

CORADDI

arts festival issue

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CORADDI

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The Barbarians and the Poet

H. KIETH MONROE

History remembers Claudius Claudianus, if it remembers him at all, as simply a poet at the time of Rome's decline. He attached himself to the circle of Honorius, the addled emperor, and Stilicho, the Vandal defender of Rome. Between the years 394 and 404 A.D., he wrote poems in praise of Stilicho and in scorn of his rivals, poems to the glory of the eternal city, poems upon any subject that looked lucrative. By this means Claudian amassed a sizeable fortune and earned a place in Trajan's forum in statue form. His one great surviving non-occasional verse is "The Rape of Proserpine." Most accounts assume that the poet died at the time of Stilicho's assassination in 408 since he never is mentioned again in the standard annals. This view, however, is erroneous.

Claudian was a wise man. After nearly fifteen years in the poetic wars, he decided to ease into retirement beginning about 405. He bought a modest villa on the southern outskirts of Rome, began declining commissions for laudatory verse, kept his friends in society and the Senate, and devoted himself to his library and his grape arbors. He was known to a select circle as a gracious host, scintillating conversationalist, and accomplished student of history. The wines his servants bottled under Claudian's direction were deemed, at best, barely adequate, but his friends would never have considered saying so to the poet's face. Claudian was valued not for his ability as a vintner, but for his wit and style and for his insights into contemporary society. More than one senator was known to seek his counsel on perplexing issues. One of these, Disarius Vespian, almost surely was instrumental in saving the retired poet from the purge that followed Stilicho's fall.

This same Vespian arrived at the poet's villa on an evil day in the year 410. Following Stilicho's assassination, the Visigoth Alaric, who already held sizeable territories in Cisalpine Gaul not to mention Macedonia and Thrace, began his inexorable advance upon Rome itself. By 410 the city was in a state of siege, food was running low, Alaric was delivering a series of orchestrated ultimatums. The Senate was in near collapse, disaster appeared imminent, and Vespian was seeking his friend's advice and solace for, perhaps, the final time.

He found the poet to the rear of the villa, lounging next to his tree-shaded pool, nursing a hangover. Vespian shook his head sadly as he neared his friend. Claudius Claudianus looked older than his years and thin. Vespian realized that he must look much the same. The food shortage was beginning to be acute. As the senator neared the poet, the latter raised one eyelid painfully, smiled wanly, and motioned his friend to a seat on the low wall bordering the pool.

"Talk softly, Vespian," the poet said. "My brains are fragile this morning."

"Revelling last night?" the senator asked.

"Hardly." The poet attempted a laugh, but it dissolved into a wince. "Or, if so, a very private one. I would give my eyes for a decent meal. There's so little food about that most of my dinners these days consist of wine washed down with wine. I'm getting sick of my own vintages. Last night I did, literally."

Vespian knew his friend's moderate habits well enough to realize that a serious depression must have been required for the poet to get himself into such a condition. The cause was not difficult to divine. As if to confirm the senator's private guess, Claudian asked bemusedly about what the Senate's response would be to the Visigoths' latest ultimatum.

"Then you've heard?"

"No, but your visits these last months have coincided rather neatly with major catastrophes."

"Am I that predictable?" the senator asked.

Claudian shrugged.

"I should have said the fortunes of the empire are the predictable part." He described a downward spiral with one index finger. "What is it this time?"

"That unwashed Barbarian swine . . ." Vespian began loudly.

The poet moaned feebly and hunched his shoulders up as if to protect his ears.

"Gently, Vespian, gently."

"Sorry. But it is infuriating. The arrogance of the man. We have given him twenty tons of gold and silver, practically everything else of value in the city. He demands more. Aullus was sent as emissary. You know him?"

The poet nodded.

"He said, 'What will be left to us?'"

"And what did Alaric answer? I'm considering collecting barbarian sayings."

"He said, 'Your lives.'"

"Pithy."

"Oh, there's more. Aullus threatened resistance by a million men, and Alaric replied, 'The thicker the hay, the more easily it is mowed.'"

"That's excellent."

"Excellent?" the senator shouted. The poet turned white. "Sorry."

"Vespian, you're losing your sense of humor. Tell me, what does the Senate propose to do?"

"I have no idea what we can do. I've heard rumors they're beginning to eat children in the city."

The senator closed his eyes in disgust.

"There can't be much meat on them," Claudian said.

"How can you joke?"

"As an occasional Stoic, I believe in accepting the inevitable calmly."

"But, why is it inevitable? Or, rather, how did it come to be inevitable?"

That's rather a large question. Do you really want an answer, or were you simply indulging in senatorial rhetoric?"

"I'm prepared to listen if you really have an explanation. It will, at least, pass the time."

"Vespian, you have the makings of a Stoic yourself." The poet adjusted himself upon the wall.

"All right, I'll pass the time for you.

"This Alaric became inevitable a long time ago. He represents after all, Rome more than you or I do. The empire is made up of 70 million. Of those, how many are Romans? One million? And how many are Italians? Six million? Why is it surprising that the majority should desire to possess Rome itself? We are not Rome; they are. This famine is evidence of that. We relied on the barbarians for everything. Our mines were in their territories. Our crops were grown by them. Even in the time of Pertinax, Italian farms were being given free to anyone who would work them. No one would. It was easier to rely on the barbarians to raise our food for us. We have plundered the world, Vespian, in order to live in luxury. Now the plundered are about to become the plunderers. The slaves have all gone over to the barbarians. There they are not slaves. What remains are you and I, the amiable incompetents. We can't do anything for ourselves. And you and I are not even truly representative. Think of most of Rome, the self-indulgent, hedonistic fools."

