

My Thunder

Kingsley Amis said he only wanted to read novels
that begin "A shot rang out," but what about Frank
Kermode's argument that there's a conflict between
our need to make sense of the world through storytelling

and our love of details that are hostile to story,
like the Man in the Mackintosh who keeps showing up in Joyce's *Ulysses*
or the young fellow who runs away naked
in the Gospel of St. Mark when Jesus is arrested in the Garden

of Gethsemane? It's all in the details, which is why
John Lovell, Jr.—and I'm sorry to keep throwing all these
names at you, reader, but one does want to give credit where
credit's due—says that every folk song is religious

because it's concerned with the origins and ends
of life, as is, for example, the ballad of Jesse James,
in which Jesse has a wife who mourns for
his life, three children they were brave, but that dirty little coward

who shot Mr. Howard laid poor Jesse in his grave.
See what I mean—that is, see what Mr. Lovell, Jr. means?
That Jesse James killed unarmed people while
robbing banks and trains doesn't really figure in, the point being

that Jesse was shot in the back by a coward, which
is, at heart, a religious question. Here's another: in 1709,
John Dennis wrote a play called *Appius*
and *Virginia* that called for thunder, so he invented a machine

that was a lot more popular than the play, which was
cancelled, though when Dennis returned to the theatre
to see *Macbeth* and realized they were using
his sound effect for the storm scene, he cried, "That's my thunder,

by God! The villains will not play my play but they steal
my thunder." And you'd be mad, too, reader, if they stole
your thunder. But if you had no thunder in the first place,
wouldn't you want to steal some? First drafts are

usually, um, *okay*, though they lack zip, energy,
pizzazz—thunder, in a word. Any subject will do
if you put enough energy into it, so that a small band
of musicians can make as much noise as a big one,

and sometimes they have to: when I tell you that
the big groups of the thirties had to be scaled down
in wartime so the singers and sax players could join the army
and the gas and rubber they used on the road diverted

to the war effort, with the result that four- and five-piece
combos began to crisscross the nation, thereby establishing
the template for Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly, Bill Haley,
and pretty much every rock band since, you might say to me, "Dave,

are you saying that Hitler invented rock 'n' roll?"
And in answer to that, I could write you a poem that says
either "Just because you're a mass murderer
doesn't mean you can't get one thing right" or else "That is not

what I meant at all, that is not it at all." And while
it wouldn't have to be a poem that begins "A shot rang out,"
it'd have to be one with thunder in it. And not
some third-rate playwright's thunder, either, but my thunder.

—David Kirby