

*Jeffrey C. Alfier*

## Recall Roster

Recalling forgotten, neglected, underrated,  
or unjustly out-of-print works

John Ciardi's "The Pilot in the Jungle"

### I

Machine stitched rivets on a tree  
Whose name he does not know. Left in the sky,  
He dangles from a silken cumulus  
(Stork's bundle upside down  
On the delivering wind) and sees unborn  
Incredible jungles of the lizard's eye:  
Dark fern, dark river, a shale coliseum  
Mountained above one smudgepot in the trees  
That was his surreal rug on metered skies  
And slid afire into this fourth dimension  
Whose infinite point of meeting parallels  
He marks in ultra-space, suspended from  
The chords of fifty centuries  
Descending to their past—a ripping sound  
That snags him limb by limb. He tears and falls  
Louder than any fruit dropped from the trees,  
And finds himself in mud on hands and knees.

### II

The opened buckle frees him from his times.  
He walks three paces dressed in dripping fleece  
And tears it off. The great bird of his chute  
Flaps in the trees: he salvages its hide

And Starts a civilization. He has a blade,  
 Seventeen matches, his sheepskin, and his wits.  
 Spaceman Crusoe at the wreck of time,  
 He ponders unseen footprints of his fear.  
 No-eyes watch his nothing deep in nowhere.

## III

He finds the wreck (the embers of himself)  
 Salvages bits of metal, bakelite, glass  
 Dials twisted from himself, his poverty.  
 Three hours from time still ticking on his wrist  
 The spinning bobbins of the time machine  
 Jam on an afternoon of Genesis  
 And flights of birds blow by like calendars  
 From void to void. Did worlds die or did he?  
 He studies twisted props of disbelief  
 Wondering what ruin to touch. He counts his change  
 ("Steady now, steady. . .") flips heads or tails and sees  
 The coins fall into roots. An omen? ("Steady. . .")  
 He laughs (a nerve's slow tangling like a vine)  
 Speaks to himself, shouts, listens, hears a surf  
 Of echo rolling back to strand him there  
 In tide pools of dead time by caves of fear,  
 And enters to himself, dented in his loss,  
 Tick-tick, a bloodbeat building on his wrist.  
 Racheting down the dead teeth of a skull  
 (The fossil of himself) sucked out of sight  
 Past heads and tails, past vertebrae and gill  
 To bedrocks out of time, with time to kill.

—John Ciardi


 uring the Second World War, John Anthony Ciardi (1916-1986) served as an enlisted gunner on a B-29 heavy bomber assigned to Saipan, located in the Marianas island chain. A 1938 graduate of Tufts University, he attended officer training but on the eve of his commissioning he was demoted to private because, as his biographer Edward M. Cifelli explains, FBI files showed that during his college years he had signed a petition against the Spanish fascists. The petition eventually came into the hands of the House un-American Affairs committee, and the Army felt that anyone who was against Franco's fascists must, by default, be pro-communist (Ciardi *Saipan* xiii).<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding, Ciardi went on to honorably complete a combat tour. After the war, he taught English at Harvard and Rutgers, and served in various capacities as an editor, translator, lecturer, teacher, and critic, and would become a life-long friend of fellow poet and war veteran Richard Wilbur. He is perhaps best known for his translation of Dante's *The Inferno* (recently reissued by New American Library), and for his extensive children's verse. During his lifetime he wrote several volumes of poetry, and there are over twenty-five aviation poems among his works. Many of these poems are found in *Other Skies* (1947), a compilation of poems based on his military service. Though now out-of-print, *Other Skies* is included in *The Collected Poems of John Ciardi* (University of Arkansas Press, 1997). In 1988, his relatively forgotten war diary, *Saipan—The War Diary of John Ciardi*, was published (University of Arkansas Press, 1988). "The Pilot in the Jungle," inscribed above, did not appear in *Other Skies* but in a postwar collection, *Live Another Day: Poems* (1949). Cifelli surmises that Ciardi began writing this poem during the war but did not finish it in time for publication in *Other Skies* (Personal Communication, 4 May 2004).

