Poems

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Abstract
THE CAT AND BANJO, FUNDAMENTALS, ARMOURIES, MERCHANTS OF SILENCE, TALKING GOD

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He lit his cigar with the last crested telegram, drifting blue ash over the stinkwood davenport. The sundry debtors-ledger curled like the brim of a smasher hat. ‘If was the master. Played the cat and banjo with my heart. Words can’t ... bad as Majuba.’ Now Doornkop was teaching his codebooks to speak Dutch.

Table Mountain boomed across the stoep. He snapped his glass from the poet’s sketch * of some raiding ape neck-deep in esparto, its great head framed by whiskey-cusps, its very species a smudged graffito.

* the poet was Kipling. This is based on an incident when he visited Rhodes after the failure of the Jameson Raid.
Brethren, I know that many of you have come here today because your Chief has promised any non-attender that he will stake him out, drive tent-pegs through his anus and sell his wives and children to the Portuguese. As far as possible, I want you to put that from your minds. Today, I want to talk to you about the Christian God.

In many respects, our Christian God is not like your God. His name, for example, is not also our word for rain. Neither does it have for us the connotation ‘sexual intercourse’. And although I call Him ‘holy’ (we call Him ‘Him’, not ‘It’, even though we know He is not a man and certainly not a woman) I do not mean, as you do, that He is fat like a healthy cow.

Let me make this clear. When I say ‘God is good, God is everywhere’, it is not because He is exceptionally fat. ‘God loves you’ does not mean what warriors do to spear-carriers on campaign. It means He feels for you like your mother or your father – yes I know Chuma loved a son he bought like warriors love spear-carriers on campaign – that’s Sin and it comes later.

From today, I want you to remember just three simple things: our God is different from your God, our God is better than your God and my wife doesn’t like it when you watch her go to the toilet. Grasp them and you have grasped the fundamentals of salvation. Baptisms start at sundown but before then, as arranged, how to strip, clean and re-sight a breech-loading Martini-Henry.
ARMOURIES

The logo of the Royal Armouries Museum is that great helmet made by Konrad Seusenhofer, commissioned as an image of and to protect the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, a gift with more edge than the collection of janissary scimitars.

I scrutinize the original for its rumoured hint of clap. The cuckold’s horns it gave him would stagger an elk. A worm of gold snot threatens a castellated silver rictus beneath an iron maiden version of James Joyce’s spectacles.

I start to lecture the children about Uncle Toby Shandy who studied war yet couldn’t hurt a fly, but when I look they’re glued to the display case of battlefield laser rifles. I wipe my glasses. The hint must be the spectacles themselves.

MERCHANTS OF SILENCE

So money could talk, the polyglot Silk Road would trade even its insults wordlessly; an index finger tapping the forehead will lose its touch in any translation: ‘You envy the silkworm its privacy’? A strict definition’s inadequate.

You might try by looking up ‘idiot’ in a dealer’s uncut first edition of Dr Johnson’s English Dictionary.
TALKING GOD

Ironically ‘patriotism’ is one of the few English words for which the Navajo language does not have an equivalent. 

N. AASENG ‘Navajo Code Talkers’

– Let me hear my title.
– Talking God, Drinker of Brimstone.
– My full title.
– Also Battalion Intelligence Officer, the 2nd Battalion the 5th Marines.
– My languages.
– Foul and Court Navajo.
– My Clans.
– I declare them The Dumbfuck People.
– Hail The Dumbfuck People!
– We are all The People. Who only do we fear?
– Dogface GIs imagining we’re Japanese.
– What of the Dogfaces who ordered our ancestors into a land where nothing grew but shadows, to share insects and weave bird-traps from each other’s hair, to lose the robe of dawn, the robe of blue sky, the robe of yellow evening light and the robe of darkness?
– Shit happens.
– Our fathers were whipped for speaking Navajo in their schools; now Dogfaces beg the very words from out of our mouths.
– We are The People.
– We are The People thrown on swords of turquoise to the South, on Northern black-rock knives, white-shell razors to the East; explain the West.
– When lakes are stars and rivers lightning.
– High-altitude reconnaissance.
– The Binaye Ahani Who Slay With Their Eyes.
– Anti-aircraft batteries.
– ‘Chat’.
– ‘Frog’: amphibious assault.
– A barren bird.
– A dry run.
– Tomorrow all the birds will lay, furnishing plumes for which ritual?
– The Enemy Way.
– Translate ‘Iwo Jima’.
– ‘Brimstone Island’.
– Till we set our feet in pollen.
– Till we set our feet in pollen.