"I admit what you say may be true. But to give in to the barbarians is repugnant. I would rather

be conquered by anyone else.”

“I may be about to shock you, but I can’t share your distaste. In most things the barbarians are considerably less corrupt than Rome. They are courageous, strong, clever, and not rich enough to be too immoral or lazy. I wouldn’t be at all surprised to learn that this Alaric conceives of himself as saving Rome from decay and internal ruin. He might be right.”

“I wouldn’t advise you to talk this way to anyone else,” the senator said. “It might well be interpreted as treason.”

“No doubt. It might also be true, however.”

“Perhaps. Another true thing, though, is that if these Visigoths do take the city, they’ll knock your statue down.”

“Yes, that is one unfortunate aspect of it. They seem to have absorbed most of what is good from the empire, but not a love of art. They seem to associate it with our decadence. They might even be partially right in that. You do recall our friend Silvitus paying 600,000 denarii for a carpet?”

“Yes.”

“You may also recall a friend of yours paying almost as much as that for a Senate seat. The barbarians seem to equate government and art with corruption and corruption with wealth and wealth with rape. From their point of view, the latter connection is certainly an accurate one. I must say if I were a Visigoth, I’d certainly feel within my rights to take Rome if I had the power to do so.”

The senator shook his head and rose to go.

“I admire your ability to sympathize, but it frightens me. Someone with your attitude who was less inclined to philosophize and more inclined toward action might well open the gates of the city. And then where would we be?”

“Where we will be soon enough in any event, Vespian. Dead.”

“True. But for the time being, I intend to keep trying to stay alive.” The senator smiled. “To that end, I must be on my way. I hope to be able to scrounge an egg from somewhere for the family’s dinner.”

“Best of luck.”

Claudius Claudianus watched his friend depart. He lay for an hour longer alone in the sun, then rose and summoned one of his few remaining slaves. He had the slave fetch a bottle of wine, poured a globlet full for each of them, and made a more or less momentous suggestion. He advised

the slave to creep that night near dawn down to the gates of Rome, to open them, and to usher Alaric and his horde into the city. The slave was aghast. The slave was not so aghast that he failed to comply.

The Visigoths swept into the city the next morning. In the carnage that followed, Vespian, along with most of the rest of Rome, was killed. The head was severed from the body of the statue of Claudius Claudianus. The poet was dead by his own hand when the Visigoths reached his villa in the afternoon. By evening one of the barbarians was installed in the villa and was entertaining in the highest style. The host and his guest concurred in the judgment most of the poet's friends had shared. The poet had bottled a truly terrible wine. This fact did not prevent the Visigoth host from pouring his guests glass after glass, nor deter them from drinking it cheerfully down.

§ § § § §



Does a tree remember the leaves
That fell away? Bud scars remember.
Tell Alice Happy Thursday for me.
Alice does not have a birthday, so
Therefore she must have a Thursday.

Happy Thursday to Alice,
Happy Thursday to you!

Alice lives in the back of a closet
And no one can see her because
Sometimes she is not there.
Maybe she is in Codfish Falls, New England
Or Alamance, France. Maybe she is
In a state of mind, like a picture
Is in a frame. Alice can write
Poetry better than George the Gutrunner.
But, then, it is easy to remember
About last year's leaves because
The snows of yesteryear have been
Able to remember being water and ice.
But somehow, it is just too hard
To remember if I am or not.

— *Ruth Anne Seabalt*

To listen to the rain now in sharp
Needle-volleys against the window,
Alone and awake with the night;
To lie in solitude and listen
To the trains rattle through the sky —
The trains you love so well,
And played with as a little boy.

I wish that I had known you then,
With your hair blonde-white,
Your teeth Falling out, and
Growing back in.
I wish that I had known you then,
I am more than glad I know you now.

