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## soot and spit

by CHARLES L. MEE

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All soot and spit  
all black and white:  
there is not a bit of color anywhere  
until toward the very end of the piece  
when some very, very faint reds and blues and greens  
begin to seep and bleed into the set and costumes  
a bit at a time.

We are inside and outside at the same time:  
the entire stage is covered with dirt.  
There are three walls of an old ice house,  
a back wall and two side walls,  
and inside the walls  
the floor is also dirt—  
so the dirt is continuous from outside the icehouse to inside—  
and on the dirt floor are four items:  
a chair, a narrow bed, a table, and a pot bellied stove.

As the lights come up slowly  
we are hearing John Hartford's Short Sentimental Interlude  
from his crackly 1969 recording.

Short Sentimental Interlude  
Short Sentimental Interlude  
Short Sentimental Interlude

Short Sentimental Interlude  
Short Sentimental Interlude  
Short Sentimental Interlude

The Narrator enters,  
takes a seat at one side of the stage  
at a simple wooden table  
with a wooden chair.  
We are not in any haste here.  
He wears a black suit, a white shirt, no tie.  
He speaks into a microphone  
over the music.  
We hear a deep, rich, gentle voice  
always speaking slowly and deliberately  
and, as it were, with compassion,  
but, still, matter-of-factly.

#### THE NARRATOR

James Castle,  
born September 24, 1900,  
Garden Valley, Idaho  
the fifth of eight children.  
He was two months premature,  
"deaf and dumb,"  
or,  
as we have come to think in hindsight,  
autistic.

Frail,  
known to the other children  
and to members of his family  
as The Dummy,  
he refused to learn to read, write or sign  
but he copied down alphabets and numbers  
and spent his time obsessively  
drawing.

[James enters, uncertainly, looks around,  
goes to his chair  
sits  
and begins to sharpen a stick.]

He was inspired by the things that came into his home,  
which also served as the post office  
and general store for his home town:  
Sears and Roebuck catalogues  
almanacs and periodicals  
devoted to animal husbandry, agriculture and gardening  
The Catholic Sentinel and liturgical calendars  
postage stamps  
picture postcards  
newspapers containing cartoons and comic strips.

Sent away to the State School for the Deaf and Blind  
in Gooding, Idaho  
where students were taught broom making,  
shoe repair,  
the care of animals in barns, coops, and hutches.

Unhappy, difficult,  
he stayed at the School for less than a year and  
was returned then to his family  
with the instruction from the headmaster  
to keep paper, pens, and inks away from him  
not to let him spend his time drawing  
but to make him spend his time learning to sign and to speak.

So  
James made his drawing pens  
from sharpened sticks  
and his ink from fireplace soot  
and his own spit,  
and he drew on old brown paper bags  
from the grocery store  
and match boxes that he flattened out  
and in this way he made art

because  
he needed  
to make art.

Now we hear John Hartford sing  
"Boogie"

JOHN HARTFORD SINGS

Uh uh uh uh uh uh uh uh  
Hey babe ya wanna boogie?  
Boogie woogie woogie with me  
Hey babe ya wanna boogie?  
Boogie woogie woogie with me  
We can boogie over here  
We can boogie over there  
Come on baby we can boogie everywhere  
Hey babe ya wanna boogie?  
Boogie woogie woogie with me

[and James tries to sing along from time to time—  
singing as those who cannot speak or hear sometimes do,  
making the sound of a sheep bleating, and occasional crooning—  
as we see him  
mixing soot and spit.

And, now, while we hear this song  
six people with Down Syndrome cross  
from one side to the other  
slowly and awkwardly  
in a gunny sack race.]

Uh uh uh uh uh uh uh uh  
Hey babe ya wanna boogie?  
Boogie woogie woogie with me  
Hey babe ya wanna boogie?  
Boogie woogie woogie with me  
We can boogie in the living room

and boogie in the yard  
Come on baby it ain't very hard  
Hey babe ya wanna boogie?  
Boogie woogie woogie with me

Uh uh uh uh uh uh uh uh  
Hey babe ya wanna boogie?  
Boogie woogie woogie with me  
Hey babe ya wanna boogie?  
Boogie woogie woogie with me  
We can boogie on the floor  
We can boogie on the table  
We can boogie on the lamp  
at least you think you might be able  
Hey babe ya wanna boogie?  
Boogie woogie woogie with me

[James remains, drawing.]

