

July 5 1979

Dear Ann Folke,

I wrote this COLOSSEUM POEM because - oh listen, don't ever trust a poet when he tries to tell you why he wrote anything because he's only pulling your leg because poets don't know why they ever do anything, they don't even know why they comb their own hair - But I did tell you over the phone that I'd try to say why I wrote this COLOSSEUM POEM, and I said I thought it had something to do with a deep concern I felt for America and with our becoming more and more "Roman" in almost all our pursuits - because for all our sexist and sexual "liberation" it still feels like we've only gotten more and more prophylactic in our dealings with ourselves - take American behaviorism for example, it keeps asking us how many orgasms do we have each week, but if that's really where things are at then why do those people get so obsessive about asking us? - something must be very very wrong - all our emphasis on life styles and biorhythms and externals - it reminds me of what Aristotle says in the POETICS when he refers contemptuously to the "spectacle" of the theatre, the set design and the costumes and the make-up and the hundred other "business" trappings of the stage, he says that this is more a matter for the costumier than for the serious poet whose only concern should be the "katharsis", the pity and terror of a real dramatic experience which can purge and purify our emotions - but then when was the last time you were "purged" or "purified" to the very core of your being? - impressed, yes - moved, sometimes - but purged and purified, right here in America? - rarely - but still I'd like to think that that kind of experience is possible for us to achieve, because I do cling to Freud's revolutionary premise that the human mind can cure itself of its own worst illness and sillinesses - but that means we may have to exercise a very strong healthy curiosity about ourselves, and it also means we may have to chuck all those plastic disposable values we've been conned into living by, and it also means we may have to get ourselves back on the track of that grim pilgrimage which is always and only the one authentic journey of every sincere individual -

But that sounds like I'm talking about a theological thing and we all know those Romans were never that much into theological things, ye gods they swiped all their own deities from the Greeks and even then they didn't believe all that much in them, because all the Romans ever really wanted was to conquer the world and then try to keep it conquered - but ha ha, then they themselves got conquered by a crazy faith that took shape right under their own Roman noses, and that crazy faith made the Romans so mad they finally had to destroy the city of Jerulasem in the years 66-68 AD in one of the bloodiest massacres of human history -

Well like I said, don't ever trust a poet when he tries to tell you why he wrote anything because he'll only beat around the burning bush until you don't know what the hell he's talking about, so I can only say I did write this COLOSSEUM POEM because I was genuinely concerned about what was going on inside that Roman Colosseum, and I was genuinely irked that there's almost no material that is readily available on it, and so it took me almost a year just to research the poem, and even then I had to manufacture a lot of the later sections out of my own head -

I say the poem grew out of a concern I had about America and I still do feel that - my concern was that America was going on the road to Rome, through our own failure of nerve and our own failure of religion and our own failure of the human imagination, and those are all very Roman failures in my mind - And I am still very concerned about where America is going - But even so it's nice to know I could write this COLOSSEUM POEM in America, and have it published in America, and have it performed in America, and all those things probably could not have happened in the Rome I'm writing about, so there is hope -

Love,

