

Restoring
~~Lady~~



Eric Paul Shaffer

Restoring
Lady
Liberty

Other Titles by Eric Paul Shaffer

kindling: Poems from Two Poets

Longhand Press, 1988; co-author, James Taylor III

RattleSnake Rider

Longhand Press, 1990

How I Read Gertrude Stein by Lew Welch

Grey Fox Press, 1996

Instant Mythology

Backer Editions, 1999

Portable Planet

Leaping Dog Press, 2000

Living at the Monastery, Working in the Kitchen

Leaping Dog Press, 2001

You Are Here

Obscure Publications, 2004

Lāhaina Noon: Nā Mele O Maui

Leaping Dog Press, 2005

The Felony Stick

Leaping Dog Press, 2006

Road Sign Suite: Across America and Again

Obscure Publications, 2007

Burn & Learn, or Memoirs of the Cenozoic Era

Leaping Dog Press, forthcoming 2009

Restoring ~~Lady~~ Liberty



Eric Paul Shaffer



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Paul Rosheim, Editor

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“Watch out for Obscure Publications”

*for all mothers,
metaphorical and otherwise,
and for all of mine*

Homage to Hart Crane

"A prophet is not without honor,
save in his own country."
— *Matthew 13:57*

Declaration

When *Liberty Enlightening the World* arrived in the United States of America in 1885, the massive copper pieces and iron frame were stacked and stored in their wooden shipping crates while Americans decided what to do with such a challenge. Many did not welcome the arrival of Bartholdi's gift. The statue was another immigrant with nowhere to go. There was no place to put it. There were no funds to assemble or maintain it. Even the name made little sense and was changed for our shores.

Not unlike the statue, *Restoring Lady Liberty*, written in 1986 for the Centennial of the Statue of Liberty, has remained in manuscript a long time before publication, even a few years more than the twenty-one that passed between the conception and the erection of the statue.

He who wrote these words and the nation in which they were written are ever-changing, yet the words remain true to those days and my life at the time I wrote them. Some of the optimism looks a little naïve now, and there is more irony in the construction of the lines than I meant or could mean when I wrote them, but that might be true of any of us after nearly a quarter of a century.

Nevertheless, I welcome the opportunity to present the poem to my fellow citizens and to affirm the embattled yet enduring promise of our nation.

Eric Paul Shaffer
Honolulu, HI
June 3, 2009

I. Preamble

"The symbols mean nothing if the values aren't there."

— Lee A. Iacocca

already Classic Coke cans litter the shore of Liberty Island
cigarette butts, bits of chewing gum foil, anonymous scraps of paper
among melting jellyfish, brown bulbs of seaweed, driftwood,
the refuse of America afloat
by the bow of the immigrant ship unloading
into the multilateral fortress beneath Lady Liberty's feet

for beginnings and new roads west in/to America
the sun paves the roads gold rising or setting
and everything under the sun is new
in the city named New in memory of land left across the sea
and the island beneath the sidewalks and streets

in the early morning jump-and-run through angles and intersections
the crowd crushes between lines painted corner to corner
crosses the street against the light —
all the faces filing past, filing themselves away, arrive just in time
to scorch the tongue on hot coffee from a mug
proclaiming, "DON'T ASK ME!! I ONLY WORK HERE!!"

and my work
to write
a timely poem of current events
and my country
right or wrong
'tis of thee
I must speak
sweet land of liberty
of thee I sing
for when we let freedom ring
the bell broke
splitting the lip
before speaking clearly once
from sea to shining sea.

II. Bill of Rights

“The dictum that truth always triumphs over persecution,
is one of those pleasant falsehoods which men repeat
after one another till they pass into commonplaces,
but which all experience refutes.”

— John Stuart Mill

“beauty is a defiance of authority”

— William Carlos Williams

authority is always the problem —
 except for the government
 claiming all power
the citizens neglect —

and I am just one more American
 willing to speak for all:
meaning authority comes from the maker’s hands
 remaking or renewing or restoring all alone —

 here I will draw my line
and cross America
 claiming free speech once more
for myself and my country —

our language alone can free us
 in a land of progressive tense,
progressive in the sense
 of *process*, not *Progress*,

progressive meaning a noun and a verb happening
 all at once
always making, yet never made
 always restoring, yet never restored

III. State of the Union Address

“Great men before great monuments express great truths,
provided they are not taken too solemnly.”

— Henry Adams

“Freedom is just the ticket of admission,
but if you want to survive and prosper, there’s a price to pay.”