As the Down Syndrome racers exit,  
they leave behind a single young fat woman,  
Elmira,  
in a fluffy pink dress  
just standing there.  
And, after a moment,  
she speaks.]

ELMIRA

Who is it gathers in the apples?  
Who is it makes great cider?  
Who is it makes great tippie?  
What is the man who produces on earth Sea?  
What is the woman who produces on earth Sea?  
What is the man who lights up the daylight?  
What is the woman who lights up the great Nights?  
What merit has the man who devours?  
Where does Normandy actually start?  
What is meant by a cliff?  
Where was queen Mathilda born?

Where is Bavent? Deauville?  
What makes us start singing?  
Which is more intelligent: the dresser,  
or the one who needs his wound dressed?  
What is a packet of bandages?  
What meritess has a Mother who watches over children?  
Why does a lad run after 36 girls?  
Why is it a young girl ought not to?  
At what age can a girl get engaged?  
To whom should her heart be opened?  
Why can't a Ram swim for very long?  
Why can't a ewe swim for even less long?  
Would a mare swim less long than a stallion?  
Would a nanny swim less long that a billy?  
What's the point of this difference?

[John Hartford sings "I Wish We Had Our Time Again,"  
while Elmira dances solo.

And, as she dances,  
people come in one by one  
carrying shoes and hammers  
uncertainly, not sure what to make of her dancing  
but making their way to a place where they can settle down  
on the ground  
and repair the shoes.

Or else they bring in the materials of basket weaving  
and weave baskets.

There are six of these folks, finally.]

JOHN HARTFORD SINGING  
The Roads We Ran and The Folks We Knew  
The Risky Things that We Use To Do  
Now It's Over And I Know We're Thro.  
And I Wish We Had Our Time Again,

I Wish We Had Our Time Again  
I Wish We Had Our Time Again,  
I Wish We Had Our Time.

I Couldn't Go To Sleep Got Up and made A Life  
Tried To Write it Down In The Middle of The Night  
Looking For The Words But It Won't Come Right  
And I Wish We Had Our Time Again,  
I Wish We Had Our Time Again  
I Wish We Had Our Time Again,  
I Wish We Had Our Time.

Oh me oh my how the years do fly  
and it makes no difference and we all know why  
dear old friends have turned their eye  
And I Wish We Had Our Time Again,  
I Wish We Had Our Time Again  
I Wish We Had Our Time Again,  
I Wish We Had Our Time.

The very thing that I knew you'd say  
was the thing you told me yesterday  
it was what you meant it was just your way  
And I Wish We Had Our Time Again,  
I Wish We Had Our Time Again  
I Wish We Had Our Time Again,  
I Wish We Had Our Time.

If not for love could hardly see  
I looked at you and you looked at me  
oh memory love oh memory be  
And I Wish We Had Our Time Again,  
I Wish We Had Our Time Again  
I Wish We Had Our Time Again,  
I Wish We Had Our Time.

[Somewhere in the midst of the song,  
Elmira dances on out,  
leaving the folks repairing shoes  
and James at his drawing.

Mr. Taylor enters, sees James,  
and scolds him.]

MR. TAYLOR

I'm afraid, James,  
I can't let you waste your time.  
I can't let you grow up to be  
some sort of animal  
living in the ice house.  
Worse than that.  
A completely useless leech.  
Taking your mother and father down with you.  
Because why?  
Because you have no sense of gratitude  
or consideration.  
It's going to be important for you  
to develop one or two rudimentary skills  
so that you can achieve some semi-independence  
and not completely waste your life  
and the lives of others  
with this inconsequential ink scratching  
living the life of a worm  
worse than a worm  
of a grub.

[Slowly, on the back wall of the theatre,  
which is, of course, partly obscured by the ice house,  
a projection fades in to sharp black and white:  
25 or 50 identical pen and ink drawings  
of a man standing alone  
outdoors,  
earless, armless  
his mouth agape in a silent scream  
can be seen around the edges of the ice house.

We hear an old woman singing mournfully,  
the sort of old woman from the local village  
who has been singing in the village all her life  
and when she sings  
you think she comes from a thousand years of living.

