



# HOLDING FIVE ACES

Poems by Benjamin Kimble Rogers



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Drawings by Lacey Stinson

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## *Stitching Ourselves with Stricture*

“Blithe” is such a fancy word  
that seems to be made up of birds’ wings.

Actually, it means “cheerful” and “carefree”.

So dogma tends to take down these wings,  
to cover them with rocks, mortar, and sand;

and is the rope by which we tie  
the beauty of sunset  
to the hard fact that day is over,  
when we must get our rest, forgetting  
the azure glories,  
and accepting the next day’s bidding.

Those people who tell us  
that we’ve got to do the right thing,  
that we’ve got to measure  
out the rope’s length, accept its accuracy,  
and bind ourselves to established beliefs,  
customs and concerns — are full of hooie-hock.

The bird flies amiably through the sunset,  
swims in the ochre majesty, cajoles the play  
of the cooling winds, then turns for night flight,  
back to such a season’s dawn.





Half Moon

*At Least It's Not a Blizzard*

“To your health!” yells out  
the homeless man, the overt smile he has  
showing good, white teeth.  
“To your health! And let it come down!”

For it has started to rain,  
and the sidewalk patrons scamper  
to find their ample awnings  
or doors that will open quickly into nearby buildings,  
and are not at all his concern.

“Yes! This rain’ll fill the cup,” he says.  
“The rain’ll fill up what’s not been there,  
or soak what’s already in there. There  
are a few dollars on this block, you know!  
I’ll just hold out my arm  
in full extension. Hey!” he says  
to no one in particular.  
“Did you see the Mets last week?”

When the taxi stops nearby for me,  
almost without my hailing it,  
I force the umbrella inside with me,  
and then close it to lesser range  
in the back seat.

We only go around once, I think to myself.  
And one man’s leaky roof  
can be another’s waterclock.

## *Planting Strawberries*

There is something quiet about the earth,  
Pregnant, vital, but nevertheless, quiet.

When a friend sits close, a third heart beats, quietly.  
A silent prayer prays differently from one that uses words.

The spring comes quickly into March,  
But not so silently as snow.

It comes more as a full rung chord  
With each instrument pitched, piped & trilling.

At time for planting the earth offers itself  
& Man responds on hands & knees.

The plants that are placed quietly in the earth  
Return as their own separate tune; then

There is something even much quieter about the earth.

## *What Could be a True Story*

There was a lady who came down from the North  
To speak at a local campus,  
And one of her themes was to discuss  
Obscurity in modern poetry.

She talked on this for seventeen hours straight,  
Non-stop, till her mouth began to bleed, furiously,  
And then she continued on and on and on . . . .

The hospital was called,  
The ambulance was called;  
But 9-1-1 then said, "No, no, don't do that.  
"Don't send us no poets!"

## *Monologue to Susan*

“What matters  
is that we stay healthy,  
well-fed, educated,  
so that we can continue —  
and maybe someday,

potentially know what matters.  
It’s a big question.

You ask me: ‘What really matters?’

— If you love to eat, kiss a farmer.  
It’s important for the fiddle  
to stay in tune  
if you want to dance the jig.  
If you want a good night’s sleep,  
try two pillows.  
If you believe in democracy,

govern at least two thirds  
of your own life.

Living just in the moment is fine,  
if you know how the day/night cycle  
occupies at least some part of the psyche.  
Don’t play with matches

unless they’re soaked thoroughly in almond-rich  
lanolin.

Have children  
only if you want to surrender  
to almost constant loss.  
And pray vehemently

when you think that there’s absolutely  
nothing there.  
God likes His privacy!”

*The Encore Nature Denies*

If love were the stain and gloss  
of fine wood, touch would retrieve  
through it  
the heart's angle to know grain.

Deliver the abyss slowly,  
for we walk on air,  
and all the breeze has meant for us  
is that caress indefinite.

The fire seeks it as well,  
more, perhaps, as a tooth  
for the anthropologist's sin,  
while he or she  
compiles the last trace of carnage.

This love, and the first weed in Eden,  
calmly magnetize the first lapsarian shout.



Vienna Fruit Stand

## *Holding Five Aces*

Where are the giant holes  
the postman always leaves?

I've been filling them  
with my aspirations.

Today, there came a postcard.  
I tacked it onto the wall  
I've decorated  
with my childhood.

I think that I forgot to read it.



## *The One Above*

Taking off the final stitch  
of my own sobriety,  
and that, just to look at her —

What moves me most  
are the flaws she hides  
behind the eyelids,  
those which fall like the grandest curtain  
in the grandest of operas.

