

# Three Variations on a Theme

By Nels Hanson

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *We've never read anything comparable to the tumbling prose—like words falling down a staircase—and the dismantling of conventional syntax that we encountered in this gorgeously smithed flash subtlety/(solteltie). Words and ideas are viewed through the literary equivalent of a distorting lens and the author's heavyweight originality results in alchemy that burns. Quote: '...maybe our generation's contemporaries were less interesting, unmarked by storms and challenges of older, harder times that carved survivors into vivid paragons.' And : 'The people's choice for Prime Minister leads a frantic brother and his cruel paramour older than 100—her comely face dissolves, George slips down a far crevice—to fatal exile, seven times tries returning, each ascent more perilous. Five stars.*

## Moving

At first the newest neighbor appeared quite fine, much better than the last few.

He watered each dusk, mowed the dead Bermuda green again, painted the peeling fence blinding white, fastened the fallen picket gate on fresh hinges, built the fountain our children exclaimed held golden koi, larger than the salmon I caught last summer off the public pier at Cayucos.

On TV he acknowledged voting decades for Republicans, years and years, to the stylish reporter and her camera crew at his shiny red door, which gave me pause although my many other concerns diverted my attention.

Later, when he left his yellow tall Hummer on the street, under one arm something long wrapped in brownish paper, I wondered half a moment if he concealed a weapon, remembered Oswald, slain JFK my late father remembered, the lost Friday before a solemn Thanksgiving.

Katherine warned the kids to “Stay Clear!” but after dinner Greg, our youngest boy, disobeyed, hid, peeked at a window, cried what he’d seen, requiring I dial 911 to summon police, the large detachment taking cover in our front yard as the plate glass shattered.

His name was Roger Sampson and he ran off 60 rounds at least with the chosen weapon from his arsenal, machinegun on a tripod.

I won’t relate what terrors transpired – you maybe watched on the nightly local news the minor incident that wounded two swat team members, one in the hip, the second through a protective vest, report that aired and disappeared in a flood of always daily deaths.

Our insurance agent promptly paid to putty bullet holes, retouch plank siding, no one would guess an evil event occurred.

Days late the landlord called, apologized:

“This week a better tenant is moving in, no worries, you’ll like her much, an attractive woman, divorced just twice, one small dog” and Katherine screamed, “You’ll buy our house!”

Again we moved away, to another home in a different town, new jobs, new friends for kids to make, I pray things safer for a while.

### **“Lost Horizon”**

His silver DC-3 escapes the bloodshed at Baskul, last plane out with refugees, but commandeered it carries Conway across high desert to Himalayan scarps, to crash-land when the pilot dies from heart attack, by Chang’s path leading to a Hidden City whispering an elusive music all his life Conway had always heard in pieces and could never name but now must say goodbye.

The people's choice for Prime Minister leads a frantic brother and his cruel paramour older than 100 – her comely face dissolves, George slips down a far crevasse – to fatal exile, seven times tries returning, each ascent more perilous.

If Conway reached Shangri-La again he's still alive, the young idealist, though Holy Lamas expand their wisdom to great ages and old he could console us.

White doves with wind harps glide there, the air sings and a clavichord plays Mozart's secret lost sonatas. Hand in hand in gentle laughter Ronald Coleman and Jane Wyatt walk the shady sun-flecked tiles but turn from their pleasure to our suffering when they hear our prayer:

“Oasis of the World, we know Eden fears descending to rain its mercy, the altitudes and skies ominous for those changed by healing breezes adrift from time.

“O Robert Conway, you found and lost and found your paradise as ours was raving, now raves to capture a final valley called Blue Moon where kindness lives, man's true heart like a seed is kept for planting a future day after evil ends.”

The blonde actress dying of TB is cured, the fugitive tycoon pipes pure water to the citizens, the scientist delights in teaching children. The High Lama sleeping after centuries dreams a new motive for kidnapping you.

### **Odyssey, Book XI**

It's funny and also not so funny, how something apparently secondary, like some weed exposed to radiation, can suddenly rise up and shade a world.

A friend told me he'd seen something extraordinary, a throwback to the art of impersonators, impressionists you'd watch each week on '60s TV, mimicking famous

actors, seizing on and blowing up their mannerisms into affectations, their accents, matching facial gestures, hands or shoulders.

“He’s on again tonight, Late Show at 12,” so I tuned in, hardly half impressed, nothing I hadn’t heard before – maybe our generation’s contemporaries were less interesting, unmarked by storms and challenges of older harder times that carved survivors into vivid paragons.

It was only at the end, when he performed the laconic Henry Fonda, the long-dead star most likely young viewers wouldn’t remember, things got eerie. He wasn’t making fun, practicing again the secret of his craft, exposing as the ridiculous something established past question in its sincerity, the trademark of a character, personality inescapable.

The great who played Abe Lincoln, Tom Joad, Wyatt Earp, seemed to come alive, unguarded, unrehearsed, as if a ghost had awakened, at first appeared confused, unsure quite where he was.

I felt unnerved, afterward called my friend to say the man on stage had nearly summoned the dead and he agreed, surprised by the strange portrayal.

That’s how it started, then voices of more recently deceased we all remember, then ones we didn’t, we never knew them, born before the phonograph or radio.

And so he brought them back, they were everywhere, on every night and day, until our Earth was lost to those who dead spoke everything we might ever know and silently we observed, waiting like Odysseus as others approached.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *I think the impetus for this story is a sense of exile heightened by extreme conditions. What do you do or where do you go? Maybe our nerves have been so battered reality begins to leak away, the nightmarish becomes commonplace. The ardent patriot and the perfect next door neighbor may be a murderer. ‘Lost Horizon’ is a world without hate and so without tension. Now even that place is threatened, the last oasis of humanity. You can move to another town, hope Conway will descend to lead us, fear that*

*history's repeated failed cycles are finally overtaken by the past as time itself gets tired. Images came to me, like the golden koi, the 1960's, an impersonator on a TV show years ago who seemed to be channeling, like a first Greek actor or a ghost Odysseus meats in the underworld. (A man named Cebes from Delos asked Socrates before he took the hemlock if after many reincarnations and bodies the soul itself began to tire and wear out.) I grew to like Fitzgerald more than Hemingway or Faulkner, and I like Sherwood Anderson, Kerouac, Kleist. I read Malcolm Lowry's 'Under the Volcano' many times and Borges stories. I like the poetry of Weldon Kees, James Wright, Georg Trakl.*

**BIO:** *Nels Hanson grew up on a small raisin and tree fruit farm in the San Joaquin Valley of California, earned degrees from U. C. Santa Cruz and the U of Montana, and has worked as a farmer, teacher and contract writer/editor. His fiction received the San Francisco Foundation's James D. Phelan Award and Pushcart nominations in 2010, 2012, 2014 and 2016. His poems received a 2014 Pushcart nomination, Sharkpack Review's 2014 Prospero Prize and 2015 and 2016 Best of the Net nominations*