

October 22, 1962

Rod Mollise

At ten your lips were curved mystery,
your body, not the least curved,
terra incognita unfathomable
that I wouldn't dream of fathoming
or very surely wanting to.
But the scrutable line of your lips
seemed knowable with potential.

I was able to answer the recess question
"You like girls?" in an unconfused affirmative.
Because you were the root and trunk of my solace,
holding me to the ground, my shelter
in those sweetly lost days of the 60s
when Sex was a distant transformer hum
way down the road from the fourth grade

where we were taught every day after lunch
what to do when the sky brightened.
We were told to keep a suspicious eye in the sky,
not the wondering eye that searched for Sputnik
in kindergarten or gazed at a sweetly bowed Moon
when we would walk friendly empty streets,
but an eye for evil in a sky no longer trusted.



"Watch for very remarkable brightening,"
Miss Dixon told us with a quiver.
"Watch for the blue to become white
as a swan's back. Bright as an Instamatic flash."
First you duck.
And then you cover.
Behind anything that casts a shadow.

In time, prophecies and revelations
came to patio parties
where you and I sat on the edge
and listened, barely an inch between
my legs and yours, radio playing soft,
my engineer father speaking slowly,
practiced, rehearsed, to slacked and combed neighbors.

"Bob, I wouldn't worry about a shelter.
We're 12 miles out from Ground Zero.
Do you have any goddamned idea
what a 25 megaton Citybuster
Will do to this neighborhood?
No, we won't be in the crater.
But the overpressure. And the firestorm.

You're thinking you'll leave?
Jesus sideways! The warhead will come in
riding an ICBM, or maybe launched
from a sub, splashing up and into a Gulf sky,
scattering gulls and shrimpboats.
Hell, it'll be over the Van Antwerp building
in ten minutes or maybe five.



You're at work, kids in school.
Wife's wondering what's wrong
with the new TV from Western Auto. Pissed
to be missing one of her stories.
The good one, *The Guiding Light*,
and I don't give a shit whether you look or not
or want to look at that light or not, you will.

The fireball will burn your retinas black,
temporarily they say, but permanent
for somebody due to be creamed
in a blast wave. Or flash burned
into a keloid monster from a Japanese
lizard movie they film in Hiroshima
or should."

Your dad, stood up and squeaked.
Your big, strong daddy squeaked
"Sure Frank, but a man's gotta protect his own.
What can I do? Where can I go?"
Daddy gestured with a pass of hands,
a magician ending a trick with an incantation:
"Sorry Herb old buddy. Tough shit."

It got my attention. Not what daddy said.
We'd heard the same from crazy ol' Miss Jones
at the library, "Radiation will melt the sky
into your hands, young people."
But hearing the tough-shit-it from him,
who knew all about *it*, mostly unsaid.
That was just a wee bit different.



"Yessiree, friends and neighbors, it sure as
shit is one tough old world.
Herby, good buddy, I wouldn't
Make too many vacation plans.
June is one long, long way off.
About as far off as she seemed
back in the fourth grade—remember that?"

Your daddy slumped back
in his hose-plastic lawn-chair and chuckled
or thought he should try to.
My daddy grinned,
having the pity to make these good
folks think he'd been having
one of his little summertime jokes early.

Which joke was on whom
was clear to me and you,
you staring dead at your weak daddy,
in disbelief as if the cold equations
of cold war were hot now in your eyes,
projected as drastically and inevitably
as your daddy begging a Viceroy from mine.

I took your hand for the first time then,
and lead you away
into blessed dark, around the house

to the lone streetlight out front
where last Junebugs buzzed in October twilight,
dive-bombing your sweat-sweet pixie-cut hair,
getting you screaming at first and then

us running and laughing--
no, howling--running
just for running, running so fast
and hard, to exhaustion,
to drop in dew wet grass
my lips brushing yours
no *why* that we knew.

Which settled it for you,
happy to think only
of an unknown yet incipient us
in innocence, simple and dear,
nightmare-free night on night
except maybe for dark dreams of *The Bat*
creeping. No bombs from October skies.

In those sweetest of days the opinion
of a parent still had to be sought,
so I asked mama what would happen to us.
"Oh honey, that's just your daddy
talking through too much Spearman Ale.
If *something* did happen, we'd just go.
Away over the bay."

