I was miserable, of course, for I was seventeen, and so I swung into action and wrote a poem, and it was miserable, for that was how I thought poetry worked: you digested experience and shat literature. It was 1960 at The Showplace, long since defunct, on West 4th St., and I sat at the bar, casting beer money from a thin reel of ones, the kid in the city, big ears like a puppy.

And I knew Mingus was a genius. I knew two other things, but they were wrong, as it happened.

So I made him look at the poem. “There’s a lot of that going around,” he said, and Sweet Baby Jesus he was right. He laughed amiably. He didn’t look as if he thought bad poems were dangerous, the way some poets do. If they were baseball executives they’d plot to destroy sandlots everywhere so that the game could be saved from children. Of course later that night he fired his pianist in mid-number and flurried him from the stand.

“We’ve suffered a diminuendo in personnel,” he explained, and the band played on.