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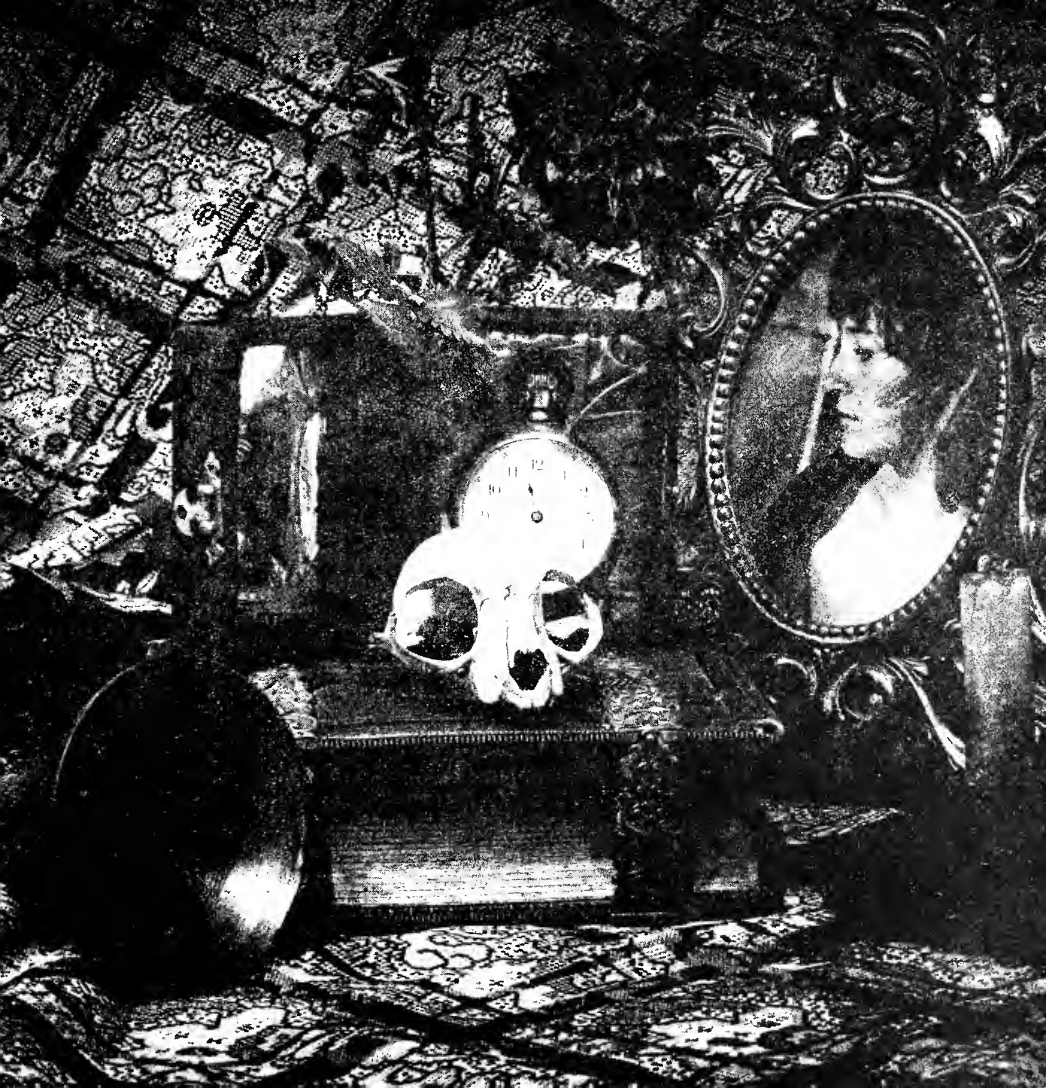
— *Ruth Anne Seabalt*

COLOSSEUS INFIRMITAS

crisp winter, and
cold desires —
a zillion people watch in cool retire.
one dozen bodies perform
a brutal ballet —
and a billion hearts burn warm.
throbbing heat, and
mounting hate —
two dozen spastic lovers horribly girate.

an orgy —
a theatrical circus of sex is sold
as a thrilling stimulation,
and a thousand souls turn cold.

— *Gray Basnight*



Digging for Babel

JIM CLARK

"Larry, your mother wants you to come in and get something to eat," the father says.

"Tell her I had some lunch on the plane," the son says.

"Well, okay. Uh, she also wants to know if the porch bedroom will be okay. It has the longest bed. And how long will you be staying?" the father asks.

"Sure. Fine. A day or two. Say, you got a shovel around here?" the son asks.

The father goes into the utility room at the edge of the patio and returns with a shovel, honed silver-sharp and oiled against Miami salt breezes.

The son takes the shovel, turning it slowly in his hands for weight and balance. "The old snake killer, isn't it?" the son asks.

"Yep," the father says, "never can tell."

The son surveys the back yard. His eyes run along the back chain fence, steel mesh entwined with the drapery of lavender passion flowers struggling for survival against the thorny snakevines of bougenvilla. The son checks the scattering of grapefruit and lime trees, poison-oiled mango trees, and a hurricane-tilted avocado tree, their trunks all painted white with mildew and wood-borer poison. Finally his eyes come to rest on the giant ficus tree, its base fat with stilted roots. "Hey, what'd you do, make the back yard smaller, or something?" he finally asks.

"No. It probably just looks smaller to you," the father says.

The son begins walking away from the house and its adjoining patio. He moves slowly towards the back of the yard, periodically shovel-slicing the grass browned by Florida sun and cinchbugs. "I wonder if I can find it," he says.

"Find what, Larry?" the father asks. "Uh, what'd you come home to find?"

"That concrete thing we used to bend the lawnmower blade on. Remember? I thought I knew where it was. It's still here, isn't it?"

The father stares at the boy. "Uh, yeah, it's over here. Uh, son, is that what you're looking for?"

"Yeah. It's a start at least," the son says, jabbing at the grass grown over the object with tight green-brown runners. It used to be a small underground silo, someone once told him, the sole remnant of an old dairy farm, leveled to make room for the growing edge of Miami. "When I was a boy," the son continues, "me and some other kids thought it was the gateway to hell or China or some underground world. We tried digging it out one time, or as far down as we could dig, about ten feet or so. But Mom made us quit — said we'd get stuck down there. We used to visualize a whole world down there. Did you know that if you put your ear to the ground here, you can hear water running? There's an underground stream or something right here." The son puts his ear to the ground. "Yeah, can still hear it. Listen!"