She sings the old shape-note song  
King of Peace  
written by John Newton in 1779,  
music by F. Price (1835)  
and she is backed up by the recording made by  
the Wooten Cousins of Ider, Alabama.  
On this recording there might be almost 100 singers,  
and, here, the old woman takes the lead,  
and she might be backed up by some or all  
of the cast.

And, from time to time, James tries to sing with them.

Lord, I cannot let Thee go,  
Till a blessing Thou bestow;  
Do not turn away Thy face,  
Mine's an urgent, pressing case.

Dost Thou ask me who I am?  
Ah, my Lord, Thou know'st my name:  
Yet the question gives a plea  
To support my suit with Thee.

Thou didst once a wretch behold,  
In rebellion blindly bold,  
Scorn Thy grace, Thy pow'r defy;  
That poor rebel, Lord, was I.

And, while they sing  
a little man with Down Syndrome,  
wearing a dunce cap,  
walks in and wanders around.

A mother wearing a sailor hat  
and a red coat  
looking lost  
carrying a floor lamp.

A man wearing a large paper mask  
made from a shopping bag,  
so that he has a square head  
and pasted across his mouth  
is an ad  
and three little movie tickets are pasted  
where his eyes should be.

A small girl enters  
hopping up and down over and over and over.

An extremely tall skinny naked guy with caked blood on his head  
and his entire body charcoal black— -burned from head to toe  
does lurching, stumbling, shuffling butoh walking  
lurches on his tiptoes  
falls over to the side  
goes into a crouch  
goes to the ground  
writhing

The little man with Down syndrome  
is brought back in at the end of a chain  
by a guy with a whip  
and the Down man has on large fake ears.

All these people, one by one, leave,  
until the stage is empty.

James stops drawing,  
looks up  
and looks out at the audience.

The old woman's song comes to an end.

Four or five others come in.

James gets up,  
puts his drawings into a folder,  
and leaves.

The group reminisces.  
They sit silently for a time,  
glancing at one another,  
as though there is an interviewer in the room  
prodding them to remember,  
and they don't remember, or don't think their memories are significant,  
they are shy, or need encouragement.  
Finally one of them speaks.]

FIRST

As an infant he was a "rocker"  
he rocked from side to side all the time.

[There is a long silence.  
Finally another person speaks.]

SECOND

His mother used to rub his body and legs for months  
till he was able to walk.  
Rubbed his legs with saltwater solution.

[Others nod in agreement.  
Another silence.  
Then a possibly significant thing is remembered....]

THIRD

Father was an orphan?

No one was ever turned away from our door.

Dad always said there was room for one more at the Castle table.

[While they speak,  
black and white ink drawings are projected  
on the back wall of the ice house,  
so that now there are projections on the back wall of the theatre  
and the back wall of the ice house.]

FOURTH

He didn't go to picnics  
you know  
others would go to picnics  
and play horse shoes  
and be in foot races

SECOND

He never took part in shivarees, or dances, or ice cream socials

FOURTH

though this was happening around him all the time.

THIRD

He would only do the dishes.

SECOND

He never did any other household chores.

THIRD

He only wanted to do the dishes.  
That's all he would do.

SECOND

At school, the boys took up printing,  
building,  
repairing furniture,  
shoe repair

FIRST

working in the fields, the orchards the gardens

SECOND

tending inhabitants of barns, coops, hutches

FIRST

carpentry, broom making,

SECOND

tailoring.

FIRST

He didn't do that.

SECOND

He made probably thousands of drawings.

FIRST

I don't think he cared whether anyone liked what he did or not.

He made, probably, in his entire life

15,000 drawings and books and sort of constructions  
out of paper.

SECOND

I don't think he cared whether it was good or bad.

FIRST

He just wanted to do it.

SECOND

I think he was

maybe inspired by his sister Nellie's photo albums

FIRST

He walked around the town sometimes.

SECOND

And in the woods.

FIRST

But not so much.

[One or two of these people get up  
go out  
and return in a moment  
with a home movie screen.  
They set it up.

And we see a home movie of  
20 small children in a Halloween parade  
in a rural town in Idaho

while the Down Syndrome choir sings

Men All Want to Be Hoboes

As the song continues  
James enters leading a chicken at the end of a string.

He sits in a chair, holding onto the string.

