

Lou Lipsitz

Elegy for Corso and so much else

Gregory Corso, 1930-2001

“Mrs. Lombardi’s month-old son is dead

.....wow, such a small coffin!

And ten black cadillacs to haul it in.”

Corso, *Italian Extravaganza*

i remember the first time i saw you
at the standingroomonly,
studentshangingoutthewindows poetry reading
in some big hall at yale new haven, 1959,
when things like that really
did not happen –
not yet – when decorum prevailed
and we were waiting and didn’t know it.
Ginsberg there, sitting on stage,
legs dangling, chanting off and on,
ringing Tibetan finger cymbals
(we’d never seen before);
paying no attention, everyone guessing
what was supposed to happen next.

And you came striding down center aisle,
yelling words we couldn’t make out,
an intruder who decides it’s time to have his say;
italian curls and big, startling black eyes,
a crazy man for sure. but no,
it was the expected one, and you climbed on stage,
goony and boyish, laughing, probably stoned
and read to us from a bunch of crumpled-up pages
you took out of your pocket
and from that little red and white text GASOLINE.
strange damn poems—funny, odd, off the map we
had been taught to follow, some other territory.
or maybe it was you yourself
and not the poems. you, so unlike
the poets we’d been made to study.
too zany, too close to us, too
flawed and coarse, too much strange delight,
or, maybe, the sense of some
approaching wildness we couldn’t grasp,
some confused ecstasy, a decade unscheduled,
unimaginable disasters waiting, the heroin
they tried to keep from you,

and the “being-torn-apart-haunted-with-meanings,”
searching for the beautiful worlds.

and now new century,
swifter than delight, meanings
sogged out,
beaten by information,
and he’s gone
the black-eyed boy,
Mrs. Corso’s kid –
Wow!

we’re a memory.

The Rope

Twenty-five feet to
the ceiling
 of the gym
junior high school, P.S. 232
and in one corner
 two ropes hung
 – rough, hand-burning, dark-yellow ropes,
 the test of our guts

(supposedly)
 and the teachers told
us

*Climb all the way up
or you don’t graduate--
 you stay back until
you can do it.*

 I wasn’t the only one
who believed them.

But no one taught us.
Not really.

 Sure, they showed
us once:

*Pull with your
arms like this and
 wrap the rope
around your leg, get a grip
between your
sneakers.*

 whenever I could
get up the nerve
when no one

was looking
I tried to practice—
never made it more
than ten feet before my
12-year-old skinny-boy
arms
failed
and I hung there,
legs thrashing.

But on the appointed day
in June
adrenalin pounding, fear
doing its powerful work,
I heard my name called and
like a hunted animal
I leaped forward and before
I could register what was
happening
the boy who inhabited me
went up that rope
arms alone pulling him
the entire way, which
I had thought
impossible, far beyond my strength.

And then
that strange moment at the top,
looking down
twenty-five feet,
elated and dazed, my altered state
just beginning to recede,
twenty-five feet to fall, or slide,
or descend in triumph;
such a long way down
and I was even more afraid
—all those years in front of me
about to unfold, and me
not knowing any better how
to return to earth
than I'd known how to ascend.
the teacher yelling: *You
can't stay up there
all day, for chrissake.*
my arms starting
to seriously ache
the fear

of falling
 starting
 to take hold, but also
a wish
 to leap into the air
 and see what happened –
it was only
 life after all
and I could see
 below me
 the rushing water
the rocks
 and the girl among
 the burning flowers.