"The Pilot in the Jungle" may be contextualized by grasping the sense of foreboding that pervades a good portion of Ciardi's wartime poetry. Cifelli noted from Ciardi's diary how often he felt he would never survive the war, how the last entries of the diary leave the reader with a sense of "desperation and heaviness" (Ciardi *Saipan* xi). These feelings had their incipience when Ciardi arrived in the Pacific theater with the first wave of B-29s deployed in combat against Japan. As such, he participated in the first regular bombing raids on Tokyo, staged from the Marianas. In the Pacific, air bases suitable for B-29 operations were few in the early days of this aircraft's deployment, and the ever-present possibility of a weather or maintenance-initiated divert raised the potential and perception of jeopardy.<sup>2</sup> Enemy attacks on friendly airfields were always possible, and on November 27, 1944—the month Ciardi began his combat tour—Japanese fighter-bombers attacked B-29s on the ground, destroying several aircraft and killing dozens of

American troops (Gorman 32). Another source of concern was the fact that search-and rescue forces' success rate in picking up downed airmen only averaged 34% (Burrell 1172). Moreover, in a 1984 interview with Studs Terkel, Ciardi stated that "The average life of a crew was something between six and eight missions... You get to thinking by this time tomorrow you may have burned to death... The first four and a half months was wasted effort. We lost all those crews for nothing." (Terkel interview). Hence, the original impulse for "The Pilot in the Jungle" likely arose from this fear of not returning from a bombing mission, something amplified by an apperception of the chasmal vastness of the Pacific itself—a *horror vacui* that confronted many Americans serving in the region (Ciardi was from Metuchen, New Jersey). This dread took a particularly poignant turn when, shortly after he had been reassigned to staff duty, the remaining members of the aircrew he flew his first missions with were shot down over Tokyo Bay (Ciardi *Saipan* xix).<sup>3</sup>

Another key consideration that enlightens Ciardi's poem concerns his doubt over the existence of God, something that emerges in the poem's fatalistic undertones and austere imagery. Richard Wilbur said that Ciardi spoke often of the certainty of death and was angry at God for being no more than a possibility (Wilbur 66, 67). Commenting on Wilbur's remark, Cifelli stated that "Ciardi would have liked the security religion brings, but he felt the modern age disallowed a thinking man to believe in God" (Personal Communication, 4 May 2004). Accordingly, when Ciardi speaks in "The Pilot in the Jungle" of "...an echo rolling back to strand him there," a redolence looms of an unanswered—and ultimately unanswerable—prayer. As well, when Ciardi speaks of his protagonist-airman "Left in the sky" we see the potential of transcendent abandonment.

Overall, "The Pilot in the Jungle" exhibits a pace of lyrical solemnity characteristic of Ciardi's other verse about war's dispossessed and missing men. Flying to and from his airbase on the twenty-five-by-ten kilometer island of Saipan, no doubt Ciardi contemplated what it would be like to bailout over, or crash-land on, one of the Pacific's primordial islands, places perhaps unchanged through "...fifty centuries." Some of them were but the tops of dead volcanoes, a rather stark geographical feature Ciardi may have had in mind when he wrote of his protagonist suddenly finding "himself in mud on hands and knees." From the height of his parachute, the landscape below looks deceptively benign, if not friendly, appearing to a contingently distant eye as a "surreal rug." This line where this term appears exemplifies Ciardi's selection of a concentrated poetic form that depicts a temporal rebirth in such an environment, as the pilot—quite like an infant now—is deposited in a new and incalculable world, susceptible to its vagaries as he "Starts a civilization" with his meager survival gear. It is instructive to observe Ciardi's description of the pilot's descent as a "Stork's

bundle upside down,” accompanied by his parachute’s “ripping sound / That snags him limb by limb”—verses that reveal the pilot’s nativity to be a moribund nascence, in much the same manner as the doomed infant of Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*. No more does the pilot partake of the near-godlike flight of the aviator—or, conversely, the innocent refuge of an infant in a womb—for such a myth has fallen hard to an earthly subjugation. Thus, perceived through a gradual awakening, his ordered existence “on metered skies” is no longer so.