— Lee A. Iacocca

“and God said unto them,
‘Be fruitful, and multiply,’”
and Americans know multiplication
means products
so they built themselves

a myth of prosperity
taking the properties of numbers
and numbers of properties in vain
from those who didn’t recognize them
or their gods until forced to see

the greaspaint grin of Ronnie Mac, Clown
Father of America, conceals
King George’s wooden teeth
in the face of President Shooting Star
a visage pickled in the gorge

of a New Conservative Wave
gathering to a head on the President
ageless and awash in some Grecian Formula
(probably Plato’s *Republic* —
yes, Ronnie Mac would toss out poets too) —

now ~~Lady~~ Liberty’s gone green
and freedom’s moved to another state
with no forwarding address
deserting her in her silver cage
to lift her lamp beside the bolted door —

"*Liberty Enlightening the World*"

designed to celebrate the Centennial of America
 arrived ten years after the party
 and the magnificent and monstrous monument
 had no place to stand

the carpet-baggers kept their cash
 claiming insufficient funds
 allowing *Lady Liberty* be raised
 from the pennies of schoolchildren
 who purchased a place to place her pedestal

"a common work of both nations" —
 after Bartholdi scrapped "*Progress*" on the Suez Canal
 and sent "*Liberty*" instead
 for, as Laboulaye said, "*Progress is nothing*
but liberty in action" —

the French kept a quarter-scale model
 to remind themselves
Lady Liberty's presence was enough
 and size was not important
 though New York's *nouveau riche* did not agree —

Lady Liberty's design
 comes from men
 loving their mothers to abstraction:
 Bartholdi gave *Liberty* his mother's face
 a stern, stiff-lipped, silent stare

and Gustave Eiffel built the iron frame
 for the copper garment of the goddess
 and later the eponymic phallic tower —
 power rising straight to Heaven
 to rival the strength of America's *Magna Mater* —

R.M. Hunt designed four-square feminine dimensions
 for the pedestal on which to put up *Lady Liberty*
 and General Charles P. Stone opened the earth
 through old fortifications
 into the original soil of the New World

making the foundation solid on the grounds
that to overturn *Lady Liberty*
 the island must be ripped from the planet
 by some catastrophe
beyond human imagination until 1945 —

Lady Liberty was the only woman present
 at her unveiling in a man's world
with women circling the Statue in an open boat
 announcing her arrival
with megaphone ceremonies of their own

for *Lady Liberty* is an allegory,
 her symbols clashing in the nation's ear,
 indelibly legible
to any citizen who looks carefully,
 angling for a national point of view

even from across the Atlantic
 Laboulaye remarked *Lady Liberty*
"does not hold an incendiary torch
 but a beacon
 which enlightens" —

Edison invented the light bulb
 to brighten *Lady Liberty's* head
 and chase shadows across the sea —
there she stood over the harbor waves
 just glowing her brains out

till Gutzon Borglum, a man good with symbols
 of freedom in stone
 carved away the copper of the torch
revealing the flame
 for all to see

no one admires *Lady Liberty* from New York —
she keeps her back to America —
 only from a boat can you see
her design to impress the oppressed
 from farther shores —

Joseph Pulitzer was one
 printing names in his newspaper for cash donations
 since freedom means more
 to those who pay for passage from another land
 and they'll rally 'round raising the copper colossus

but even J.P. couldn't take America's temperature
 giving *The World* orders from a boat
 beyond the island and the land
 where *The Times* reports today
 the hard-hatted crawlers

working through the folds of ~~Landy~~ Liberty
 pissed in her face
 rather than climb down the scaffolding —
 page 2 reports "The Star-Spangled Banner" offends
 Professor Titcomb because the words are militaristic

and the melody stolen from an English drinking song —
 America, if we are what we drink, what we toast
 and what we eat,
 are we so easily cowed
 because we've eaten billions of McBurgers?

Remember the respectable refusing to pay even once,
 while others provided the pennies,
 admitted themselves to exclusive ceremonies of freedom
 as we, the people of the pavement,
 crowded the shore, regarding ~~Landy~~ Liberty from a distance —

and now, we're following fifty feet of Mobile HomeLand
 towing all the comforts they can barely afford
 along a crowded freeway
 (all other possessions safely secured
 in barbed-wire rental space at American Self-Storage) —

lawn chairs, moped, and on a trailer, a compact car
 with a bumper sticker aglow in the twilight's last gleaming,
 leaving it all behind with a curse
 for the survivors and centuries to come:
 "WE'RE SPENDING OUR CHILDREN'S INHERITANCE."

