

Norman Friedman

THE MAGIC BADGE

Or, SONG OF MYSELF 100 YEARS AFTER

1. Trailing through life leaving behind me
A cloud of birth certificates and old Cub Scout
uniforms,
I was baptized, circumcised, confirmed, and
bar-mitzvahed,
I learned Hebrew, French, Spanish, Morse
Code, and semaphore flags.
At sixteen I was issued a lifetime Social
Security Number,
I practiced the piano, and earned diplomas,
honor-society pins, and prizes.

I am followed by name-tags, dog-tags, ID
cards, and passports disgraced by fluorescent
photographs.
I won a Naval Commission complete with sleeve
stripes, insignias, and fitness reports,
And now I am the hero of a thousand transcripts,
qualifications, publications, and grants
and fellowships.
Do not forget my permit to practice marriage,
my insurance policies, credit ratings, and
income tax forms in triplicate.

Oh, I am the Whitman of driver's licenses,
auto registrations, inspection stickers,
and parking decals,
The Poet of health plans and checkups, anti-
cholesterol diets, and regular exercise,
Rhapsode of all the conglomerate of wallets,
drawers, walls, cluttered address books,
appointment pads, and disappointment
calendars.

2. For I have paid all my dues, always return
found money,
Never tell lies, pull strings, or buy and sell
under the counter.
Modestly I refuse to dangle my Phi Beta Kappa
key,
I'm forever on time, never forget, observe
all celebrations, and answer all my mail.
I've met all the requirements, taken all the
prerequisites, and followed all the owner's
manuals religiously.

And still they don't believe me,
My father won't pay attention, no one listens,
I don't belong, doors remain closed,
I keep flunking math and physics,
And the first and last time I ripped off the
Five and Dime with the other kids, I was
caught and put to shame.
I never made it to First-Class Scout,
And I almost didn't make it past Byron, Keats,
and Shelley.
Gathering demerits at Midshipman School like
nosegays,
I was reprimanded as an Ensign for fraternizing
with the troops.

I still can't play the piano,
I nearly didn't get a job, am never elected to
committees,
Foundations, editors, and women turn me down,
My work has come to nothing,
Universities won't let me change careers,
Police persist in ticketing me,
My children go their ways,
My wife is bewildered and the neighbors
scandalized by my nocturnal hours,
My grass refuses to grow,
My house won't stay repaired,
My body isn't holding together,
My machines keep breaking down just after the
guarantee period has expired,
And my therapist insists I need to give myself
a mother.

3. I drop out, wino on the Bowery, I wipe wind-
shields with a greasy rag on the corner of
Houston,
Falling downstairs, I panhandle quarters on
Saint Mark's,
Mingling with the cast-offs, runaways, and
hippies of Second Avenue, bum among the
blacks,
Starving cats assaulting garbage cans,
Addict sweating in the toilet,
Biker among the motorcycles, violating girls
and streets,
Pimp hanging out in pizza parlors,
Car thief shivering in the Tombs.

I'm with you, Ginsberg chanting mantras and
freaking out in Bangladesh,
Joe Gould eating ketchup on free rolls for
lunch, and begging nickels for his jokes
from friends, filling his rooms with lost
and useless piles of manuscript,
Gauguin bringing syphilis to Eden,
Tennyson's embittered boy rearing his dusky
race,
Beachcomber among the squawking gulls,
Singer of the Open Road and of my unquenchable
need,
Wolfe wanting it all, living up to the hunger
of his name,
Taking nothing if only something comes.

4. Dreaming of the universal VIP with the magic
membership card, the ultimate sheriff's
badge,
The millionaire's club that opens all doors,
breaks all speed limits, and crosses borders
with impunity,
Moves arresting cops to salute and pass me on
as I ride by on my white horse Silver,
Renfrew of the Mounted, Jack Armstrong,
Mister District Attorney in my black
limousine,
Judges to dismiss the charges, courts to
award me damages, doormen to tip their hats,
and Playboy keys to twinkle.

Mild-mannered reporter headed for the phone
booth,
Jazzmen invite me to sit in, women welcome me,
Jet pilots smile knowingly in recognition
as I come aboard,
Secretary of State, double agent, Daddy
Warbucks, I negotiate on equal terms with
the Mafia and the FBI,
Double-Oh-Seven, Shadow of my other self,
libidinous underside of all my dreams,
Melting through plates of steel and the holes
in the system,
Invisible even to my own mother, and escaping
my father at last.

Gentile and Jew, familiar of history,
Shapechanger, Ulysses, Batman, Faust,
Picasso, Don Juan,
Mick Jagger in his dayglo Cadillac, Brando
in his sacramental T-shirt,
Norman Mailer rides the range, the Kid from
Brooklyn socks it to 'em in the New York
Review of Books,
Superstar, I always get what I want, and I'm
always wanted,
But still I can't get no
Satisfaction,
Nor is there any comfort to be found.

5. Following my hunger to the bottom, I find only
more hunger,
The Open Road is my Dead End, No Trespassing,
Violators Will Be Prosecuted,
And I have no place to go,
Except to marvel at my sleepless nightmares,
Except to hear them played back on the
morning's news,
Except to see my insomnia reflected in people's
faces on the morning bus dragging us to work.

The shits are killing us (the White Negro
quoting Emerson), my self suffocates in its
cradle, crying to get out,
Wanting to be itself, but wanting to be held,

I trouble my spirit to vindicate itself and
be understood,
Afraid of what I want, wanting to be loved by
those I do not love,
I am not allowed, do not have permission,
cannot acknowledge my body.
What am I doing here? Why does no one answer
my letters?

A heavy man, parked in his car up the block
from my house, speaks quietly into his hand
mike as I walk by, writing in a small black
notebook on his lap.
I could get hurt like this,
I'll get cancer from all this running around,
I am smaller and worse than I thought,
I did not know I held so much badness.
The days move too slow, I have nothing to do,
my papers and books all empty.

I can no longer save my mother by being more
sensitive than my father,
I can no longer win my father by being
more successful than sensitive,
I can live without them,
I am not what they want and can no longer try,
I never really fooled them anyway, hiding
a piece of myself from each in turn, becoming
a man of mystery,
I couldn't look at them, so they never saw me,
I burn my Social Security Card, licenses,
careers, manuals, policies,
I consign them to the flames of my anger,
I can retire the leather jacket now, along
with the silver bullet,
I never had the guts for either, and settle
for the nothing that I am.

I stamp my feet, I lose my breath,
I become blue, they turn me up
Side down, they never fed me,
I vomit up this poison,
I am sick, I am

Dizzy, I am
Empty, I
Am lost.

6. In a silent wind,
In a vacant world,
Sand is the substance.
I am alone. I am afraid. I will die here.

Allons! the desert is before us!
The paper remains on the desk unwritten,
the book on the shelf unopen'd!
Follow the stripped saint's progress, bare to
the ends of his body, his fingers burning,
Free even of such blessed names as Buddha,
Moses, Jesus, Gandhi, and Thoreau,
On the track of being, the freedom of failure,
the failure of comfort.

No one has a name here, not of the father,
neither of the mother,
Only the vacant sky, only the silent birds,
His head clear, his mind dry,
He begins to feel his body shaking, he cannot
stop his tears,
Terrified by joy, a hundred men enraged
finally shed their skins,
Simultaneously tracking in the sand to Now Here.