She was not untroubled,
any more than you.
But I said no more,
wanting to believe what I knew wasn't,
sitting silent with Green Arrow and the Flash
until I heard the rumble of daddy's '55 Bel-Air
crunching down the driveway same as always.

"How's it goin' sport?"
Too quick, brushing past.
To Huntley-Brinkley Beethoven
as the tubes warmed up to tap
into collective ether and conjure our Young
Hero (he didn't look young to me),
NBC sucked down all over the subdivision.

The skipper of PT-109 looked most grave.
And in a stomach-pinch almost
as sharp as that patio party night's
I saw in clear and childish revelation
he was wide-eye scared. A man who'd
faced the Japanese fleet
was shit-pants scared.

I listened to 90-miles-off-our-shores-missiles
and *knew* it was here, *it* here and at last.
And chose to see you as in a vision
cool, simple and straight in your room

reading a Wonder Woman,
we'd got you that afternoon
with a foil-envelope of Sweet Tarts gobbled

a thousand years ago
as we walked, hand held in hand
not embarrassed, boyfriend and girlfriend now
(I think our names are preserved in a concrete
slab still),
in golden October sun from Seven-Eleven,
not looking into the irrelevant sky.

Lying on the couch in the family room.
On that close night.
Daddy out in his shop.
Mama washing clothes.
Nothing changed.
Except for me.
Blanket-wrapped statue.



Unmoving as Ozymandias,
winding-sheet ready,
despairing already and forever,
not daring to go out and scan dark skies,
or hunt among the stars once beloved
for things that moved, capricious spirits now,
bearing unreadable futures.



Not looking at all
as Gary Moore and Carol Burnett
laugh and gambol
in some hideous prophecy or mummery
of tonight's predestination.
Daddy's I-don't-give-a-shit mugs and shrugs
monstrous and sick-making on them.

Instead listening. To distant sirens,
as if to read animal entrails in the air.
Steady or warbling alert tones?
Or just oblivious squad cars or ambulances
going their errands of pickup and pursuit
as if nothing had changed
or needed to on the eve of apocalypse?

Sweating, wondering what it would feel like
—that last instant. You can't feel radiation,
I learned that night from a civil defense
Spot—to inform, not frighten.
But how about the fireball?
Rising in the east like the sun
too early or late, too bright.