The suffusive element of time—that “fourth dimension” of relativity theory—runs prevalently throughout the poem. As the pilot contemplates his wristwatch, that timepiece of frequent synchronization for combat mission coordination, he fights the realization that it has devolved to a device offering nothing more than a countdown to madness, a thought he must quickly brush aside, telling himself, “Steady. . .” When “birds blow by like calendars / From void to void,” they mirror the irreferential progress of his wristwatch, for he now lives in “the wreck of time” where life gives way to a prophecy of the quite unremarkable “fossil” he will become. Ciardi’s use of “void” bears expanded comment. Perhaps the most noteworthy use of void is Conrad’s classic modernist expression of it, *Heart of Darkness* (1899): Kurtz represents the void within; the jungle, the void without. This is the same circumstance facing the pilot; as Heidegger would have it, his supreme fear is his own obliteration.<sup>4</sup>

In an earlier stanza, Ciardi used language suggestive of hope, describing the pilot’s untimely arrival as “an afternoon of Genesis.” But that served to set his readers up for ironic vicissitude, for the emergent reality that unfolds is one of entropy where Eden is but a dystopia. Even the choices previously granted by the chance of a coin toss are now irrelevant in this “bedrock,” a sobering foundation revolving in a timeless realm beyond the fellowship of “vertebrae and gill”—creatures at any level of complexity.

Amidst these sharp discernments, the pilot eventually comes across the wreckage of his aircraft, an event that offers further metaphors of his delinquency where the “glass/ Dials” of the cockpit—that locus of his forever relinquished airborne existence—are “twisted from himself.” That is, what he is as an aviator cannot be separated from the lifeless mechanisms of aviation; thus, the wreckage existentially becomes “the embers of himself,” as if he is melded to his own cenotaph. Ciardi, like his fellow servicemen in WWII, held few illusions about the surety of survival. There was vast potential for death, either from direct combat, or as a result of being lost in a jungle to become a “Spaceman Crusoe,” a sole survivor like Defoe’s shipwrecked English adventurer. But instead of finding footprints portending a grateful companion, the survivor will only witness the “unseen footprints of his fear.”

Bolstering our understanding of the pervasive psychology in “The Pilot in the Jungle,” is “Elegy Just in Case,” a thematically kindred poem which appears in *Open Skies*. Echoic of Ariel’s song in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, “Elegy Just in Case” is a kind of auto-vicarious poem where Ciardi speaks of his own “pearly bones / In their ripe organic mess,” being consumed by exotic insects, as his remains end up nothing more than “Fractured meat and open bone—” (Ciardi *Open Skies* 45).

As with fellow airman and poet Richard Hugo (1923-1982), the components of a writer’s *weltanschauung*, coupled with his hard-wrought discernments from aerial combat, inform their writing. For Ciardi, misfortune may be mourned but not softened. As we learn from “The Pilot in the Jungle,” this applies to poems that may appear, but only on the surface, to be about events dissociated from the poet’s inner life.<sup>5</sup> In John Ciardi, readers gain insight into how a combat veteran employs poetry to confront both his wartime fear and his embedded ontological doubts. He accomplished this through an impressively philosophical resolve, and an unambiguous and effective use of language.

### Notes

1. Cifelli wrote the Introduction to Ciardi’s war diary (see Works Cited). Comments on John Ciardi’s FBI file may be found at: <http://members.aol.com/wmpb/NSLCiardi/>.
2. That weather was a salient consideration for aircrews, as well as for Ciardi as a poet, see his poem, “Visibility Zero,” published in his war diary.
3. Ciardi was transferred from flying to desk duties because an officer higher up in his chain-of-command thought poets were good grammarians, and subsequently employed him as a writer of military awards and decorations and one who wrote letters of condolence to families of men killed in the war (Ciardi *Saipan* xix).
4. The “void” may refer to an ontologically or spiritually aborted Eden—a kind of anti-Genesis—of Ciardi’s religious doubt. Note as well Ciardi’s pilot as he faces “pools of dead time” where the watch is but “a bloodbeat building on his wrist.”
5. Cifelli’s biography of Ciardi is *John Ciardi: A Biography* (1997); for similar studies see *John Ciardi* by Edward Francis Krickel (1981), and *John Ciardi: Measure of the Man* by Vince Clemente (1988). For Hugo, see especially his poems, “Mission to Linz,” and “Note from Capri to Richard Ryan on the Adriatic Floor.” Hugo, who would go on to teach English and creative writing at the University of Montana, was a B-24 bombardier based in Italy during the war.

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**MAJOR JEFFREY C. ALFIER** was recently recalled to active duty and is assigned to Ramstein Air Base, Germany. His work has appeared in *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Concho River Review*, *Georgetown Review*, *RE:AL*, *Reed Magazine*, *Santa Clara Review*, and **WLA**. He is author of a chapbook of poems, *Strangers Within the Gate* (The Moon Publishing, 2005).