

“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—