The father puts his ear to the ground, staring into the eyes of his son with only inches separating their faces. "I'll be damned!" the father says. "I didn't know that. I'll be damned."

Later that afternoon, the son has laid out an old beach blanket next to the concrete silo. On the blanket there is a variety of large and small shovels, a bucket, a brush, a knife and a large magnifying glass. The son sets down a beer, takes up a large shovel and begins carefully removing grass and dirt from the center of the silo. His mother and father sit on the backyard patio, sipping gin and tonic, watching.

"Larry," his mother calls out to him, "don't you think you ought to call Pamela and the baby and let them know where you are? I'm sure she's worried."

"Let her worry," he calls back, not taking his eyes from the hole he is digging.

"What's the matter, Larry," his mother says, "having trouble in your marriage? I don't understand why you'd fly all the way from Chicago to Miami to dig a hole in the back yard."

"That's my problem, Mom," he says, still not taking his eyes from the hole. "I don't understand . . . anything. And you know everytime I've ever got hurt or confused, I've always come home to Mom."

After a few more minutes of digging, the son removes a small, plastic briefcase from about a foot down. He dusts it off, tries unsuccessfully to unzip it and then cuts it open with garden shears. He empties the contents onto the blanket: a notebook of handwritten poetry, a lock of brown hair, and a letter.

"Find it, son?" the father yells out to him.

"I'm glad, Larry," the mother yells.

Larry unfolds the letter and begins reading:

September 2, 1963 — 7:30 a.m.

Leaving for college in a few minutes. Scared. I'll flunk out for sure. And I'll never see Peggy again, or at least not until Thanksgiving. She says she loves me. If she were dead, she could not escape from me. So I bury her hair. Voodoo, black magic. Perhaps somebody will dig up my poetry in the year 2000 and they'll read me in English class. But I doubt it.

The son skims through the poetry, noting titles: "The Hermit Crab," "Poison," "A Day in the Life of a Butterfly." There were many others.

"It'll take longer than the year 2000," he thinks, throwing the poems on the blanket.

He begins with the shovel again, carefully thrusting out triangles and slices of dirt, sorting through bits of limestone, spheres of coral, and fossil shells.

"Uh, son," the father yells out, "is there more? Your mother is worried about you. Uh, she's afraid you'll hurt your back."

"Yeah, there's more — lots more," he answers. "She can rub my back later."

Through the afternoon, the son continues to dig. The dirt pile grows. The blanket is littered with objects retrieved from the hole: cigar boxes, plastic bags and matchboxes, filled with poems, shiny coins, photographs, show tickets — and, of greatest interest to the son, letters.

October 27, 1962

The papers call it the Cuban Missile Crisis. JFK in showdown with Fidel and Krushchev. All night jeeps and army trucks rolling down the highway towards Key West. Opalocka Airbase turned into military camp. Neighbors are leaving town, heading north. They say we'll get the first Russian rocket, we being so near. We're staying. Tomorrow the ships meet. I'm afraid. Maybe end of world. Peggy and I made love tonight, just in case. We can die happy. But I'm afraid.

The son opens and folds the letters carefully, studying each bit of damp, yellowed paper. Some letters were more interesting than others. Some seemed so minor, so silly now — so important then.

July 17, 1959

I'm in trouble. I want to run, but there's no where to go. I went to Peggy's tonight and I french kissed her and now Donnie says she'll get pregnant. He knows everything about everything. What if I have to marry her? How will I get a job. I don't even get good grades in school. And Donnie says I'll probably get the disease and my tongue and everything else will fall off. And after a few years my brain will get holes in it and I'll have to live in an iron lung. Maybe I'll get killed and it'll be okay. If only I could run away.

He folds the letter and spins it onto the blanket with the others. Then he leans back into the depths of the hole with a bucket in one hand and a garden trowel in the other. Every few minutes he comes up for air and light when the bucket is full.

Finally, he emerges with a plastic bag containing a letter and a jar with black and yellow floating inside. He shakes the jar at the sun and the contents swirl and settle, revealing a spiral ladder of bones. He unfolds the letter:

'April 1, 1956

Daddy killed a diamondback today in the back yard. Chopped his head off with a shovel. He gave me the rattles — but they're not as long as the ones Roger has. The snake squirmed for a long time. And Daddy told us not to get near it until the sun went down and it died. Especially the head cause the mouth was open. But Roger and Wayne and Peggy were there. Peggy is the new girl who moved in down the street and flies kites so high they disappear in the clouds and she says someday we'll get married. But she said she bet I was afraid of the snake. So I stuck my finger in the snake's mouth and it bit me. And they took me to the hospital. The doctor said I was lucky. But I can't play or else I might lose my finger. I'm afraid. We pickled the snake and put it in a jar.

He stares at the jar.

"Larry, what time would you like to have supper?" his father shouts to him. "Thought we'd charcoal steaks outside and your mother says we need to start the fire soon, probably."

"Sure. In a little while," the son says. "I'm going to go see somebody. Peggy still lives with her parents, doesn't she?"

"Yes, she does, son. But she's married. Her husband's missing in Vietnam. You know that."

"Yeah, I know that."

"You're not thinking of seeing her, are you?" the father asks.

