

**JOHN CANADAY**

**General Leslie Groves Counts to Zero**

Stick to your knitting. Nobel physicists  
should know that. Not my lot. Even Fermi  
began a betting pool, offering odds  
our gadget will ignite the atmosphere,  
wipe out the world—or just incinerate  
New Mexico. A joke, to smooth frayed nerves,  
says Oppenheimer. Calculated humor's  
smart—in smallish doses; helps your men  
defy their fears. But this? Frivolity's  
the danger here, not death. Safe in their lab,  
they hazard nothing. Headaches. Writer's cramp.  
And yet the scuttlebutt these longhairs flog—  
that my incompetence once killed a man.  
I'd like to see these know-it-alls make hay  
with World War I stock blasting caps, fuse cord,  
and TNT.

Midwinter in Vermont:

Winooski's foot-thick ice floes throttling  
the pontoon bridge my commandant had built  
all wrong. My orders: clear the ice. All wrong.  
We cut three-minute fuses, hard to light  
or know if they were lit. The cold. The wind.  
And Littlefield beside me when the block  
exploded in his hand. Tore off his arm.  
I knew at once he wouldn't live. I woke  
next morning in the hospital, too doped  
to mourn, his bone shards lodged like shrapnel  
in my left forefinger knuckle.

Gossip. Spite.

These coddled scholars strut their ignorance.  
The bungling's theirs. My competence is all  
that keeps their precious keisters in one piece.  
I cleared them Triple A priority  
when Ike and Mac both thank their stars for less.  
If they knew what explosives really do  
they'd shut their traps for good and tight.

Last night

I called the governor—another duck lined up.  
Shocked silence crackled back along the wire  
when I said, "Martial law may be required."  
Then anger when I wouldn't tell him why.

And now the weathermen are dithering  
amid the hubbub at base camp. Hubbard  
and Holzman, rattled by their failed forecasts,  
flip-flop and bicker. Distant thunder bombs  
the mountains. Experts second-guess themselves  
to death. No guts. No choice but to dismiss  
the both of them and make my own predictions.  
I've trusted general knowledge all my life.  
"The devil catch an idle man, he'll find  
him work." My parents kept me busy, warned  
against the vice of foreigners, the sloth  
of other races. They were right. The whores  
in St. Supplice thronged every corner, clutched  
my sleeve and fawned. No wonder France succumbed,  
attacked by Huns. Venereal and pompous.  
Even the Mona Lisa proved as ugly  
as I thought she would. I wouldn't bet on God's  
forbearance. We have marred his work past bearing.

But Armageddon is our least concern.  
This bomb's more likely to go belly-up.  
And what would Fermi care? It's all some great  
experiment to him. If Trinity's  
a bust, it will have proved the world is safe  
from atom bombs. He's not the one they'll hold  
accountable for all those wasted billions.  
All those years. Me, I'll grow old and lean  
as Rayburn, Barkley, Bridges pick my bones  
in claustrophobic subcommittee rooms.

Six Schrafft's if it's a dud. Indulgent, but  
my right hand knows what's what: to Mrs. O  
my gut's a favorite tease, yet for this trip  
she tucked an extra box of crunchies, creams,  
and cordials in my kit, and didn't smirk.  
The extra pounds won't nudge scales weighted down  
by history. By failure. Fat will be  
least of my burdens.

Face down on a tarp  
gone slick with drizzle's neither comfortable  
nor dignified. But if it's good enough



for Harvard's president. . . . Our feet aim straight  
at Zero, like twin compasses. Ten miles.  
And if that's not enough, whoever's left  
will raise a statue, one day, in our names.

It only takes one soaked electric tie,  
one short, and half the world's plutonium  
is scattered to the wind—and still no proof  
this darn thing works. Each hour we delay  
increases risk. Each hour, dozens die,  
while Truman, twiddling his thumbs at Potsdam,  
waits for word of what we've wrought. I put  
my head down, pray, and wait for it.

Now. This.