

1. *Herakles*

Greek badman

some say

was for killing kin

compelled to do 12 Labors

didn't he

flay the Nemean Lion

slay the Lernean Hydra

bound the Ceryneian Hind *didn't he*

bind the Erymanthian Boar

scour the Augean Stables

expel Stympthalian Fowl *didn't he*

grapple the Cretan Bull

break the Man-eating Mares

take Hippolyta's Girdle¹ *didn't he*

steal Geryon's Cattle

pluck the Hesperidean Apples &

abduct plutonian Cerberus *didn't he*

2. *Stagger Lee*

Black badman

some say

shot Blackfolk by the paddy'ful

shot the high sheriff & his honor

shot the hangman & the Devil

but near all say Stagger

shot Billy Lyons² dead

didn't he

didn't he

didn't he

didn't he

didn't he

¹ Most tellings go that though Hippolyta was willing to give Herakles her war-belt, Hera tricked the Amazons into fighting him and his men. He killed Hippolyta in combat.

² An exception of note: "Stagger and Billy," one of two versions of the story Tina Turner recorded. In this take, Stagger Lee flirts with Billy's wife and Billy beats him severely. Ike Turner—Tina's then-husband—penned the lyric.

MANE

bad Stagger Lee's bad song a cathoused toast bout killing some cat.
Stagger bad Lee's hard bad rock song bang Lyons a wet hole,
body him with a shot's heat.

Stagger put work in,
Billy got worked. gunned down Billy
Lyons' dead song falsetto the saloon. *please don't take—*.

what a man what a mighty badman.

Lee as some Herakles! Herakles!

Herakles the badman kill the lion.
skin him for to wear him.
Stagger wore Lyons out.

seem some cats see Lyons anywhere but mirrors,
where, lying, many wear Stagger's smokehouse lips,
take his song up our mouths,

a badman's tongue,
a slick low note.

no doubt
he make something out us.

NECKS

and know he love it, the badman, from jump.
bust-off one head come two to lay down.

again and over.

each damp stub jut to cherry vipers
stiff then limp, slip and twist of muscle twitch throat-deep
and bang lips open.

Stagger, braggart lover, can dagger for hours,
till cock-hollered crack of dawn.

love all that cut-up, two new holes to tell it: *Stagger!*
Stagger! figure Lee chop till Monday, week after?
Billy knocked again and over,
too quick he drop, eager lover.
can the bad bad bad bad stay up till summer, winter?

pow come two new mouths to fill with red tune.
each new hole gape then pucker
then blossom unpoped mambas. *Stagger!*

Stagger! pow off his senseless hips
again and over.

bang bang summer after next till ever
and *Stagger!* the hard dark heat busting new skulls:
a song this wound turned mouth—the badman—
won't know to stop.

SHOT

so winter melt when Herakles buck her dear down
and the unplucked huntress grit her red-eyed ololyga
to bring us back to doe sprung up.

to hunters, prey precious:
a gangsta's nada sans mark-ass.
weird mirror, blood.
what would Stagger call himself minus Lyons lying
on the wood floor? who'd call him?

Artemis speak her burst hart back to quick,
a soundboothed gangsta say
that shit hot! run that shit back!
so BOOM CLAP BOOM BOOM CLAP
“shot that boy so bad...
broke the bartender's glass”:
made a gang of little mirrors. Billy! Billy! Billy!
who sing a Billy back
from the bucking “shot that boy”
for Stag to buck him back? “shot that boy”
“shot that boy”
go BOOM CLAP BOOM BOOM CLAP
hot!
run that shit back!

ROOTER

pigs prey to piggishnesses. get ate from rooter to tooter.
I'm a hog for you baby, I can't get enough go the wolfish crooner.
the gust buffeted porker roll in the hay
or laid down in twig rapine. let me in, let me in.

no drum-gut, Stagger's stomach a tenement:
his deadeye bigger than his brick house.
Stagger Lee live by the want and die by the noose,
whose greedy void's like a whorehouse
full of getting full. won't get enough!
rumored Stagger'd root through pussy
to plumb a fat boy. here piggy! whatever
Lee see he seize: whoever. know how he do it:
manful (to?), ham-fisted. sorry Billy,
us made your name "Mud" and who dig dirt like swine?
they get in it like a straw house. Lee got down.
Lee get dirty.

SHIT

but what's too much of shit peel our stink eye.

that nigger ain't shit, so us don't give a shit
bout that piece of shit getting shot. make it go way.

what's gone is dead and what been dead deader now,
just a stank mound of did and done once gone scudding down
a hunger's black river.

LYONS ... *my life!*
US fuck that shit, nigger!

like, Stagger, this Billy business
some business, this mess
some mess. make it go way.

yoke the mitt your pistol ride in on and till.
you could you crook Jordan, make the Mighty Muddy lean
with just your trigger finger's black hook?

make it go way. over that black-ass shit,
gently shirr—o Stagger—
your blues cold and sure.
make the shit done and did, then gone.
it reek with what us don't want keeping.

CHRRRP

iron tune, trill, cut the tongue to song.
thrill the singer's heart, balloon
the chest. red breast.

bulletproof song, balloonskin singer—
the tune scores and clefts.
all the little birds' cast iron beaks.
pop the singer red-breasted.
pop can't kill the song.
it cut the tongue
but not off. all the little balloonskin birds
thrill in the bullet song. Stagger song. red.
red. bullet scores. clefts.