And on the surface left before,  
what shows most  
are the rare perfections of daintiness,  
    a demureness  
when, with a gentle twist of the fourth finger  
of the left hand, she reaches out,  
as if to call — from all the birds  
which form in azure skies —  
for just one to light there solidly,  
and maybe for a lifetime,  
in order to secure, in calendars, the strings which tie  
beyond the riggings meant for a sailor's dream —  
and for him not to be, in the end,  
land bound,  
to die easily in Neptune's arms,  
and become as coral she would wear.

    But I am not salty enough  
for even the least bit of all of this.  
I am just the rust in some old trap,  
one that's meant to catch the dust  
from the hallow and sedentary wake of her walk;

only for me then to rap the gate of some pauper's shack  
in search of a true prosperity.

I'll reel now, instead,  
and only from her quaint and unforgiving nods,  
those that become her rules,  
that measure out nobility,  
her sovereign, intractable reign.

*Realization, Natal: 5 June 2008*

It's late enough now to know  
the nocturnal doctrines hidden in the fireflies  
blink lunkish heresies,  
off and on, on and off —  
that all is not safe beyond  
the bulwark's guarantee of any suspended disbelief.

With the shirking complexions of their rules,  
yellow and inaudible,  
they'll rattle not the cages of the animals,  
as none have such a containment, false restraints.

For then, autonomy becomes written  
in the backs of their eyes by their rest:  
lighthouses which forewarn the dawn,  
a rosy pink which calls their bidding  
toward easiest journeys along day's foot-path,  
over soil, in light.

All this life disports play,  
braves a temporal conquest inevitable,  
trumps an unfavoring walk of taciturn deities  
which descend to this earth  
for full disclosure, skin's appetite. Their lessons to teach?  
How I know that I'm a man?

## *Sonnet*

What has become of us? And may I ask?  
I'll judge the time by suns that pass our eyes,  
And moons, too. And by Mercury, who flies  
On fastest wings, so much ahead the task.

Why did the light of light hearts have to go  
Out, when she went on t'ward some destined point,  
And left behind a breeze that can't anoint  
Our love, what was, but now we cannot show?

And if I ask these questions as a dream,  
And you should follow logic while it turns  
To answer how that next step should be best —  
One follows Fortune to its final scheme,  
Where wisdom in my eyes of scarlet burns:  
Should I then call such feelings to my breast?

## *Lament for Ortega*

From my vantage point here,  
looking straight down the sidewalk,  
I can see several people  
striving,  
straining to raise their heads

to a point high above those others in the crowd.  
The crowd,

are they chattel? among the brick,  
the mortar, and the thick-lain asphalt,

while lights floating  
are hung to tarry  
and to speed.

The brisk breezes of this traffic  
move to peel the onion skin away from the tunneled,  
gray and lengthy avenue.

*Something Only God Would Know*

Four problems are lying on the coffee table  
before the widowed bride.

One of them is invisible; another  
is liquid in a glass; another

is a book; and the other one  
is her outstretched hand.

He died  
because he planned for eternity  
like an electrified cheetah running,  
who chases its prey  
from one end of savanna  
to another.

Any face  
becomes expressionless, when,  
even under new light  
a set of shadows intervene;

or when age becomes the roughest side  
to the smoothest coin.

She will not take up the drink  
for scant purpose,  
but comforts it, allows it  
its eminent domain,

then reads  
until the own book she writes intrudes.

## *One Afternoon in New Jersey*

Licking the sidewalk, I put my ear to the ground.  
This is the first time that I do this.

A passerby gives me his blessing, walks by,  
late afternoon, a businessman. I notice his shoes.

He notices that I seem forgotten,  
and redeems me with a smile.

I continue to listen. The Mozart  
on someone's radio interferes, but I hear through it:

the sieve of sound too porous to stop me now, in any way.  
Click! I hear the first beat!

Or has it been beating all this time,  
and what I am hearing new now only to me?

My ear is cold! Though I persevere,  
like unquenched thirst.

What I *do* know, and what I *don't* know  
confuse: a tightrope of endeavors.

I hear a drum, yes!  
The man knows this, as he walks by  
to meetings of boards and stocks, old money and new.

The drum is North India — a raga for the saints,  
built up slowly, tier on tier — one old mode

that's major, clear subdominant.  
Yet, it is the heart of a child I hear,  
I now learn: a baby carriage near, a few feet away:

The mother consumed with a newsstand, magazines,  
*The New Yorker*. (She must be reading the poetry.)

I listen *not* to North India, but to a child,  
growing in urban forests, its heart just starting,  
a mere twig sprouting within the human milieu.