A man enters and  
gently takes James by the hand  
and leads him around the periphery of the stage

as a kind person would tend to a needy person  
in any village in the world  
taking them through the streets

and then he takes James on out

as two people pick up the movie screen  
and move it across the stage to the other side.  
And, from now on to the end of the piece,  
one soot and spit ink drawing after another  
is projected onto the screen,  
one very, very slowly bleeding into the next

so that now  
there are changing projections on the movie screen,  
on the back wall of the theatre  
and on the back wall of the ice house

as a hot young woman  
in a minidress enters  
and sits at a table with a telephone  
performing sexiness  
performing seductiveness  
like Jean Harlow  
crossing one leg over another  
Music up.

YOUNG WOMAN

Hello  
Hello hello

[she sings with music]

hello  
hello hello

[she hangs up phone  
crosses her other leg  
then picks it up again]

hello  
hello hello

[hangs up  
crosses opposite leg]

ditto

ditto

ditto

ditto

ditto

from time to time  
we hear guy's voice from the other end of the phone  
and sometimes she says 'who is this?'  
or 'is this raimondo'  
or something of the sort  
but mostly she  
only sings

hello  
hello hello  
hello

hello hello  
hello  
hello hello  
hello  
hello hello

the young man with Down syndrome  
enters wearing a crimson prom dress

Harry Nicholson plays guitar and sings  
the John Hartford song

#### HARRY SINGING

I tried to keep from wanting you  
I thought this feeling soon would end  
then I could get on with this life I live  
but here I am in love again

I started to call you twice today  
I even wrote a note I didn't send  
I tried not to think of when I brushed your hand  
here I am in love again

[is he joined by a chorus???

here I am what can I do  
I started out to be your friend  
I never meant to feel this way  
here I am in love again

I tried to get you off my mind  
but it's so hard now to pretend  
the more I try the more I find  
here I am in love again

here I am again what can I do  
I started out to be your friend  
I never meant to feel this way  
here I am in love again

the Morton Salt girl enters, stands stock still

THE MORTON SALT GIRL

James,  
why don't you draw me?  
You could always draw me.  
I am standing still.  
Do you see how I stand still?  
I stand still for a long time.  
I don't move.  
You can take your time.  
And while you draw  
you can think.  
Because I am not going anywhere.  
Or, if you like,  
I could sit.  
And you could do my portrait.  
And I won't talk.  
I will be quiet.  
Completely quiet.  
So you can have some quiet  
and some peace.

[Now, the sears and roebuck catalogue comes to life  
while John Hartman sings

Good Old Boys  
Good Old Boys

James's people  
emerge from the backdoor of the icehouse  
through a projection:

the Gerber's baby,  
the Saltine girl,  
the Nu Bora detergent woman,  
Prince Albert  
a man who quacks like a duck  
a lingerie ad girl  
Sugar Honey Maid Graham Cracker

a woman in an elegant black dress  
with a blood red face  
does a wild wild dance  
and smears red lipstick all over her face  
in time with the music  
and then throws herself to the ground on her back over and over and over  
she becomes covered with dust  
as she kicks and writhes wildly on the ground on her back  
like a cockroach frantic on its back

Several couples enter and dance to the song.  
The young women are in cotton dresses  
as though at a summer ice cream social.

the lingerie ad girl  
joins in for a duet with the john hartman voiceover

Good Old Boys  
Good Old Boys

musical interlude  
while  
couples dance

and there are some solos  
James's mother dances with a floor lamp  
and his sister dances solo

a guy in overalls walks through pushing a wheelbarrow  
full of leaves

The Down syndrome choir returns in their gunny sack race  
and then stops to provide a backup singing chorus

Good Old Boys  
Good Old Boys

while  
James makes art of the materials at hand  
meticulously  
a paper bag folded just so  
soot and spit  
sharpening the stick  
and he draws

they all dance out  
leaving the lingerie girl alone in duet with john hartford  
and then she leaves at the end  
as the music dies out

Now, James's "people"  
are lined up against the back wall of the ice house  
like a Greek chorus.  
They are wearing paper dresses  
or paper shirts and pants  
with drawings on them.

Or they just have flat cardboard fronts with drawings on them.  
And they may wear flat paper or cardboard masks  
with cut-out collage pieces pasted over their faces.

And, as they speak,  
projections of pen and ink drawings  
of people, landscapes, letters of the alphabet,  
and interiors of the ice house  
are projected on the back wall of the ice house,  
on the back wall of the stage  
and on the home movie screen.  
One after the other, these drawings fade into one another.

