

Syndromes of Wisdom

"You must not invade Mother Russia," it's said
In the vast, bitter wintertime cold
Napoleon, though, thought he'd figured a way
So did Hitler, or so we are told.

"Do not get bogged down in an Asian land war,"
So they once taught cadets at West Point
Not that France or America listened, of course
Till their noses got wrenched out of joint

"Do not spit to windward," the sailors will say
Or you'll get the snot back in your face
Not that landlubbers heed these instructions so wise
Which accounts for the whole human race

"Do not use a puppet to run your affairs"
If you don't know the nature of string
With two ends, you know, it can pull either way
As the bad puppet chorus will sing

As they train the young dogs not to shit where they live
And the cats not to pee on the rug
So America ought not to jump in the hole
That it has only recently dug

Latrines have their uses, but swimming ain't one
Not unless you like stinking and slimed
So America ought not to dive in the ditch
Out of which it has only just climbed

We haven't yet found our way out of this mess
Still, before any learning can start
All the ones who so brazenly lit the last fuse
Seem to fear that we might lose the art

They've gone back again to the tried and the trite
Seeking slogans to mask their retreat
In a panic that soon we won't do this again
"Isolationist!" now they repeat

In the land of the blind rules a king with one eye
Whose perspective is greatly obscured
Like the fabulous realm of the learning impaired
Where the people know only one word

The sunken investments run deep, far, and wide
And to give them up now would be bad
Never mind all those kids with the lost legs and arms
We must not make the stockholders sad

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The headstones grow grim in the grass 'round their graves
As the rows of their ranks slowly fill
While the numbers and dates tell a story of lives
Ended short, not for good but for ill

What remains of their bodies lies buried away
While their souls through eternity fall
Leaving only their memories fading in friends
And their names on a black-granite wall

They bang the drum slowly; they play the horn sad
They preach and console and reprise
Their denials that youth really dies for the old
While the story the statesmen revise

Now furious fear flings more sand in the face
As the trial balloons litter the sky
Once again it's a "syndrome" to think of the waste,
To remember, and understand why

What kind of a people would coin a cliché
Using "syndrome" to lie and appease
All to cover a wish to make wisdom passé:
Just a symptom of one more disease?