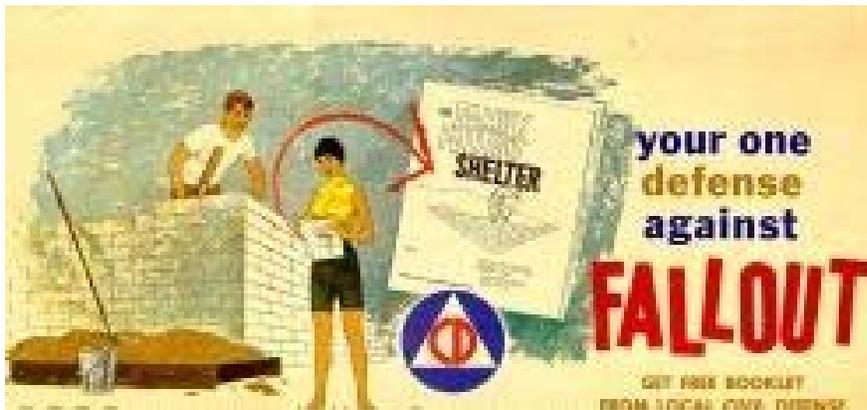
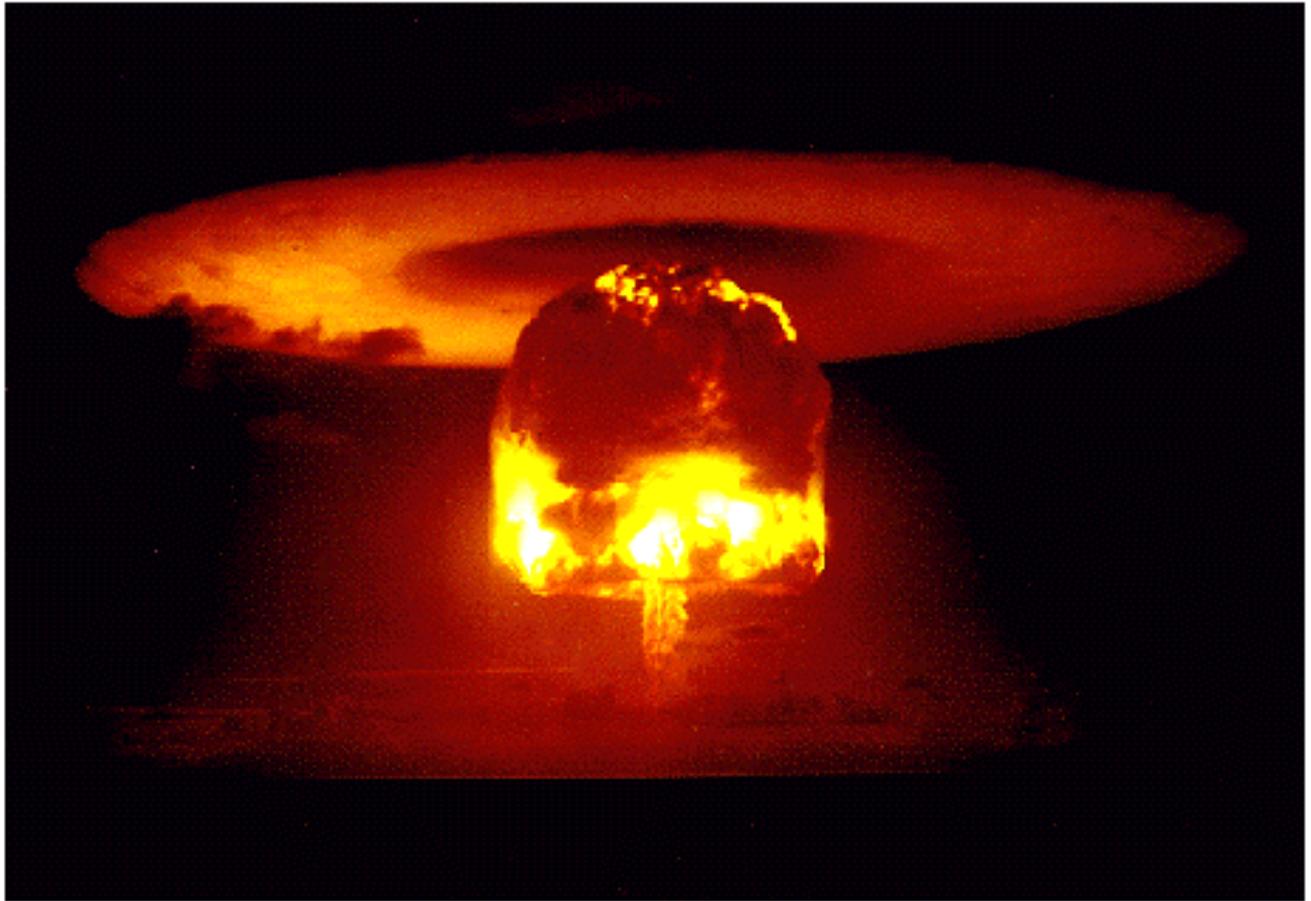
Till that flood of photons hit.
To feel what? Every nerve
lit for one last piece of a glorious second?
And then gone? Me gone?
Or walking out into that mighty mushroom
rising beneath the fireball, sucked up
with fallout and beta burns?

Shuffling invincible mamas and daddies,
shambling as walking dead? Long lines
of fleshless faces, skin-peeled back
in a final unmasking no longer warded away?
How *hard*, either way.

And I began to list collateral damage
as if ticking the names of dead already:

Christmas.
Birthday.
The new kittens.
Buying a glove at Sears.
Endless loops of Saturday King and Penny.
Your eyes lit by a fat yellow Moon.
The returned squeeze of your hand.

Then it was that you saved me finally and forever;
I could bear those losses
Then or not, now or in futures to come or not,
because we'd swallow them not alone--
me and you or at least the lingering idea of you—
two October daisies browned-back,
mown under in a field long awaiting Spring.



The preceding is an excerpt from Rod's book, *The Wild and the Innocent*. Contact him for details about receiving a copy of that or his other book of poetry, *Talking SAC Blues with Karl Shapiro*.