Now, too, a little very faint color has just begun  
to bleed and seep into the set and costumes  
a bit at a time.

LAURA

The sky is overcast.  
The nearer mountains are gray-melancholy.  
And at this point I meet Me face to face.  
Face to face I look at Me  
with some hatred,  
with despair,  
and with great intentness.  
I am rare - I am in some ways exquisite.  
I am pagan within and without.  
I am vain and shallow and false.  
I am a specialized being, deeply myself.  
I am of woman-sex and most things that go with that,  
with some other pointes.  
I am dynamic but devastated, laid waste in spirit.  
I have a potent weird sense of humor -  
a saving and a demoralizing grace.  
I am scornful-tempered and I am brave  
I am slender in body and someway fragile  
and firm-fleshed and sweet.  
I am distinctly original innately and in development.  
I have in me quite an unusual intensity of life.

I can feel.  
I have a marvelous capacity for misery and for happiness.  
I am broad-minded.  
I am a genius.  
My brain is a conglomeration of aggressive versatility.  
I have brain, cerebration -  
not powerful, but fine and of a remarkable quality.  
I have reached a truly wonderful state  
of miserable morbid unhappiness.  
I know myself, oh, so well.  
I have gone into the deep shadows.  
I have entered into certain things marvelously deep.  
I know things, I know that I know them,  
and I know that I know that I know them  
which is a very fine psychological point.  
Very often I take this fact in my hand  
and squeeze it hard like an orange  
to get the sweet, sweet juice from it.  
Along some lines I have gotten to the edge of the world.  
A step more and I fall off.  
I do not take the step.  
I stand on the edge, and I suffer.  
I have reached some astonishing subtleties of conception  
as I have walked for miles  
over the sand and barrenness among the little hills and gulches.  
Their utter desolation is an inspiration  
to the long, long thoughts and to the nameless wanting.  
But there are elements in one's mental equipment so vague,  
so opaque, to undefined—  
how is one to grasp them?  
There are feelings that rise and rush over me overwhelmingly,  
I am helpless, crushed, and defeated before them.  
It is as if they were written on the walls of my soul chamber  
in an unknown language.  
I put Me in a crucible of my own making  
and set it in the flaming  
trivial Inferno of my mind.  
And I assay thus:  
I am quite alone as I live my life.

And I am unhappy -  
a scornful unhappiness not of bitter positive grief  
which admits of engulfing luxuries of sorrow,  
but of muffled unrests and tortures  
of knowing I fit in nowhere,  
that I drift - drift -  
and it brings an unbearable dread,  
always more and more dread,  
into days and into wakeful nights.  
My Soul is not free:  
God hung a string of curses,  
like a little manacled chain,  
round its neck long and long ago.  
Always I feel it.  
My heart is not free  
for it is dead:  
in a listless way and a trivial way, dead.  
And my Body -  
it is free but has a seeming of something wasted and useless  
like a dinner spread out on a table uneaten and growing cold.  
To-morrow  
if I should meet God to know and speak to,  
the first thing but one I should ask him would be,  
"What was your idea, God, in making me?"  
There are times when my Loneliness is a charmed  
and scintillant and resourceful Loneliness  
with a strange and ecstatic gleam in it.  
The miracle of being a person rushes upon and about  
and into me 'with lightning and with music.'  
The spirit of me closes its eyes in turbulent dusks  
of wondering and wishing  
and leans its forehead against a mathematic dead-wall.  
But when it lifts its head and opens its eyes  
there are the melting mauves and maroons  
of a dead sun across the evening sky,  
and the small far wistful flames of always-hopeful stars.  
My soul goes blindly seeking, seeking.  
But when at last my happiness is given to me  
life will be an ineffable, a nameless thing.

It will seethe and roar  
it will plunge and whirl  
it will leap and shriek in convulsion  
it will quiver in delicate fantasy  
it will writhe and twist  
it will glitter and flash and shine  
it will sing gently  
it will shout in exquisite excitement  
it will dance  
it will glide  
it will rush  
it will swell and surge  
it will fly  
it will soar high—high  
it will go down to depths unexplored  
it will yell in utter joy  
it will chime faintly  
it will sob and grieve and weep  
it will revel and carouse.

