

# **“Toadous”**

*a lavish spectacle*

by John Deming



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# “Toadous”

*a lavish spectacle*

*“I can’t even remember what it was I came here to get away from.”*

—Bob Dylan

*“If we come to a point where we say, with certitude, right here, this is the end of the universe, then of course we must deal with everything that goes on after that...”*

—John Ashbery

*“No more my splintered heart and maddened hand were turned against the wolfish world.”*

—Herman Melville

## A BOOK

contains the words “a frog,”  
at once describing a discreet  
round amphibian and announcing  
itself as a book containing  
the words “a frog.” If the former  
is rendered faulty, the latter bends  
to bend roots a bit more. Water  
at once announces itself  
and works the crust of a stone.  
All describe somethings,  
on occasion, with symbols:  
things causing other things  
that mean what they are.  
Make incisions in soil,  
so to speak, splitting selves  
daily to discover afresh  
the divisible and split more  
lumber for the whole.  
The universe, distending,  
is the throat of a wide toad.  
One day we won’t be  
able to see the stars. We’ll  
be left with all we make:

## GREAT BAY ESTUARY

little wall-clock twitches an instant  
before little bathroom clock; blue  
light, on crutches, announces the sides  
of the window. Wasn't half an hour ago  
there was a figure in this room, a whaler  
in standard raingear sitting on the couch  
with a small silver whale nestled under  
his arm. Smugness is a whale's face—  
and somehow earlier in the night, gunned  
silhouette palming a hand in the dark—

## HUMAN HEADS ON HUMAN BODIES

memory loss as the total  
forfeiture of memory as an  
abstract concept—there  
can't be memory if there  
are no people around to  
do the remembering. Rilke,  
in his ninth elegy, asks  
the planet earth, "*is it not  
your dream, to become  
invisible, one day?*" Earth's  
invisible when there's nothing  
with the capacity to look  
at it—life's infirm symmetry  
ceasing, blues and greens  
inside out to some bestitching  
gray. This may happen  
in a variety of ways: first,  
there's the early sun paradox:

## HUMAN HEADS ON HUMAN BODIES

because the sun was nearly a third dimmer than it is now when life commenced on earth, the planet was likely frozen. The sun, growing brighter, prompted an early greenhouse effect. Ice melted. In steamed the lives. Sun's growing brighter still, so eventually oceans may begin evaporating. People would suffocate "under a huge greenhouse effect," it's said. "Tens or hundreds of millions of years from now." If that's avoided here's another possible out:

## THE UNERRING MASTER TO HER STUDENTS

yet I have gorgeous affection  
while eating an operatic pear—  
fine fruit chosen for my loving  
stomach—I was born a hero.  
Then centuries grated along  
my bones with increasing speed,  
and I forfeited worthy friends:  
the mercurial, the bombastic.  
You'd say it right—I'm a deluded  
but radiant pastor, a green fruit  
poised to show you life: the kernel  
of a baby in utero. But I'd tell you  
that around here, things mutate  
in seconds; that in my eyes, you  
can see you've successfully aged



## GREAT BAY ESTUARY

when the whaler vanished, the whale  
began swimming in my direction.  
I ducked my head to the left. It passed  
and ballooned to a more appalling size.  
They surrounded me then, whales,  
stingrays, and eels. A small twitch  
in the whisker of a bullhead. Wasn't this  
saltwater, what manners in things, what  
swells—and all the while she's long dead  
but miraculously hunched in the corner—

## HUMAN HEADS ON HUMAN BODIES

the sun will fatten into a red  
giant, large and luminous,  
nearly kissing earth's orbit,  
cooking all that lives to death  
(unless perhaps one goes  
underground, or moves  
to another planet). Flattened.  
At this point, the thirsty,  
luckless underground-  
dwellers would have a new  
bonnet-bee: as a red giant,  
the sun will puff off layers  
and make some pretty planetary  
nebulas. The sun, forfeiting  
mass, might abandon its  
gravitational pull on earth,  
which would then spiral doggishly  
off into the Milky Way. But if  
it's able to hold long enough, earth

## HUMAN HEADS ON HUMAN BODIES

will still be around when the sun  
becomes a piddling white dwarf,  
dim as a walnut and about the same  
size as earth, rendered by then  
a scanty pellet of hail. Circling.  
Possibilities, anyway, maybe no  
time soon unless we do it all  
ourselves, or are greeted by some  
particular comet; water's already  
begun to rise through my kitchen  
floor. We're interesting enough,  
though, to justify self-preservation  
at all costs, to maintain what we've  
achieved, each individual working  
not many, but one grand memory  
that's fed at the same biting rate  
regardless of any distance above  
or below sea-level. The human  
heads inseparate from the human  
bodies, a soul a thing inseparate  
from a human body. So he's  
real, the version of myself that's  
the same, only dead—and it seems

I can't meet him. He'd remember  
a few things. I've read amnesia  
plots are often stories about  
guilt, and that in most cases  
the authors don't even know it—

## DELIVERED SAFELY

one child started crying for lack  
of cinnamon, and I thought  
it best to catalogue that; his mother  
had just died, and the unrelated fact  
that a 66-year old widower I knew  
felt plumlike-in-love in his guts  
for the first time in 40 years  
was enough to remind me—at  
least lust will fall in line this way—

## GREAT BAY ESTUARY

that was a cold November morning.  
I was assigned to take photographs  
along Great Bay Estuary. This is another  
one. The room's the same except for  
the shadow of a harpoon the whaler  
must've left behind. For me, I'd guess.  
Now I own a weapon. But where have  
they gone, the block-headed whale,  
the churlish cod, the husky flounder and  
frogs. Jerking clocks. Light on crutches

## LET'S SEE THEN

all types of little faces,  
the faces are everywhere,  
the way every imperceptible  
atom has a face, and all  
sub-atomics, faces. People  
choosing to stare at the faces  
of screens so they can begin  
to speak to themselves face  
to face, that dumb, that rote  
pageantry bold beyond  
criticism. They're heroes!—  
living daily against their  
deaths, balling modest hope,  
old wolf; chained let it pace,  
gnash, and whimper, even in  
wind or rising water; apologize  
like an angry god; it cannot leave—