of the toxic worms;

but you revel in shit so much you want to hand it back to the others

I'm not talking about your spiritualist intonations

you bring down accidents and fires

through your power over all the acts of men

and specially of women.

It's the man of feeling talking to you;

one of those who's suffered more than enough in life

without realizing at the time that it was you

who were stealing all the elements of his happiness
he was courageously seeking to establish.
Rosalyta will tell you anything you want to know.
But eye shitton yew toodle doo tweety mooch ooh lala.
Tivvy tavvy tuv.
Eyed door you the lady replied
but furst eye knee two rhea shore mice selph
bee 4 eye embraize your flame
and test your fiddle itty.

HORTENSE

Turkey, you can have your capital
its name is no longer part of the risk.
Mr. Punch Charles the Fifth
and Luther Chris toffer column bus Eat temple knees.
Hens rooster chicker dee nilly-nilly.
Kasablanca Boulogne Paris Cigar.
Dirigible balloon khyte.
Kimonilastic.
Seedy bra hymn.
Wheat oats dandyion.
Halfweigh. Halfweigh. Pezolour Tutsh tastic.
Red lipstick great stuff.
Black cataclysm allah bubble.
Fog drizzle Spring Blue sky Dawn Pencil X
Go Ann.
Cindrella old Ma Twankey
Rightup the evil whole.
Shah spipe hubble bub Bounced check
Toss ex equo Frigates Tawny Owl kestrel Magpie.
Rook.
Ducks nightingales blackbirds warblers.
Cold Frozen sweetmeats melting March April May
centuries Creator.
Whitadonna lil coco 1 White Durious Ball
Zlong theirs yours tars neath the Vorts of heaven
their be Happy nessin the faithless night Seams
that scald Sylvaren
Sig her etts.

Butterfly whose wings bring us fine weather
you know the latest about the new defusing juice.
It's not just children of kings
get given fabulous present when they're born.

[And now
a big dance number:
the whole cast,
all in brightly colored swimming suits
bikinis and boxers
or grass skirts,
do the slow hula
to the song Lorena.

Even the Narrator,
taking off his jacket,
joins in this dance.

Or else everyone comes in sitting on huge bouncing balls,
red and yellow and blue balls,
with handles on them,
riding them like ponies,
as they sing.]

The years creep slowly by, Lorena
the snow is on the ground again
the sun's low down the sky, Lorena
the frost leans where the flowers have been
but the heart beats on as warmly now
as when the summer days were nigh
oh the sun can never dip so low
to be down in affection's cloudless sky

[musical interlude]

a hundred months have passed, Lorena
since last I held that hand in mine
and felt the pulse beat fast, Lorena
oh, mine beat faster far than thine

a hundred months was flowry May
when up that hilly slope we climbed
to watch the dying of the day
and hear the distant church bells chime

[musical interlude]

we loved each other then, Lorena
far more than we ever dared to tell
and what we might have been, Lorena
had our loves prospered well
but then tis parting years roll on
I'll not call up their shadowy form
I'll say to them lost years sleep on
sleep on keep life's belting storm.

[Now, too, a little very faint color has just begun
to bleed and seep into the projected drawings and constructions.

They are all singing another shape-note song,
Morning Sun,
written by S.M. Denson in 1911
and backed up by the recording made in 1954
by the choir of the Old Flatwoods Church
of Nauvoo, Alabama.

Youth, like the spring, will soon be gone,
By fleeting time or conqu'ring death;
Your morning sun may set at noon,
And leave you ever in the dark.
Your sparkling eyes and blooming cheeks
Must wither like the blasted rose;
The coffin, earth, and winding sheet
Will soon your active limbs enclose.

and the full cast in black
enters at funeral march pace

rocking back and forth
as they go from one side of the stage to the other
and narrator sings: Ni ni nah nah over and over and over

after they have all gone through
James enters
wearing a wedding dress

James sits on box
watches TV on packing crates
he eats bread and sings along with TV
making drumming motions with his hands

old woman in black with guitar
sings a lament

VERY old guy in print house dress and clogs enters

the Narrator now has on a mask head
and he dances
hard, violent hip movements
as
the choir comes through again
with Morning Sun
as another woman in a black dress and also a black veil
enters up center and comes all the way slowly down center
holding a bouquet of flowers in front of her
motionless in every way except her walking very slowly
to lay the bouquet of flowers on the ground
her eyes are streaming tears of blood

HERBERT

I finally asked her if they were for sale...
She said yes,
and I gave her almost nothing, like a dollar....
It was the darndest collection of junk
in the kitchen of those paintings...
the drawing was done on the back of one of those cardboard things that go down
inside a shirt sent back from the laundry.

It was the only one I had any interest in
because I know exactly where he had to be standing in Garden Valley when he
painted it or drew it.