When it comes my turn to meet face to face  
the unspeakable vision of the Happy Life  
I shall be rendered dumb.

Sometimes the dusk is full of fire.

Some dusks I sit by my window looking out  
and hotly and coldly want a Lover:  
hotly with my Body and coldly with my Mind.

For any woman of any charm

the world is full of Lovers:

each and all to be had by the flutter of her finger,  
the droop of her white eyelids,  
the trembling of her pink-bowed lips.

The world is full of them -

facile Lovers, craven, potent, and pinchbeck.

And it's that kind I want hotly with my Body,  
coldly with my Mind

in dusks of rippling warmth - rippling, rippling warmth.

MARY

When you get up in the morning  
you have to know  
when you got up  
to know if you are right on schedule.

6 AM

And then recite  
briefly  
the main goal  
getting fit  
10 exercises  
running  
chinups, pushups  
indoor track  
weight machines  
ten times swinging of the head  
ten winks  
ten nose-ups.  
A good workout.

Then.

Washing.

Eau de Portugal  
left temple, armpits,  
face upwards. Nose.

Dressing toward the north.

Feng shui  
dress in parallel, first right, then left,  
doing it in order also  
so that you don't forget to dress  
one side or the other.

8 o'clock.

Hand practice—working out the kinks  
42 glasses of water.

And then, with the other people in the park,  
droll stories. Anecdotes.

Unforgettable characters.  
Be sociable!  
And so forth. And so on.

Later. Back home. Supper alone.  
Eat soup in silence.  
Dear little right finger plays at tasting.  
Sit towards the right.  
(don't cross left foot)  
remember the circulation.

In the evening hours:  
sofa—prone exercises.  
make a little poem.  
enjoy colors.

And then,  
to bed at 8 o'clock  
bed in northerly direction, head better towards the east.  
Feng shui.

[stops, thinks]

Shui Feng.  
Eye exercises: glossy spots, bright spots, distance.  
Rest towards southeast.  
Estimate star,  
weather glimpse.  
10 glimpses through the room (left, right, above).

Ten o'clock.

Midnight.

One.

Day's end.  
Fetal position.  
Left hand sideways.

Rectum.  
Left ass cheek.

Four o'clock. Night's end.  
Another day.

There needs to be love in the world.

HERBERT

Oh, yes.

Yes.

There does.

BOB

Tears or laughter, what does it matter.

It's life

that's the main thing.

Yes.

I suppose so

but it's the cushion round the edge I want to put back.

I the good for nothing.

No more shall you attend my new universities

to learn how to ridicule the weak

and swindle them every which way

and send them to their death

and grab all their property

which they've scraped together

through sexual love or all kinds of decent work.

Daddy allowed you some leeway for his leaven

that is some soft purgatives

to get rid of the toxic worms;

but you revel in shit so much you want to hand it back to the others

I'm not talking about your spiritualist intonations

you bring down accidents and fires

through your power over all the acts of men

and specially of women.

It's the man of feeling talking to you;

one of those who's suffered more than enough in life

without realizing at the time that it was you

who were stealing all the elements of his happiness  
he was courageously seeking to establish.  
Rosalyta will tell you anything you want to know.  
But eye shitton yew toodle doo tweety mooch ooh lala.  
Tivvy tavvy tuv.  
Eyed door you the lady replied  
but furst eye knee two rhea shore mice selph  
bee 4 eye embraize your flame  
and test your fiddle itty.

#### HORTENSE

Turkey, you can have your capital  
its name is no longer part of the risk.  
Mr. Punch Charles the Fifth  
and Luther Chris toffer column bus Eat temple knees.  
Hens rooster chicker dee nilly-nilly.  
Kasablanca Boulogne Paris Cigar.  
Dirigible balloon khyte.  
Kimonilastic.  
Seedy bra hymn.  
Wheat oats dandylion.  
Halfweigh. Halfweigh. Pezolour Tutsh tastic.  
Red lipstick great stuff.  
Black cataclysm allah bubble.  
Fog drizzle Spring Blue sky Dawn Pencil X  
Go Ann.  
Cindrella old Ma Twankey  
Rightup the evil whole.  
Shah spipe hubble bub Bounced check  
Toss ex equo Frigates Tawny Owl kestrel Magpie.  
Rook.  
Ducks nightingales blackbirds warblers.  
Cold Frozen sweetmeats melting March April May  
centuries Creator.  
Whitadonna lil coco 1 White Durious Ball  
Zlong theirs yours tars neath the Vorts of heaven  
their be Happy nessin the faithless night Seams  
that scald Sylvaren  
Sig her etts.