IV. National Anthem

"We are proud of our corporate sponsors. The Statue of Liberty stands for everything America is . . . the capitalist system with appropriate use being made of commercialism."

— Steven Briganti

"Why not? This is the Statue of Liberty. You know: Mom, apple pie, the flag — and big bucks."

— Anne English

"Merchants have no country. The mere spot they stand on does not constitute so strong an attachment as that from which they draw their gains."

— Thomas Jefferson

"Lady Liberty sells: shirts, lunch-boxes, and bells,
gold pencils and pens, an assortment of knick-knacks;
an oak Grandfather Clock with a gold door and lock
engraved with her face and her dates of dominion;
her gold pendulum swings,
silver chime inside rings,
as each hour flies, Lady Liberty sings.
The U.S. Mint will sell you a half-dollar for just \$7.50,
a silver buck for \$24, a set for seven bucks more.

Swizzle sticks and beer steins, a gold Liberty mug,
a bear in green gown and a milk chocolate statue,
big red Styrofoam torch, cardboard Liberty mask,
stamps, patches, and pins, and green spiked-crown sunglasses,
that aquarium there,
among striped fish, her glare,
red, white, and blue stones for her submarine lair.
Can you see that six-foot green plastic statue in the display window?
Sells for \$19.99. Today, I sold twenty-nine.

Torch erasers and charms (metal and plastiform),
pajamas and plates, and embossed stationery;
an alarm clock for sale — Liberty drawn to scale
with gold minute hand, and her torch tells the hour;
pretzels in a tin can,
a jack-knife for your man,
jigsaw-puzzle proof the Green Lady still stands.
If you like dirty pictures, I've got some here beneath the counter:
Lady Liberty disrobes with Colossus of Rhodes."

VI. Inauguration Address

"Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles . . ."

— Emma Lazarus

"I must write again to say how much I like your sonnet
about the Statue — much better than I like the Statue itself."

— James Russell Lowell

"Crown'd with a helmet & dark hair
the nameless female stood"

— Blake

the Titan Atlas was my sire
condemned

to cradle the world

on weary shoulders,

his muscles maps of his strength and his struggle,

bunched beneath the burden —

after the War of Heaven and Earth

tore the two asunder,

for warring well against the victors,
he was condemned

to crouch beneath the circumference

by Zeus, God the Father to the Greeks,

who place all their wonders far

in the West

and so contrived to place us here,

keeping their reckless gods safely across the sea

in the sky or underground,

converting culture to logic

to justify themselves —

the night Perseus arrived

I held high the torch

to greet the rare visitor

"silent she stood
as night"

— Blake

with the joy
 reserved for great occasions —
 charged by Hera to guard
 the golden apples,
 those tokens of love
 to celebrate the foolish
 celestial marriages of gods and men,
 my sisters and I saw few
 who did not come to steal the gilded fruit.

since Herakles, we were wary of visitors
 for he tricked my father
 into resuming his burden
 after Atlas rejoiced to be set free,
 yet once more,
 the Titan groaned beneath the globe

“round about all
 is mute”
 — Tennyson

but Perseus pitying
 raised the Gorgon Medusa’s head
 in the light my torch cast
 so Atlas might be turned to stone
 beneath the weight of the Earth
 and I, not meaning
 to see
 that hideous face, the writhing, hissing hair,
 the tongue split as a serpent’s
 tongue worming with a serpent’s grace,
 my voice, too, grew still
 where I stood on the last of the land
 this island once was,
 and still I remain

 “for never
 from her iron tongue
 could voice or sound arise”
 — Blake

 alone
 till searching the West without the maps
 my father’s arms
 now seem to mean
 the descendants of the Greeks —
 in thought
 if not in thew —
 discovered me here
 my green breast
 the promise of a new world
 defined

in the dreams of an old one
and guarded by giants
of new imagination
newly arrived
long ages after
the ward and reward are gone.

“sleep and stir not:
all is mute”
— Tennyson

VII. The Constitution of the United States

"Eiffel's hidden structural reality is totally unrelated to the statue's very traditional appearance. Liberty is an archetypal illustration of the aesthetic tension of its time — when technology had already attained great advances and power and a hold over the mind, but when the conscious eye was still dominated by traditional imagery."