"Yeah, it's been years. I'll just be a little while."

"Son, I don't think you ought to. You took her marrying pretty hard. I don't think it's dead between you two yet. Wait until it's dead, son."

"Be back in a few minutes, Dad. Start the fire."

The walk to Peggy's house is short, but each step seems to take him deeper into a foreign land. The houses where Roger and Wayne and other childhood friends lived now emit Cuban speed talk and smells of frying plantains and boiling black beans, chicken and yellow rice. Small brown boys run back and forth between houses, playing some variation of cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, or perhaps, Fidel and Batista. The way to Peggy's house is easy, but the son keeps noting the location of fire hydrants, trees, odd-looking cars and houses — signs, Hansel and Gretel hints of a way back to his parents' safe-place. But the hints keep disappearing, every time he looks back for them — as if snatched away by some late afternoon power.

Then he sees Peggy's house, a yellow Spanish mini-castle, surrounded by a giant's hedge of royal palms. A large, open-air porch extends off the house and into a garden of elephant ears, hibiscus and oleander.

Peggy is on the porch. She is snapping beans. She does not see him.

"Peggy-eyes," he thinks — the name he used to call her. "Brown eyes that have somehow seen everything, eyes that see an adventure in everything, in the wind, in the rain, in every whisper of doom."

"Hello, Peggy," he says.

"Why, Larry, I can't believe it!" she says, putting the pot of beans down and running to give him a brief, stiff hug. "I haven't seen you in years. Aren't you living in Chicago still?"

"Yeah, just down for a day or two. Thought I'd see some . . . old friends."

They sit on the porch, trading do-you-remembers and watching cars on the highway turning into the late afternoon burnt-orange sun of the Everglades.

"Mom and Dad just stepped out for the grocery store," she says. "They'd love to see you. We were talking about you just the other night."

"Do you talk about me often?" he asks, his voice saying much more.

"Oh, you know, every once in awhile. Just remembering the old days."

They sit in silence. Peggy asks if he wants coffee. He says no.

"Okay, Peggy," he finally says. "I'll be honest. I can't get you out of my mind. Remember, we always said we'd get married. Remember the night of the missiles. We said we *were* married. We . . ."

"We are married, Larry. Remember. Don is somewhere in Vietnam. Remember. Your wife is . . ."

He stands up and pulls her to him. He holds her face, kissing her. He feels her teeth slightly touching his lip, the tempting touch he has never forgotten.

"There's . . . there's my parents," she finally manages to whisper.

Larry releases her, spinning around at the driveway. It is empty.

"You're just the same, aren't you Larry? A coward. That's why I didn't marry you. You're afraid. Don's somewhere in Vietnam. You made sure you got college deferments," she says, her voice rattling in anger. "You're even afraid of my parents. If you wanted me, really wanted me you wouldn't let my parents or Don or anybody stop you. You'd promise to leave your wife and you'd carry me up to bed and you'd say fuck the world, all I want is you. But you won't do that. So you'd better run home, before your mother starts calling you. Remember that, Larry? Your mother screaming, 'L-a-r-r-y, it's getting dark!' Time to go, Larry."

They stand in brief silence on the porch. Then he turns quickly to walk out of the yard. And he finds his way easily enough. But his lips burn with pain and his heart feels pierced with heavy, yellow venom, even though the sun has just dipped below the horizon.

Supper is ready and his mother is just about to stick her head out the door and call him just as he walks in. Supper is on the back porch. And the son eats much of steak and potatoes but he chews slow and carefully.

"Larry, I wish you wouldn't drink so much," his mother says after dinner.

Larry flips a cigarette butt into the dying coals of the barbecue grill. The yard is dark with only a silhouette of trees and a mound of dirt visible.

"Son, are you going home tomorrow?" the father asks. "If so, you better check on plane reservations. Maybe you can get a direct flight to Chicago."

"I've got some more digging to do. I'll get back, don't worry."

The son goes inside and returns with the portable TV. He turns it on without the sound.

"Larry, you can't hear the TV, can you?" his mother asks after a few minutes. "You want me to turn it up a little bit?"

"No. I don't want the sound on. But you can bring me another bloody bull, but leave off the hot sauce. My mouth is still burning pretty bad." He stares into the soundless screen. "Hey, look!" he says to his father. "Old Festus has his arm around Miss Kitty. I knew it. I knew it all along. Festus has been getting it from Miss Kitty — not Matt Dillon."

"Uh, have you seen this one before?" his father asks.

"No, but watch. You can figure out what's happening. Make up your own words. See. What's been happening is that every goddamn Indian in the country, maybe even Canada and Mexico too is descending on Dodge. Marshall Dillon has been scared shitless and has gone back home to Boston where his family owns a pastry shop. Now Festus and Miss Kitty figure they'll get it on 'cause Dodge is going to be turned into an ash heap."

"But, Larry, no, they're having a party. Even old Doc is up dancing," his mother says, handing him his drink.

"Well, what the hell do you expect them to do? Have a prayer meeting in the church on their last night? Say, do they even have a church in Dodge? I've never seen it," the son says.

The father is leaning into the TV screen, occasionally knocking away a mosquito. "Matt Dillon's back!" he shouts. He's joining the party!" The father looks to the son for an explanation.

"Well, yeah. Well, you see . . ." the son mumbles as the screen flashes on the list of characters. "I'll be damned."

