Prison Song

By Alan Dugan

The skin ripples over my body like moon-wooed water, rearing to escape me. Where could it find another animal as naked as the one it hates to cover? Once it told me what was happening outside, who was attacking, who caressing, and what the air was doing to feed or freeze me. Now I wake up dark at night, in a textureless ocean of ignorance, or fruit bites back and water bruises like a stone. It’s jealousy, because I look for other tools to know with, and other armor, better girded to my wish. So let it lie, turn off the clues or try to leave: sewn on me seamless like those painful shirts the body-hating saints wore, the sheath of hell is pierced to my darkness nonetheless: what traitors labor in my face, what hints they smuggle through its arching guard! But even in the night it jails, with nothing but its lies and silences to feed upon, the jail itself can make a scenery, sing prison songs, and set off fireworks to praise a homemade day.


Alan Dugan is remarkable for the dark, blunt comedy of his distinctive voice. Nothing held sacred by others escapes him unscathed; he is, in one critic’s label, “the clown of nihilism.” After growing up in New York City, Dugan was drafted into the Air Force and served in WWII; in the 1950s he held various jobs while developing his poetry. His first volume, published in 1961, won both the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize, and his subsequent six collections—all titled Poems—were similarly acclaimed. For years he was on the faculty of the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

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