LAURA

I kind of figured that that lady was
more interested in getting them cleaned out
than she was in selling them....
they did burn a lot of it.

BOB

One guy, named Day,
bought thirty or forty pieces for \$500
and his wife was upset
as you might imagine,
and he said to her,
he said
"Some day
this man is going to be well known
for what he created."

MARY

He had no concept of money
if you would give him a dollar bill
he'd look at it and throw it away
or draw on it.

THE NARRATOR

Then one day
an art dealer came to the house.

James tried to talk to him,
but he got too excited
and he had to run out of the house
and run around outside for 15 or 20 minutes,
smoking
till he calmed down, and returned to the house.

The dealer visited the ice house

and there he found
gunnysacks
filled with hundreds of books
and thousands of drawings.

And the dealer took armloads of the stuff.
He talked it over with the family.
They all agreed on it.
It turned out he was an honest man.

And when it came time to leave
he looked around for James to say goodbye
but they couldn't find James anywhere.

And then James came running from around the corner of the house.
He had two wrapped up parcels in his arms
it was more of his work that he had taken special care with
each package neatly wrapped in newspaper and tied with twine
and he handed the two packages to the dealer.
He was excited
and he was proud
to get this sort of attention for his work after all those years.

And that was how was ended
nearly a half-century
of unacknowledged art and book making.

[So James stands for a moment alone
watching the dealer leave,
triumphant for a moment,
and then he just forgets it
and goes back to work
sharpening sticks and making soot and spit]

THE NARRATOR

Of course, in a day or so,
he'd forgotten all about it.
The truth is,
he didn't care whether he was recognized or not

whether people thought what he did
was good or bad.

He just had to do it.

And what he knew for certain was
he knew to never quit.
Never never never never never quit.
Never quit.
Go all the way to the end.
Never quit.
Never quit.
Never stop living.
Never quit.

[James is back at his drawing.

The old woman returns to sing another shape-note piece.
She is backed up this time by the Flatwoods Church Choir
—and the cast joins in—
for North Salem,
written by Isaac Watts in 1707
with music written in 1799 by Stephen Jenks.

My soul, come and meditate the day,
And think how near it stands,
When thou must quit this house of clay,
And fly to unknown lands.

And you, mine eyes, look down and view
The hollow, gaping tomb,
This gloomy prison waits for you,
Whene'er the summons come.

Or they could do Present Joys
written by A.M. Cagle in 1908
with backup by the Alabama Sacred Harp Singers
in their 1928 recording.

We thank the Lord of heav'n and earth,
Who hath preserved us from our birth.

Chorus:

For present joys, for blessings past,
And for the hope of heav'n at last.

How shall we half our task fulfill?
We thank Thee for Thy mind and will.

Chorus:

For present joys, for blessings past,
And for the hope of heav'n at last.

Redeemed us oft from death and dread,
And with Thy gifts our table spread,

Chorus:

For present joys, for blessings past,
And for the hope of heav'n at last.

As the lights go slowly to black.

We hear his voice again singing with her.

Slow fade to darkness.

The cast all come back slowly for their curtain call.]

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NOTE ON THE TEXT:

soot and spit (the musical) is greatly inspired by Pippo Delbonno's *URLO*, by Tom Trusky's biography of James Castle, by the songs of John Hartford, and it also takes texts from the archives of the Prinzhorn Collection in Switzerland, from Mary MacLane, Aimable Jayet, Sylvain Lecocq.

A NOTE ON THE MUSIC:

If it is difficult to obtain permissions for all these John Hartford songs, of course

other Bluegrass and country songs can be substituted for the Hartfords, but a "Hartford musical" would be nice.

Still, there are other wonderful options. The Hartford songs could all be replaced, for example, by songs from the classic collection compiled in 1952 by Harry Smith and put out by Folkways Records (now in the Smithsonian's collection and republished in CDs by the Smithsonian). This was the collection that inspired the American folk revival, and that all the folk musicians of the 50s and 60s knew by heart.

It includes songs by Blind Lemon Jefferson, by the Memphis jug band, in which one of the members played an empty whiskey bottle, by the blind Louisiana guitarist Didier Hebert, by Cannon's Jug Stompers (led by Gus Cannon, whose parents were born into slavery, and whose first banjo was made from a bread-pan and a raccoon skin head).

Most of the recordings from this collection were made in 1927, 1928, 1929—and so they have a wonderful old sound, on top of which the cast can sing.

A NOTE ON CASTING:

It might seem ridiculously difficult to imagine having a half-dozen performers with Down Syndrome in a piece, but, in truth, nearly all facilities and communities that are set up for people with Down Syndrome have active programs in performance and singing—and it should be the easiest task of all in staging this piece to find a half-dozen very accomplished and experienced performers with Down Syndrome.

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