"Uh, well, son, I think your mom and I are going to bed. See you in the morning."

The son kisses his mother goodnight. "Hey, mom, you're crying. I didn't think you still cried at these TV shows. Look, I'll see you all in the morning. I've still got some digging to do."

When they are gone, he goes out to the hole and lies down on the empty part of the blanket. At first he lies on his back watching for shooting stars. But seeing none, he puts his ear to the ground, stares into the hole and listens to the sound of rushing subterranean rivers flowing through limestone caverns and canals, leading, possibly, to some forgotten world.

He awakes the next morning, sweaty, feeling almost a sunburn. As he looks toward the house, he sees his mother moving away from a window.

"Jesus Chrst," he mumbles, the sound of mockingbirds echoing painfully through his skull. "Hey, what time is it?" he yells to the house.

His mother comes out, aproned. "It's eleven-thirty, Larry. I've got you some breakfast."

"No, I'm not hungry. Just some orange juice and coffee."

He leans over the hole. His head throbs, but he digs with the garden spade. "It must be here," he mutters. "Somehow, it's got to be here" But the day's diggings are not very productive. Some pieces of costume jewelry which look like diamonds and rubies. Some marbles — aggies, cat-eyes, jumbos and the most-prized steelsies, now transformed into large rusted ball-bearings. And more letters, all written on yellow, broad-lined school paper in fat pencil strokes and angular crayon markings. There are accounts of hated friends, bloody noses, misadventures, and cruel teachers wielding corporal punishment.

And finally, he brings out the last bits and pieces. The last is the biggest, an old knapsack which tears easily as retrieved from the hole. Inside, there is an old, khaki-painted WWII spotlight complete with a rusted, green-corroded battery cube. There is also a cigarbox filled with gold-painted rocks and, of course, a note.

February 12, 1951

The men from outer space are coming. Toby and Wayne and Wheeler and I are making plans. We have blocked the back alley and built a secret clubhouse. Nobody can get in it except us. We talked about it in school today. Somebody saw flying saucers last night. We are hiding our gold and our secret signal light. And if they come, we'll try to defend the neighborhood. And if we can't we'll hide in the clubhouse. And they'll never find us. But we're all scared.

Larry sits on the blanket, surveying the diggings. "Not a clue," he thinks. "Not one clue to my fucked-up life. Except maybe Peggy. Peggy-eyes." And again his lip pains and his chest sours. "Goddamn orange juice," he thinks.

His father walks out to the excavation. "How's it going son?"

"Okay, I guess. I sure had a lot of shit in that hole."

They both look down at the pile of boxes, trinkets, toys and letters.

"Not a clue. Not one clue," the son whispers and he looks about the yard. His eyes stop on the giant ficus tree. He smiles. "Hey, remember when we planted that tree. Carried it home in an eggcan in the back seat of the car. Now you couldn't carry it away in a railroad car. And will you look!" He walks over to the tree, pointing to long marks on the trunk. "Remember when I tried to cut it down with that little plastic saw of mine, 'cause it was starting to get big and I was afraid it would attract the lightning."

"Yeah," the father says with a smile. "You almost got it, but I stopped you."

"I'm glad. It turned out to be a beautiful tree, even if it still attracts lightening. Don't you worry sometimes about hurricanes knocking it into the house?"

"Not really," the father says. "It's got some deep roots. They aim for the septic tank—or at least they used to. We put in one of those steel-lined tanks a few years ago. Now the roots probably go down into the underground stream you can hear. Maybe that's why it's grown so much in the last year."

"Well, I guess I better fill up this hole," the son says. He begins kicking at the pile on the blanket. Drying sand falls off with a hiss. "You know, Dad, maybe there is a clue. You know, like with those guys who study anthropology and archaeology. They spend their lives digging up splintered skulls and pictures of monsters on cave walls and pieces of villages and people struck by volcanoes and earthquakes and fires. And then do you know what they do? They take the pieces of human fear and come to us and say, 'Look, we've been afraid ever since Adam. We've created dance and music and jokes and play and gods and mythologies to make sense of our fear. And yet, we're still here! In spite of everything.'"

"Never thought of it, son. Never did."

"Yeah. And maybe that's it," the son says. He takes out a pen and a small piece of paper from his wallet and begins writing.

August 27, 1972

I am afraid; therefore I exist. I am afraid of not existing, therefore I have nothing to fear. Be back in ten years.

He begins shoveling things from the blanket back into the hole until all that is left out is the snake jar and the cigar box of gold rocks. He throws the jar over the back fence and it almost magically bursts on a rock or tree trunk. Then he puts his latest letter in the cigar box and gently places it in the hole which is soon filled with dirt. And with a last attempt to pound the soil back into place, the son breaks the silver-tipped shovel.

"Uh, it was old, son, don't worry about it."

"Sure, okay. Say, dad, do you remember that little bar, the Lucky Shoe, near the race track? Remember, the place where all the jockies went and I was afraid to drink cokes with you there 'cause I was afraid I would catch their disease and not grow?"

"Yeah, sure, it's still there. I go in there to get racing tips. Why?"

“Let’s go up there and get a couple of beers. I don’t think I have to be afraid anymore,” he says, smiling, as his father looks up to him.

