

Charlie Smith

The Major

What could I say to him, my kinsman,
 rattling through town, painted and pulled
 by a crowd? It didn't help to call out 'Remember
 the Rainbow Room, remember sassafras,
 remember the girls in their sunsuits, remember Ruby.'
 O Jesus, he couldn't hear a thing, he was
 crying, his face black as Othello's, all his sidekicks
 split on the ferry to Newburne. He howled,
 but it was low and weak, like a dog crying
 far back under the house. It was a terrible moment
 to see him, greased and tortured, who had been
 so fancy. It changed my life, I can tell you
 that — I denied him; accosted, I said, 'Wait a minute, Bub,
 I don't know this guy.' It was at that moment his eye caught me
 and I instantly began to badger myself: Why
 couldn't you settle for the simple
 petrifying embarrassment
 of seeing him this way, why
 do you have to complicate things? His eye
 caught me, not a level glance
 and totally without love, just scared
 out of his gourd, shrieking
 for the exit, and suddenly I thought
 of the time he shook that guy awake everybody
 thought was a goner, and those crazy pigs,
 and all that wild stuff he said
 in that pasture downriver from here, and I thought Jesus
 how he was always like that his eye catching you
 or something and you thinking what? what the hell
 is going on here am I losing my mind?
 And all those stunts he pulled out in the provinces
 they used to drive the minorities wild; he loved it
 when they hoisted him on their shoulders
 and carried him around like a god. He was a pretty

one, all the girls trying to tease him, touching him
 with flowers and me running after crying 'Major, Major,
 come on, we've got to be in Dubuque
 by tomorrow.' He said I reminded him
 of a prissy old aunt who threw the whole supper
 out because the dog licked the roast. 'Eat
 what's there,' he'd say, 'Or everybody
 goes hungry.' Well. Fer sure. But now
 I guess he'd sing a different tune. He wasn't going
 to sweet talk his way out of this one. No
 sirree. *Then he wasn't looking at me*
anymore. I remembered that time he saved me
 from drowning which time
 I thought I'll love this guy forever, but, ah,
 he stopped looking, and I
 lost sight of him, the crowd moved on,
 and I got away, stumbled off along the docks,
 somewhere upwind
 from hostile cries and painted loss. I lay me down
 on splintered boards, watched the tainted water
 all night thinking tomorrow
 I'm going out in the fields
 tomorrow I'm getting out
 under the biggest sky I can find, walk
 around — Boy, you got to pull yourself together
 now.

— *after Hawthorne*