Butterfly whose wings bring us fine weather  
you know the latest about the new defusing juice.  
It's not just children of kings  
get given fabulous present when they're born.

[And now  
a big dance number:  
the whole cast,  
all in brightly colored swimming suits  
bikinis and boxers  
or grass skirts,  
do the slow hula  
to the song Lorena.

Even the Narrator,  
taking off his jacket,  
joins in this dance.

Or else everyone comes in sitting on huge bouncing balls,  
red and yellow and blue balls,  
with handles on them,  
riding them like ponies,  
as they sing.]

The years creep slowly by, Lorena  
the snow is on the ground again  
the sun's low down the sky, Lorena  
the frost leans where the flowers have been  
but the heart beats on as warmly now  
as when the summer days were nigh  
oh the sun can never dip so low  
to be down in affection's cloudless sky

[musical interlude]

a hundred months have passed, Lorena  
since last I held that hand in mine  
and felt the pulse beat fast, Lorena  
oh, mine beat faster far than thine

a hundred months was flowry May  
when up that hilly slope we climbed  
to watch the dying of the day  
and hear the distant church bells chime

[musical interlude]

we loved each other then, Lorena  
far more than we ever dared to tell  
and what we might have been, Lorena  
had our loves prospered well  
but then tis parting years roll on  
I'll not call up their shadowy form  
I'll say to them lost years sleep on  
sleep on keep life's belting storm.

[Now, too, a little very faint color has just begun  
to bleed and seep into the projected drawings and constructions.

They are all singing another shape-note song,  
Morning Sun,  
written by S.M. Denson in 1911  
and backed up by the recording made in 1954  
by the choir of the Old Flatwoods Church  
of Nauvoo, Alabama.

Youth, like the spring, will soon be gone,  
By fleeting time or conqu'ring death;  
Your morning sun may set at noon,  
And leave you ever in the dark.  
Your sparkling eyes and blooming cheeks  
Must wither like the blasted rose;  
The coffin, earth, and winding sheet  
Will soon your active limbs enclose.

and the full cast in black  
enters at funeral march pace

rocking back and forth  
as they go from one side of the stage to the other  
and narrator sings: Ni ni nah nah over and over and over

after they have all gone through  
James enters  
wearing a wedding dress

James sits on box  
watches TV on packing crates  
he eats bread and sings along with TV  
making drumming motions with his hands

old woman in black with guitar  
sings a lament

VERY old guy in print house dress and clogs enters

the Narrator now has on a mask head  
and he dances  
hard, violent hip movements  
as  
the choir comes through again  
with Morning Sun  
as another woman in a black dress and also a black veil  
enters up center and comes all the way slowly down center  
holding a bouquet of flowers in front of her  
motionless in every way except her walking very slowly  
to lay the bouquet of flowers on the ground  
her eyes are streaming tears of blood

HERBERT

I finally asked her if they were for sale...  
She said yes,  
and I gave her almost nothing, like a dollar....  
It was the darndest collection of junk  
in the kitchen of those paintings...  
the drawing was done on the back of one of those cardboard things that go down  
inside a shirt sent back from the laundry.

It was the only one I had any interest in  
because I know exactly where he had to be standing in Garden Valley when he  
painted it or drew it.

LAURA

I kind of figured that that lady was  
more interested in getting them cleaned out  
than she was in selling them....  
they did burn a lot of it.

BOB

One guy, named Day,  
bought thirty or forty pieces for \$500  
and his wife was upset  
as you might imagine,  
and he said to her,  
he said  
"Some day  
this man is going to be well known  
for what he created."

MARY

He had no concept of money  
if you would give him a dollar bill  
he'd look at it and throw it away  
or draw on it.

THE NARRATOR

Then one day  
an art dealer came to the house.

James tried to talk to him,  
but he got too excited  
and he had to run out of the house  
and run around outside for 15 or 20 minutes,  
smoking  
till he calmed down, and returned to the house.

The dealer visited the ice house

and there he found  
gunnysacks  
filled with hundreds of books  
and thousands of drawings.