They start out the back gate which rings from the rusty bell tied to it, a warning from invaders, but also a warning of escape.

“Where are you two going,” his mother yells after them. “You’re not going out to drink are you? It’s too early to drink and neither of you have eaten a thing. That’s how alcoholism begins, you know!”

“Hey, mom, call the airport and get me a plane leaving before sunset,” the son says. “I feel like flying into the sunset. Hey, and get me first class,” he yells. “You get free drinks,” he whispers to his father.

§ § § § §

TO BECKY, THE BLONDE

there was a rose ripening beside the road.
i drove by too quickly to know how yellow smells,
too slowly to forget those rounded petals
or this empty lapel.

— *Tom Kerr*



AT NOTHING'S UP

The general's chipped blind
by ignorant woodpeckers.
The sun's the hottest act in town.
Cigarettes doze under anemic moustaches.
Ladies flirt with parking meters.
Nothing's up. Magnolias sleep,
and the pawky streets unwind
toad frogs, snakedoctors, milk
barns. Something seemed possible
once, at the end of the war,
when the women's arms opened like grocery stores.
Something actually happened here:
murders electrocutions . . . Now, all
day, we are what we are, events

with torn shirtsleeves, shy pederasts,
repetitionists who pop up accumbent
to watermelons in the photographs
the girls from Washington take north.
At night, way out in the country,
we do not understand our illnesses,
and turn into dark houses.

— *Rodney Jones*

THE STEER THAT ATE THE MOON

She's the one. You lie
down and water curls up
around you like a tulip.

Whoever she was before
now she's another story.
When the two of you

exchange calendars
you are the one shortchanged.
You hold hands like diamonds

only to discover
your knuckles bruised
and pitiful. You never

guessed loving her would
prove so dangerous. Point
blank it is a lot

like extracting glass
from the genitals of a
tiger. She's the one

alright, sent you packing
dated stuff, and then off
to that godawful farm

by the lake. Notice how
she eats the babka from
your soul, leaving nothing

but wrappers, and how
there's no time left to play
the upright. Look. The steer

in the lot is eating the moon.
Now you see it. How
could you have overlooked

the gremlin in her hair,
the microphone in her panties.
Loving you, loving you

she gives you roses and
water on the knee. For her
you hold out the soda

that doesn't fizz. You
bring her something fat
and intriguing. Someone

else is out of the question.
Too late to lie or give
off an odor, so you hold

her like a breath of smoke
and blow out misery
like laughter. You smile.

All your affairs are over.

— *Rodney Jones*

A CURE FOR SHAPES

It is an event like any other.
He'll push his childhood
Back inside his navel
Like a boat.

He'll owe up
To his touchy relationship
With the vegetables
And the procedure will not frighten him.

It will be as if a bird
Had stepped from a cartoon
Into a stranger's living room.

He'll leave his color-famished girl
Drowning in a brown rocker
And climb up his father's trousers.

There the skin will ask of the skin,
What are you here for
Unless to experience pain?
He'll be disposed
To wait days for an answer.

Then he'll crawl wearily into his mother,
Without notions his hands implausible,
His little feet twitching like backscratchers
In the hands of an elderly and incompetent nurse.

Soon he'll become accustomed
To waving goodbye to himself.

Often the radio will be playing
The clouds darkening over the houses,
And he will lean against a tree, sweating.

He will invent
Wheels and complicated prayers like excuses
and he will believe them.

It will be a task, adjusting the landscape.
Form will be an occupation like hunger
And he will go in and out of the towns

Until there are no towns.
Then he will walk the trails
That the animals have left
Looking for his own image
That he will not recognize.

It will be hard to get by.
He will leave a note in the garbage, explaining.

— *Rodney Jones*

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— *Rodney Jones*

THE RAZOR

The razor glimmers like a mountain lake at sunset,
veneered with a smooth icy blade.
It is warm, hot with beds of chyle spuming
as warm and oily as sunburnt bodies
lying on pores of a white sandy beach.
The mirror lake thaws and overflows into rivers
that run to oceans to mix with a final salty kiss.

Old steel blades make new steel vessels
that knife through the ocean's surface,
staining its way with the vermillion foam,
which is innocent and living as a womb.
Love, herself, was born from such lather;
others have died in her place:
soldiers of Rome, ladies of the scalpel,
hairy beings, soon to be scalpless cadavers.

The razor falls in reverberation, a metallic echo —
its red reflection in the porcelain pool
beside the mirrored crimson orbs forfeiting their shine.
They look deep into the graves of black brine
of Nepenthe, the glimmering, fluid-like metallic
blade that surfaces from the dark abyssal
chasm that was once a calm sea of backbone.
The husband-corpse lies in a dream with duel slits.

Such is the ironical razor of the surface slice,
painful, yet not so unbearable as the lady of the home,
who places the blade ever so carelessly back on its shelf,
stamped with her name, her face, carelessly the uniqueness of herself.
She disposes of the event as casually as the razor
in a cement cellar with the bowling trophies and the stone
She will relax in a tub, warm and wet on her spine,
and await a new soldier, another trophy, another man with a razor.

—Ralph Gerald Nelms

TO MARGARITE

If in your low rooms you live
Less than content but filling
Nevertheless, your airy days
With bric-a-brac new to the touch
To be nearer to your lovely old things,
You know you have your ways
As always; knowing how much
Is too much. You know how to give.