The businessman turns back to me, winks,  
increases his step to a high cantor,

and I fade inside, and raise my head, only to hear a dove.





Primitive Dressings



## *Ode on the Inevitable*

### I

Barking dogs range over the field's pock-marks  
As the stars, in their coy subterfuge  
Lament that they cannot touch the hallmarks  
Of greenery, nor hear the voice of huge  
Factory emissions, those which a child  
Would sequester as it learns its lessons:  
The choke of knowledge and science preparing  
It for citizenry, masked confessions  
That could breathe the air as richer fairing,  
If only maxims, still, were not defiled.

### II

And streams that knew the joy of diamond wealth  
Flow less, now, for any thirsty purpose,  
Almost trickle away, as if some stealth  
Of modern times felt it worthy of curse  
And not the swimming place of young and old  
Where the simple joys bind abandonment  
To the happy, larking need of spirit.  
What? Do the wealthy have their need for gold  
Still, to stack their mountains till gods lament  
And rally their jealousy to have it?

### III

O, it's the march of time, hand in hand with  
Man that's led us to this perfumed quagmire;  
And all seasons of reason have lost pith  
Of strong philosophy; no wisdom's fire  
Shall level the land to start once again  
Where we could do better, or still excel  
To some lost paradise cored in the dream.  
Such salving balm would surely lead to scream  
The hearts of singular beasts who remain  
Against the quest of man, and what befell.

## *The Roses*

Channel 12, Sunday night,  
the last kiss still lukewarm.

You had to go, and I let you,  
not because I showed great favor,  
or would relinquish great power,

but to watch a program  
and sit there among the flowers

you brought me.



The Mountains of Paradise

*From Going Bowling in the Balkans*

I am distracted  
by this thing called *war*.  
There are so many other things  
I want to do;  
like I want to go to the pool hall  
and drink more suds,  
like there's no tomorrow.  
I want to play fiddlesticks  
with the town vagabond —  
and then afterward  
coach some tired mechanic  
on how to fix my car. (I'll trade  
him fresh cigarettes, an old American brand.)  
Or then, I want to gaze  
at the mid-day sky  
when there are no destinies involved  
and so, when that sky looms soporific, congenial —  
in case I happen to awaken from restless dreams —  
I can consume another six pack, or two.  
I want to throw eggs at the postman.  
I want to read the cheapest novel  
that I can find  
at the local dime store, and after reading it,  
forget about it, completely.  
I want to know why  
and how it is that these poor bodies drop  
like flakes of frigid snow  
to take their place, lastingly,  
on such an empty ground.

## *Two on the Island*

We met on the island of Buru, remote  
as a child's hand  
reaching to grasp ancestral charms.

It was in the late 60s, you traveling light,  
I, as heavy and dense as atomic water  
found in the bottom of the China Sea.

You knew how I was partly Dutch;  
and the Netherlands Indies  
became a grounding mark for you as well,  
though you couldn't admit it, till later.

We fantasized on many things;  
and for two full months  
we thought we could see Kerintji,  
two islands away, through surf and mist,  
and even its sand, roused up  
when a stream of coconuts would fall.

We had lost to two generations  
the amber horizons that were behind us;  
for the nations we had left  
were in suspect bloom,  
out of proportion with reality,  
and demonstrating their rabid concourses of youthful travesty.

We dined on fresh cassava,  
and peppered it with our new-found emotions.  
Though you, with your Euro-mix of passion  
and tradition — reflecting on the American brattishness  
I held in my chest — always seemed perplexed.

And if we knew who we were,  
it was only in the twilight dusk,  
while a cheap transistor radio  
would play the “Mouldau Concerto” through static.

And while you turned that night and said,  
I love you, words fell through my core  
like Hiroshima, just another simple thing  
for me to find, and deny.

For when we look back, from a satellite’s distance,  
through shaky phone calls, and the like,  
we can close the moment by memory’s fetish:  
the echo that returns little sentiment,  
and fades, like a contrail’s tail,  
or some pauper’s sparse, dry nod of no appreciation.



## *A Walk Through Sudden Memory*

This alley between us, laden in vines  
and matted light,  
where Dante's pupils would corrugate  
in search of who-knows-what —  
even the asphalt lifts to create the "No"  
of greater distance.

Why, the sea was here once in time, too,  
that brine of distant thought  
that surfaced through uncounted aeons,  
that set up a lore of vanity  
how we are something else indeed,  
and worthy of dead reckoning,  
and worthy of a spar's set prowess, no matter the sail.

And so we head on, no ocean cliff  
to lay in adumbration.