— Marvin Trachtenberg

what we can learn from the body

of ~~Lady~~ Liberty
 are the lessons of building
 the genetics of freedom
 a double-helix stairway
 winding up in the lofty head
 standing on the imaginary
 copper tongue empowering speech
 free
 or your money back
 proclaiming, "It's a free country!"
 with every single voice
 rightfully raised

what we can learn from the body

a flexibility absolutely necessary
 for the magnitude
 and complexity
 of the structure as it stands
 yielding enough
 to remain standing
 as long as the copper skin waves
 in the wind
 flexing on the single-bar strapwork
 supporting each section —

a tremendous concrete intellectual frame
must be wrapped in the humanity
of our symbols renewed
through the past

 in the present
 for a future
we will live to see

 in the balance we achieve
 in the flexibility we design
 in the interdependence we learn
 as the rites
 wrights
 rights of ~~Lady~~ Liberty
 engendered in ourselves

what we can learn from the body

VIII. Amendments to the Constitution

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

— Article I of the Amendments to the
Constitution of the United States

“We found it wasn’t just a matter of cosmetics. We just couldn’t buy her a new dress and dab on some new makeup. We had to fix her internal problems.”

— Edward Cohen

remaking *Lady Liberty* is a process
of reviewing original plans
reworking original construction
replacing original parts
revising original designs
and remarking, in an original way,
Lady Liberty was lucky
to last a hundred years
with all her problems

but there are changes

replacing *Lady Liberty*’s missing curl
and hiring a patinist
to make the color conform

replacing the tip of her nose
gnawed off by the sulphuric spite
of polluted air

replacing the spiral stairs
with more stable steps winding
to the head of *Lady Liberty*

installing central air
to control the temperature inside *Lady Liberty*
and to avoid extremes

installing elevators
for those who cannot climb
to look down on what they're missing

replacing the 25 windows of the diadem
so that visitors may share
Lady Liberty's point of view more clearly

replacing the rusty iron bars
supporting the image with new and improved
stainless steel to do the same job longer

and then there are changes

now the torch of *Lady Liberty* is gold
gilded 24-karat leaf
since money talks
telling the truth in our pockets full of change
IN GOLD WE TRUST
the light of the flame is gone
aglow below
somewhere out of sight,
the lesson clearer, though lightless —
illumination
comes from within no more
for the torch shines
only in the beams
trained on the gold from the base

may the gold swiftly wear away
with exposure to the elements,
down to *Lady Liberty's* true mettle:
copper —
for good reason
the ancients called copper
the metal of love

for the ore was common
 enough for the coin of the realm
gleaming and familiar with use
 valuable only in exchange
 and useless for weapons:

there is wisdom in the lesson the lowly penny teaches —
 treated well
Lady Liberty may last a thousand years.

finding government in our own hearts
and no more in pledges to rags,
windy old glory sheets drying streaks of blood,
and no more in marble buildings
and monuments on the Potomac
where Washington began the tradition
of throwing money around,
for we need the freedom to spend a dollar
without washing our hands of the smell
of America printed in green
on the coast where the promise is still green
despite the axe in our hands
taking the liberty and leaving justice
to some power in ourselves
and to claim no more
the right to judge
a diversity of people as dangerous
for once
and for all —
one American like me
finding myself
right in the heart of my country,
a boy seeking my place in the nation
where I was born —
a realm seeking peace
strengthened by a constant vigil of humility —
a man loving the land
and seeking free companions
somewhere in America —
I pledge allegiance.

X. Farewell Address

"Our union is now complete; our constitution composed, established and approved. You are now the guardians of your own liberties."

— Samuel Adams

"When we are planning for posterity, we ought to remember that virtue is not hereditary."

— Thomas Paine

"If some of my judgments were wrong, and some were wrong, they were made in what I believed to be the best interests of the nation."

— Richard M. Nixon

in the U.S. Bar and Grill
 darkness
 the patrons watch TV
while somebody else spotlights the torch
 the bartender turns to the screen
 grumbling

"This really burns my ass.
Somebody shoulda axed me
 to light that torch."