Stagger can't kill the song.
Stagger song pop.
all the little singers' hearts trill.
all the little hearts aren't iron. bulletproof
breast, the tune thrill
but can't kill. the tongue,
red. the beak
cut and cast the singer Stagger.
Stagger can't kill all the little birds.
pop. song can't kill all the little pop birds
pop. the cleft.
the cleft hearts. the red breast—

BULLY

and a live nigger just a past due sacrifice like a bull too pretty to die.
bully Stagger's longhorn brimspan and oxblood crown crown him
bad bad bad bad and bull.

only good one dead one us(?) scold our mirror. should've been dead
before Stagger rassled it bull-headed red-blind muscle-a-muscle.

bully and bull stagger the city levee round round round.

who say: let's walk down

and china shop the Hellenic Belluthahatchie,

cut antic in antiquity's Diddy Wah Diddy,

ATHENS ST. LOUIS CAIRO KANSAS CITY?

they pretty beefcake too fine to die but is that the goddamn gods'
damn rules?

fuck them all.

or whose work to be did and Stagger put it in: heeere Billy!

bully Lee's bully bullet bully Billy lay by bull Lee by and by bidy
bye bye.

who say: *let's run down*

MEMPHIS CHICAGO SPARTA DETROIT

only good nigger Lyons. Billy loin, rump none too pretty beefsteak.

Stagger, bull too pretty to ride the slab but

stagger round round red-blind with work to be did: since.

and fuck one of em.

should've been rassled before he deaded Lyons,

swear us(?) seen for what bull the bull-headed headed.

God clutch his steak knife like a lightning!

WHOA

see, badmen ate by what's between their legs.
so a plug cranes a veiny neck to that *whoa*-ing sugar cube stack,
chew to a red of prairie.

gun a stunt cock for rough stuff. Stagger go down
into his junk,
skeet into Lyons. slung slug some slag-cum-spunk.
Billy bellow a birthing yelp
and stagger, Lee sprung out the stunt cunt he fix in him.
smoking pistol his papa. muzzle flash umbilical.

Stagger dick won't take *whoa* no more so
"Stagger..." "Stack-o-..." "Stago-..."
give dim hard-ons mouths.

pianola a doula. Stetson bassinet.

"Stagger..." "Stack-o-..." "Stago-..."

mare and red prairie, horseflies
ride the bloody muzzle and bit.
saddle and bridle fall like belts, flies.
as so the broken break *whoa*
then go on to break. so
blood on the broke oat stalk.
blood on the broke hat.
blood on the slave's cutlet lips—
a dick eats its mister, still working the reins.

strange relationship? Billy snatch
Stagger's hat. "don't play with me, boy.
give it to me." six gun cum. Stagger hung,
their striptease end bloody.

what to call this:

rough?

thin line? undone belt;

cocked strap?

"don't mess with me,
boy—"

HERD

still the thunder of Stagger's hips steal Thunder's thunder.
his hips' steel: supercell black till it thunder slug heat, bone white.

Power to the Stagger us singsong sifting brown sugar
from shit and back.

what stink so good about Stagger? his rap sheet of stiffs?
how he do prod the herd with uncut don't-give-a-fuck?
his hot monogram red as shepherds?
how that hardrock cowpoke make himself himself's own stallion
and ride—whoa!

Stagger to the People!

now tomorrow come over some shot-prone pussy set to weep
for his now herdless field blank as a shorn cheek.
turn shorewards, simp! see the sea abet a badman's stealing.
shifty thief in its ancient gray hood, its in-out.
Stagger spur his mount,
yaaaaaaah, cut a rut down the littoral. *yaaaaaaah!*

is *Power* Lee there to rustle us off to greener?
boom go Thunder or Stagger or breakers
though us told us hear our Collective Hoof.
boohooohoo go the wounded herdsman, slapfaced
while a new name burn to smolder black in our skin.
over and again.

MOUTH MOUTH MOUTH

Stagger get at the end dogged by the work.
he reckon by Billy's plot dug spade-dark—
that sorry-ass passage Stagger can't quite pass quiet—
under there's the Devil.

Stagger tics who he killed—a whorehouseful, a courthouseful—
but tilts his limp Stetson only at the Billies billeting yonder.
won't beware, just diddy on down:
under there's the Devil.

a bark, then a boom.

them stories always sortie a bad bad bad bad
to bum-rush a stingy hell
and heel back something savage on leash.

what's "always" but meaning to make a mountain
of a tune learned over and again?

suddenly: barking at the dark.

cats, us catch us cornered in our skin,
groins cocked at ourselves.

Stagger shatter that mirror then Stagger shoot Billy.
don't take my life! whose? who's
to say whether one blubbers *please*, or glowers *I can't go with that*
as the bad bad bad bad us had had swagger down into refraining?
under there's the Devil.

and when Billy peep Stagger stagger on and out,
to cell, to noose, to rule Hell's roost,
Billy get up get up get up get up to sweep
the pieces out like pine dust on a brothel's Monday dawn;
fixes to fix the glass
as all the little Billies falsetto a song:

“he done me wrong”
“he done me wrong”
“he done me wrong”
“he done me wrong”

then a bark.

again and over the cathouse doors swing wide,
in come a tongue-red hat. a wet thing stiffen behind our lying teeth.