But the sun changes the sea here, as well;  
and in this empirical stab  
is fondly processional,  
while we walk slowly, turning the corners  
which lead to un-numbered dwellings,  
those that are bound to the image's *hauteur*.

And in this leisure of talk,  
where verity hums among us,  
we'll reach a calmer stasis —  
to feel it within our hands

as we touch our faces  
in order to remind us such.

And though vast colonnades of birds fly fast  
to seek for us some greater mercy,  
they'll know it not how we, quite long ago,  
completely attained it.

*Head That's Never in the Clouds*

Note: Erasmus

Where is  
the market for fools?

Lead me there;  
give me counsel with them!

(I must measure my  
disadvantages and advantages  
at this point  
to see if I'm able  
to distinguish one from another,

like so many penguins  
on the beach.)

— There must be  
a difference  
between the simple man,  
and the dupe. Lead me there.

I will buy a million!

## *Johnny Be What*

We drank too much — essentially  
we were drowning  
the backs of our eyeballs  
so we couldn't see  
the mess we'd made  
of other people's lives,  
not to mention  
our own.

We never held hands,  
but we shared the wine glasses  
like they were some windows  
of the Taj Mahal,

and we looked through them  
for only the moment.

### Pieces

of life  
fell all around our feet, like dropped pennies;  
but being too drunk to dance

we didn't,  
and besides, the music had stopped.

## *The Bogus Legend*

“I live without love, because love  
lives without me.”

She says this, while we pick our way  
through the fusty forest  
of an urban din of descants: human beings

who trudge the sleek sidewalks,  
their tacky pull of feet,

a grand assault on motion’s madness.  
We reach the cheap boutique half wet

from the fog that occurs  
(as ripe for damage as luckless gamers),

before I can form the apt reply.  
“Let’s go inside, to mull over the scents

left by the wealthy, and their perfumes,” I say.

The place is lighted by the flush  
of Chinese incandescence, or rather  
the swaying of lanterns hung  
by elastic, or cord.

She goes over to the lapidary counter  
and makes out, on the glass,  
as if she’s leaving fingerprints. The pressure

causes the wooden case to creak, a little.

“Did you hear what I said?” she says,  
turning.

I only notice the disabled man  
through the window, who’s taken out his  
asthma spray, uses a couple of shots,

then gets in, along with his shopping bag,  
to a cab,

whose driver then speeds off, to dodge  
frantically within the world.

## *The Specter*

What do you do when a machine says out loud to you,  
“I love you!”?

Do we, at that point,  
take off our hats and say,  
“Oh yes! Welcome to my world!”?

And then do we say such  
with heart-felt passion,  
with a strident pride we feel  
for having crossed over the pale  
into something  
rubbing quite a bit new,  
or maybe even a little bit too new?

She says to me,  
“Embrace the ghost in the machine!  
the sewing machine  
which dons the colored threads  
much as a jib of some vessel  
in a fleet of human desires:  
for they touch close to the coast of invention!  
And remember,  
when you take down the dust-buster,  
when it works, that is,  
recall the language that was taught you,  
and that by one salesman at Sears:  
a scholarly, toned-up rap of technology  
which corners the dusts of the mind!  
And this is the learning alone  
which is the better way.  
We must live clean!”

And while I listen to her, as if  
to a baby's holler when first at its mother's breast,  
I wonder what happens  
when the machine is turned to "off".

Does it then become a title-bearer of your  
own silent life, your privacy, won to the hilt?  
And when it's comatose, and waiting to receive the charge,  
the bait, should we love it then in return  
for the quiet it gives back in kind?



## *Illusion and Escape*

His car was two years old, a Mercury Cougar,  
beige with black interior, in perfect shape  
as if it worked out everyday on the cross-  
country ski machine — tires, black as a domino  
in the dark, with plenty of tread, uncovering.  
He, Palmer Mason, had a good job, a better job,  
he thought, than he would have thought, bills paid  
with the anticipation that a kid would show  
at the first day of school after a boring summer.  
Palmer Mason had a good job, among great computers,  
in a modern world, in a modern world beyond  
Charlie Chaplin, in a rat race of the highest  
infestation, among concrete and bridges and traffic  
like those dominos falling, and stoplights and stoplights  
and stoplights ...

And this morning, Palmer Mason woke to the weekday —  
some weekday in middle of the week,  
he thought, for he had been up most of the night  
staring at something, but he'd forgotten what it was  
he was staring at; but he knew he had to go to work,  
and that he had a good job, and a good car,  
and freeways to drive. This was when he got the idea,  
after the second cup of  
coffee — and his wife had left years ago —  
and he still had his computer, and the coffee.  
Traffic was impossible, and dawn showed its  
rosy fingers; and passed one car with religious  
bumper stickers and passed one car with rock and roll  
bumper stickers — and veered and dodged  
and dodged and veered on the way to the hardware store  
where he stopped and bought a shovel.

