



Death Has Pounced

Brother Antoninus, O. P.

Numberless words have been employed by many men in describing the shocking murder of President John F. Kennedy. A great deal of what has been written is factual, recordings of the awful event. Brother Antoninus, O.P. presents a new approach, a theological reflection of the assassination of November 22, 1963. Dominicana is privileged to publish the following excerpt from his book, "TONGS OF JEOPARDY."

Death has pounced. The President, for all his alertness and the vigilance of his guards, never heard its wing. The superb head, molded by the processes of thought and action to a poised perfection, packed with the received wisdom of ages and the deepest secrets of state, explodes in blood. The beauty and the grace of a superlative man shatters in a thousand lights, to abruptly become an object, something to dispose of, a mere thing. In the zip of an instant all presence is gone, leaving us the stunned hole in our thought where this intense and meaningful being, this marvel of a man, existed once and is no more: a vacancy, a gap in reality, a privation, an unassessable loss. More terrible because more total, the cancellation strikes as nothing ever did, and sends our minds sprawling, fragments around a bomb-crater, unable to quicken. Then, before we have recovered, death pounces again. The heart of his murderer, grazed by the bullet's dissecting path, stumbles, falls like a bird dropped over an abyss, plummets into death.

And in the wake of death a long tide of darkness lifts over the land. More bloody than the painful sunsets of our dreams the autumn dusks draw out of the east. Bronze by gold fall the leaves on the Mississippi, Father of Waters, great spinal nerve coiling with power up the back of the continent. It is the season of death. High in Alaska the caribou come down, fat from the fragrant

tundra, bugling in rut, the timber wolf scathing the straggler's heel, tooth raking the tendon. Minnesota draws her mists on her multitudinous lakes, breathes silence over her shivering reeds, watches her geese go south with the sun. Ohio of the heaped corn gathers the encroaching dusk in her beeches, burns leaf and branch, shudders under a bloated moon, fingers the cold lips of the night, succumbs. On the vast chequered plains of Nebraska, where game in its millions pounded a sifting pallor of dust, and the hunter shot, reloaded and shot, ceaselessly, the stubble now stands lax and broken, waiting for snow. West of the Rockies the last silver-tip, hearing a clamour of dogs, turns, sees the far glint of the carbine, doubles over the bullet's blow, coughs blood and collapses. The year yearns to be through with it. We have tasted killing and killing, slung the cartridge belt and the skinning knife, and are sick, sick. It needs now the long snow, the long, long sleep, if ever we are to recover. We have watched death given and given again. Hating it in our thoughts and hugging it in our entrails we turn, like the wolverine run to earth, to lick the wound that throbs and oozes, to sleep the long forgetfulness, and if we cannot forget, then, in the mercy of God, to die.

We cannot forget. Nor are we quite ready to die. Secretly, implacably, retribution haunts our wish. The hand, sodden with killing, fretfully plucks at the bed-cover, and the hard-set mouth mutters in sleep, slurring the pillow. For even in this, it seems, we are not without our gratuities. There is a silent satisfaction about us, an appeased greed, that belies our outrage, and trying our hearts we know what it is: we have tasted revenge. And though our code has been callously violated, cheated of its accustomed processes, we can hardly deny that in some covert way this substitution was our own, and we find ourselves stangely gratified. A man was caught, virtually red-handed — or so we concluded in the swift surmise of the frontier. As far as we were concerned he only awaited sentence, which was (as far as we were concerned) as good as execution. Out of deference to our ethic, a decent respect for due process, he must of course be protected, removed from the turmoil of a city jail to the relative security of a county prison. But out of deference to *us*, massed breathlessly

behind the lens, the time was announced and the stage was set. At the moment of appearance the preceding guard, key frontal defence, was obligingly withdrawn, thus clearing the view. Some photographs show vengeance virtually on top of its victim, the out-thrust gun seeking like a snout, and all unseen by either prisoner or police. Eyes glued to the camera, each man seemed conscious only of his moment before the peep-hole of history. Or was it merely that the glare of floodlights made any other vision impossible? Was it merely that the reaching gun was indistinguishable in that glare from the bristling microphones thrust toward them?

For if the pressure of the news agencies on the harrassed Dallas police was unconscionable, as so many have protested, it was only the point and apex of our pressure on *them*. What would we have done if they had failed to bring us the graphic engrossing chronicle unfolding there? What resistences could have withstood our hunger for gratification, our need to see what was happening *as it happened*, our craving to slake a lurid and monumental avidity to the very spilling of the prisoner's blood? Or was it, actually, given what was there and what we knew, something profoundly other, the ancient awe that draws the witness to the crime, pace by pace with the killer, as mute accomplice and silent judge, sustained in the impress of a primal wrong? Or can it have been rather that immemorial fidelity to a law which men do not hesitate to take in their own hands, not because they fear the miscarriage of justice, but because, given their grief, justice does not suffice, is too abstract, cannot stanch the heart of its oppressive burden nor consummate the unspoken purpose empacted in the soul? The charge of men who must themselves fulfill the oath of retribution, purchase blood with blood, expunge the stain of terror in a sacrifice of kind? God knows. More drew us to that moment than words make real. But whatever the steep incentives each allowed, in truth or falsehood, the great levelling denouement swept up the difference. For when that cornered prey slumped to the floor, clutching his sound like a precious thing and uttering the fearful cry which instinct picks unerringly as the syllable of death, we groped in panic, sucked into the television's omni-

verous maw, fighting to extricate ourselves from those manacles of truth that bound us to his wrists, until, flotsam of a passion we had loosed but could not stem, we swam the roiling backwash, and choked on slime.

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For vengeance, of course, is ours. We are the killers and the killed, the victim and the executioner, the witness and the crime. How many times have the holy prophets proclaimed that to us, and how many times have we shrugged them off! Now, once more in Dallas the sirens scream through the streets (the same streets), back to the hospital (the same hospital), where the same surgeons, heiratic maskers, bend above the fountain of living blood in the trauma room. The Trauma Room! That hideously suggestive appellation, redolent of the chick incongruity of nightmare, something Jack Ruby himself might have dreamed up: a select cocktail lounge in the rear of the Carousel Club — for the head-shrinker trade! Yet it is not quite the same room, only Number Two. And it is not quite the same wound, a bit lower down in the anatomy — as if Fate, in establishing its ironic correspondences, takes care, all the same, to maintain its distinctions. Nonetheless here at last they both laid down their lives, the ill-starred brothers, only a few feet and a few hours dividing them, the gunshot in the head and the gunshot in the belly, each crucified on the bodily organ that typified his life, the brain and the spleen. "But the rubber gloves are deep in a deep wound," broods the poet, "stitching a single heart," for the humanity is the same. That heart must stop; it cannot go on. Gunshot on gunshot is too much for it. And we look up from it, searching for something to fasten on, because in our unbearable need we have to go forward, we cannot stay here, not at this stillness. We look up to what survives, saying, Who is to take up the Good and who is to take up the Bad, that we may endure our existence? As when the President fell, our thoughts leaped out for his killer to slake our shock and stave off our grief, crying Who? And now that the killer is killed, so too do we ask it. Who are these men, the ones who survive? What yokes them together, if anything does, beyond the violence of the day?