"What can we do?
Government got all the power."

says one of the bar belles

"Shit!
I'm a goddamn citizen. I got power.
 Like John Hancock said,
'Give me Liberty, or give me Death' —
 or give me a million dollars
 to keep me quiet."

mixing a "Green Lady" —
crème de menthe, clear stuff,
whipped cream, & a cherry
 on a swizzle stick

"Take a whole new revolution for you
 to light that torch."

laughs and more
"Liberty Specials" —
 buy one, free one

"Wasn't that Patrick Henry?" says the fat guy
at the bar's end

"At least, this can't last forever." says he with his head on the bar
and the rest roar

"Will all you assholes shut up?
Some of us *Americans* a voice crying
want to see this shit!" in the dimness
of dark tables

I'm listening but beer comes
and beer goes
and I make my way to the back; over the urinal
is a scrawl:
"Lady Liberty is Madonna in drag."

a goddess in green, still a virgin
in the ancient sense
meaning a woman running her own life
the way she wishes
a woman with a will of her own

I'm back to my barstool in time to hear some toasts

"Here's to Lady Liberty in the Harbor,"
says the fat guy

let us raise our glasses like torches
to the All-American starless night
across the rolling fields of the dark republic

let us toast the fire
seized from Lady Liberty
by the men who bought it
for the Freedom Museum

let us toast the hills
two centuries ago green
with nothing but leaves
become bills in golden calfskin wallets

let us toast to Lady Liberty
whose work was clear
as soon as the light shone forth

meanwhile I'm writing my own toast
 freehand on a bar napkin

let us not find ~~Lady~~ Liberty
 buried to her breasts on another planet
 in the sand once our nation as Charleton Heston did
 now run out
 through the strait throat of the minute
 we exalted
 to get us to our jobs
 making a living making payments
 ON TIME

let us stand on the shore
 of the moment arriving
 in the present
 of ~~Lady~~ Liberty for all
 for America
 as indivisible as a nation from its people —
 for founding the nation
 endures as long as citizens are born
 to believe
 faith is not enough without actions —
 America
 not a product, a process
 for the making
 means more than the made
 and the made must be made again
 and the making will remain
 the same great work.

"Hey! Here, listen to this!"
 and I read by the bar's grainy light
 over the blue buzz
 and chitter-chatter static ceremonies on the screen

"Shit, man, what is that?" says the bartender,
 "Why don't you just *say* what you *mean*?"

envoi

over the face of the waters
where the Greeks thought Atlantis lost,
a wind bears salt
to the shore,
the sand where we stand,
working to see
Liberty Island from the coast of America,
adrift among the waves.

About The Author

Eric Paul Shaffer is the author of five books of poetry, most recently *Lāhaina Noon: Nā Mele O Maui*, which received an "Award of Excellence" in the 2006 Ka Palapala Po'okela Book Awards presented yearly by the Hawai'i Book Publishers Association.

Shaffer received the 2002 Elliot Cades Award for Literature, an endowed literary prize given yearly to an established local writer in Hawai'i, and he won a fellowship to the 2006 Fishtrap Workshop and Retreat at Wallowa Lake, Oregon.

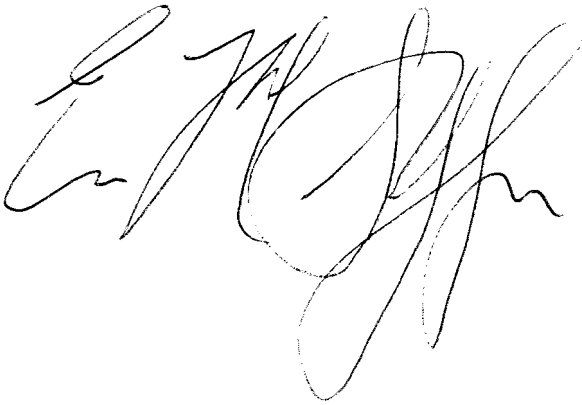
His poems appear in *Ploughshares*, *Slate*, *North American Review*, *Threepenny Review*, Australia's *Going Down Swinging*, *Island*, and *Quadrant*, Canada's *Dalhousie Review*, *Event*, *Grain*, *Malahat Review*, and *PRISM International*, Eire's *Poetry Ireland Review* and *Southword*, England's *Magma*, *Iota*, and *Stand Magazine*, New Zealand's *Poetry NZ* and *Takahe*, and Salt Publishing's *100 Poets Against the War*.

Burn & Learn, or Memoirs of the Cenozoic Era, his first novel, is forthcoming from Leaping Dog Press in 2009.

He lives with Veronica and two rambunctious teen-aged sister cats on a ridge overlooking Kalihi. He teaches at Honolulu Community College.

*This edition is limited
to 60 copies.*

This is number 6.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several large, overlapping loops and flourishes, positioned below the text.

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