And then driving the interstate, where the leviathans  
eat the road, he took the state road 151 exit  
and drove for a few miles, then drove off that road  
back into the wood; and for 20 straight  
hours, he dug a hole and buried his  
beige beautiful Mercury Cougar forever, then  
began walking. He found his body receptive,  
as if it knew what it were doing — and  
it felt good.

And Palmer Mason then walked over some hill  
on some weekday in some week, and as  
he walked, his body like new breath, he  
whistled a tune from *Song of the South*.



Wire

*You, Martin Bormann*

What I love most about you is your past.

\*

Walking in the ether beside  
the railroad tracks:

a season  
somewhere between courage, and late dismay.  
Funnels of light speed by  
like the last train to Auschwitz.

Yes, I too died in the final search for absolutes.

It's not comic  
the way the dead dog lies,  
balls basking in the sun.  
Scrape him up into a decent prayer!  
Throw him in the earth's itch!

This is not me, speaking:

It's echo off the tin walls,  
and flesh!

*Taking To the Wing: A Villanelle*

Obsession, at the right time's a good thing.  
Keep over and over the on and on,  
For how would young birds else take to the wing?

In a push and a push and a pulling,  
Though the weight may weigh in, over the ton;  
Obsession, at the right time's a good thing.

Keeping after it wrecks the one-time fling;  
Steady loft can surely attain a sun,  
For how would young birds else take to the wing?

A song may learn itself, but never sing;  
And when harmony pounds to make it run,  
Obsession, at the right time's a good thing.

Though fatigue creates a pawn from a king;  
Its straight-ahead soars, with no care who's won,  
For how would young birds else take to the wing?

And lessons are taught against this teaching;  
Their learnings ending then, at last, at none.  
Obsession, at the right time's a good thing:  
For how would young birds else take to the wing?

## *The Sands of Ormos*

For R.H.

Polyclitus, one whom I have known  
through the only eyes I have,

those glaucomaed, blue  
from the silkscreen  
I saw one brightening day  
at Gardner's Garden:

what shall you make  
of this good friend,

eyes topaz, and filled with Aegean mist:  
that grand reach of sea  
that laments, in perpetual chronicle,

to put down every eventuality for the wave's palimpsest memory?

Does she know, O Polyclitus  
of Ormos,

how you're never there when she needs you;  
how your hands, beyond the arthritic,  
have suffered a sea-change universal,  
which took you from her dance

where she burned the sand to feel the feet?  
Shall your metacarpal madrigals  
frame her apostatic smile?

No; let her be your post-ad hoc argument;  
your choice for the weirdest afterlife,

for hunks of celestial marble,

and for them to tame her now,  
in facial compass, static wisdom.



Benjamin Kimble Rogers

## *Pro Bono Bellum*

Blank this. It has become your watermark.  
And none shall forgive you now your grimaces,  
or choirister-sweet bosom-chants,  
the ones that you hide in silence, boxed away,  
top secret.

And who — for you only —  
would crack under his own special circumstance?  
And then what falls, does it fall *gratis*;  
or deny decay  
as rain would do on its call to honor fallow fields?

For under the grave's sweet foliage  
one can hear the pounding screed much clearer;

and it's all your own, that din of your own making,  
a swilling pollywog  
which croaks too soon ridiculous anticipation.

But none are listening now; the tune is dead;  
the harmony death. And to those  
who have fallen down, let them arm themselves once more,  
with robins' eggs, or with silk.



*Sonnet*

I search for joy — have never given up.  
    No false desire belies my presence here.  
    I'll tell it now, how such dissolves my fear  
To trust how on your sweetness I can sup.

For if your charms move fast to fill my cup,  
    And that at first, or last, or at mid-year,  
    I'll covet mirth so every man can hear  
How I've grown young, more playful than a pup.

So listen now in eagerness which calls  
    The wind, the trees steadfast to hear your keep —  
    A call and troth with purpose to come true,  
Which, like a swing, secures what rises, falls,  
    Much as in ebbs, or even when in neap  
    The ocean tames, feels conquered, moved by you.





Benjamin Kimble Rogers, born June 5, 1949 in Ruston, Louisiana, has lived most of his life in Lincoln Parish. He attended college in Dallas, Texas then returned to live in Baton Rouge and in Dubach. He has been a regular columnist for THE BANNER and THE MORNING PAPER. He is founder and president of The Upper Parishes Poetry and Prose Society.



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