

# New Poetry from Edison Jennings

## A Letter to Greta

"...so pitying and yet so distant," Cecil Beaton

Among my father's posthumous  
flotsam recently washed up in my house,  
I found a letter, postmarked 1928,  
addressed *Miss Garbo Hollywood Cal*  
(*Private!*), stamped RETURN TO SENDER,  
sealed unread and stored for sixty years  
inside its author's desk. Held to light,  
the envelope revealed a trace of earnest  
cursive written to a star flickered  
on a million screens. I set a kettle  
on the stove to steam the letter open  
and expose the heart of this dead man,  
once vestal boy, husband to three wives—  
one widow, one dead, one faithless  
(also dead)—fighter pilot with cleft chin  
and good teeth whose friends had died  
from too much war or too much booze,  
who, if asked, what happens when you die?  
would sip his drink and say, "you rot."  
When the envelope at last unglued,  
I found a time-fogged photo of a skinny  
school-age boy standing contrapposto,  
looking straight into my eyes. I slipped  
the photo and unread letter back inside  
the envelope, taped it shut, and late  
that night went outside and burned it all  
as offerings to a heaven of Gretas.



Greta Garbo, circa 1930.  
<http://flickrriver.com/photos/26612863@N00/3432818194/>

**Operation Odyssey Dawn, 2011**[\[i\]](#)

See Naples and die, Johann Goethe wrote,  
the deep-dish bay, smoke plumed Vesuvius,

the castle and the terraced hills, the fleet  
at anchor, tended by a swarm of skiffs.  
Gigs skim from ship to shore, filled fore and aft  
with sailors, their paychecks cashed in lira  
to spend on booze, tattoos, and prostitutes,  
and reams of postcards they'll forget to mail.

At night the fleet is rigged with winking lights  
and swings according to the wind and tide,  
couched in swells of trough and crest, rocking  
sleeping sailors above the sea scrubbed bones  
of city sacking Ithacans who heard  
the Sirens' hymn and never more saw home.

*[i] International military operation against Libya, including  
elements of the American Sixth Fleet, homeported in Naples,  
Italy.*

## **Dead Shot**

Drunk or sober, but mostly drunk,  
he had a knack for seeing  
and a gun like twelve-gauge Euclid  
to make the dizzy world cohere.  
That he spent hours as a boy  
splitting three-inch blocks his father tossed,  
busting them clean with a twenty-two rifle,  
one hundred, two hundred in a row,  
is not explanation enough:  
he became his sorry old man's trick.  
Imagine this: a case of shakes, cross-eyed  
from the night before, he'd shoot trap  
and never miss, pump-twelve booming,  
two discs shattered in one tick,  
but never draw a bead on anything  
that breathed, no early morning vigils

squatting in a duck-blind—too hung over  
for one thing, and for the other,  
his skill was calculating proofs  
with rapid fire theorems as tangents  
angled into exploding resolution—  
until he drew one on himself.  
At sunset he would drink and watch  
the purple martins slice the falling light.  
His last night he tacked a strip of tin  
outside his room so he could hear the rain  
rinse clean and clear the drunken dreams  
in which he split the moon.

## **Chiaroscuro**

for John Jennings

The muffled pull and puff of breath, the soft  
insistence of his need, dispel my dreams  
and I wake up as swaths of headlights sweep  
my wife and child, composed into one shape,  
gigantic night rebounding through the room  
while they lie still, curled on the cusp of sleep,  
mouth to breast and filling god with god.