And the dealer took armloads of the stuff.  
He talked it over with the family.  
They all agreed on it.  
It turned out he was an honest man.

And when it came time to leave  
he looked around for James to say goodbye  
but they couldn't find James anywhere.

And then James came running from around the corner of the house.  
He had two wrapped up parcels in his arms  
it was more of his work that he had taken special care with  
each package neatly wrapped in newspaper and tied with twine  
and he handed the two packages to the dealer.  
He was excited  
and he was proud  
to get this sort of attention for his work after all those years.

And that was how was ended  
nearly a half-century  
of unacknowledged art and book making.

[So James stands for a moment alone  
watching the dealer leave,  
triumphant for a moment,  
and then he just forgets it  
and goes back to work  
sharpening sticks and making soot and spit]

#### THE NARRATOR

Of course, in a day or so,  
he'd forgotten all about it.  
The truth is,  
he didn't care whether he was recognized or not

whether people thought what he did  
was good or bad.

He just had to do it.

And what he knew for certain was  
he knew to never quit.  
Never never never never never quit.  
Never quit.  
Go all the way to the end.  
Never quit.  
Never quit.  
Never stop living.  
Never quit.

[James is back at his drawing.

The old woman returns to sing another shape-note piece.  
She is backed up this time by the Flatwoods Church Choir  
—and the cast joins in—  
for North Salem,  
written by Isaac Watts in 1707  
with music written in 1799 by Stephen Jenks.

My soul, come and meditate the day,  
And think how near it stands,  
When thou must quit this house of clay,  
And fly to unknown lands.

And you, mine eyes, look down and view  
The hollow, gaping tomb,  
This gloomy prison waits for you,  
Whene'er the summons come.

Or they could do Present Joys  
written by A.M. Cagle in 1908  
with backup by the Alabama Sacred Harp Singers  
in their 1928 recording.

We thank the Lord of heav'n and earth,  
Who hath preserved us from our birth.

Chorus:

For present joys, for blessings past,  
And for the hope of heav'n at last.

How shall we half our task fulfill?  
We thank Thee for Thy mind and will.

Chorus:

For present joys, for blessings past,  
And for the hope of heav'n at last.

Redeemed us oft from death and dread,  
And with Thy gifts our table spread,

Chorus:

For present joys, for blessings past,  
And for the hope of heav'n at last.

As the lights go slowly to black.

We hear his voice again singing with her.

Slow fade to darkness.

The cast all come back slowly for their curtain call.]

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NOTE ON THE TEXT:

*soot and spit* (the musical) is greatly inspired by Pippo Delbonno's *URLO*, by Tom Trusky's biography of James Castle, by the songs of John Hartford, and it also takes texts from the archives of the Prinzhorn Collection in Switzerland, from Mary MacLane, Aimable Jayet, Sylvain Lecocq.

A NOTE ON THE MUSIC:

If it is difficult to obtain permissions for all these John Hartford songs, of course

other Bluegrass and country songs can be substituted for the Hartfords, but a "Hartford musical" would be nice.

Still, there are other wonderful options. The Hartford songs could all be replaced, for example, by songs from the classic collection compiled in 1952 by Harry Smith and put out by Folkways Records (now in the Smithsonian's collection and republished in CDs by the Smithsonian). This was the collection that inspired the American folk revival, and that all the folk musicians of the 50s and 60s knew by heart.

It includes songs by Blind Lemon Jefferson, by the Memphis jug band, in which one of the members played an empty whiskey bottle, by the blind Louisiana guitarist Didier Hebert, by Cannon's Jug Stompers (led by Gus Cannon, whose parents were born into slavery, and whose first banjo was made from a bread-pan and a raccoon skin head).

Most of the recordings from this collection were made in 1927, 1928, 1929—and so they have a wonderful old sound, on top of which the cast can sing.

#### A NOTE ON CASTING:

It might seem ridiculously difficult to imagine having a half-dozen performers with Down Syndrome in a piece, but, in truth, nearly all facilities and communities that are set up for people with Down Syndrome have active programs in performance and singing—and it should be the easiest task of all in staging this piece to find a half-dozen very accomplished and experienced performers with Down Syndrome.

Charles Mee's work has been made possible by the support of Richard B. Fisher and Jeanne Donovan Fisher.