I love it mostly when you sing
A spare snatch for comfort, as hushed
Sometimes you fear yourself to be
Stray music to a roughened ear;
Your men like negro children bussed
To greener pastures just to see
How short they fall; I like you near.

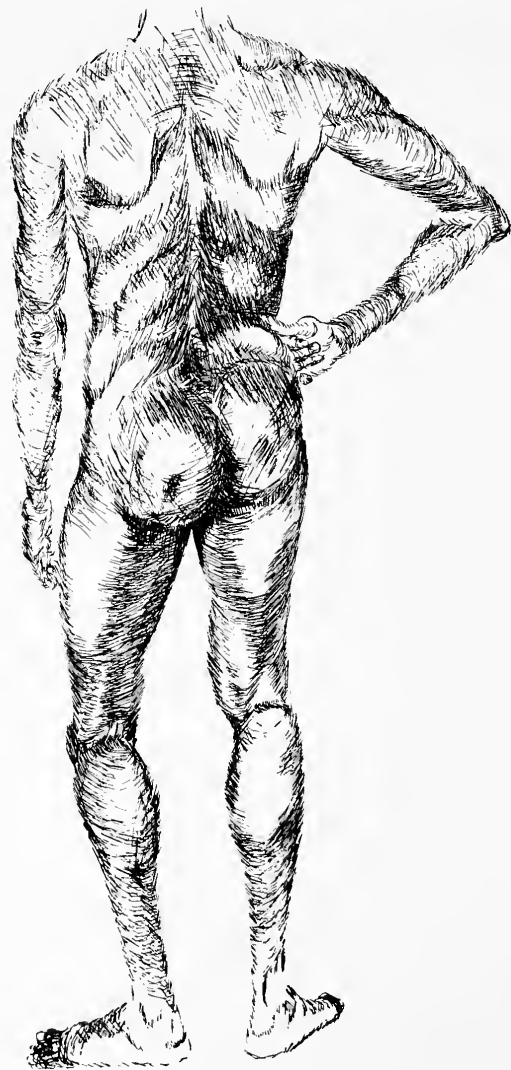
You know me vain
And flimsy; fast, a butterfly
That's not yet under glass, oh just . . .
A Red Admirable stain
Lost amid the rising must
In other people's houses.

My

Goodness me, how fearfully effete
These people are to sling their stones
At you.

There are men
Of another kidney, men you'll meet,
And then you'll shuck these groans
And sighs. We'll meet again
Too, and I'll praise your eyes
As always; lift your chin until
It finds its proper angle.

— *Gregory Jerozal*



Coin of the Realm

DONALD MAXWELL

No, it wasn't so easy, but it wasn't hard, either. Not the way everybody thinks, anyhow. Maybe it was because it wasn't the first time. And then I had this big plastic bag that Marcelene's crib mattress came in — I had it there to keep from messing everything up — and I turned it inside out, so that the baby and everything was inside. It never even made any noise at all, just one sort of cough, so my mother never knew. Then, after a while, I stuffed in the towels and tied a knot in the bag. In the morning — I went to sleep after that — in the morning I took the rest of the towels and untied the bag and put them inside and tied it up again. Then I didn't know what to do with it, so I just hid it in this chest my brother made in his shop class. It's made of cedar wood. I put some blankets on top of it. It didn't take up much room, just the towels did. I thought I'd do something with it — take it somewhere — but I just never got around to it. That's how my mother came to find it. There must have been a hole in the bag, or maybe I didn't get it tied tight enough. I just never could think of a place to take it, that's all.

I had to go to work that day — it was Friday, thank God, so I had the weekend coming. I sure didn't want to, but I had to, to keep everybody from suspecting anything. I don't think anybody ever did guess, at least not until they read it in the newspaper. It was on TV, too, my mother said. It was lucky they let us sit on stools at that bank because I never could have stood up all day. As it was, I had to go to the bathroom about every half hour. This other girl that works there, Gladys,

she kept asking me if I was all right, but I told her I was having a real bad period. She gave me some of her pills. She was real nice to me that day, but most of the time we didn't get along so good. She and her boyfriend used to give me a ride home sometimes, when my car was in the shop, but I never thought they were real happy about it. And to tell the truth, I never did like her too much, either. But she was nice to me that day and she didn't even know what was wrong. You never can tell about some people, can you? But that's what I liked about the bank — everybody was nice to everybody, even if they didn't really like them. Not like some places, where they're always yelling at you to hurry up with the order and you have to punch in on time or they take it out of your pay. And it's nice at the bank because you get to handle all that money and count it as many times as you want, no matter how long it takes, and nobody says a word. I used to have a bank when I was little that a friend of my mother's gave me once. It was a piggy bank, only it was made like a barrel and it said "Save for a rainy day" on it. Every time he came to visit he'd give me some money to put in it. And then I'd go in the other room and shake all the coins out on the bed and count them. Sometimes I'd count them all right up, and sometimes I'd put all the quarters together and count them, and then all the dimes and count them, and all the nickles, and all the pennies. I don't guess they'll want me back at the bank now, after this, even if they let me go.

Well, I finally made it through the day, but it took all the napkins I brought with me and half of the bank's paper towels. I had to stop at the store on the way home and get some more, and I just made it to the bathroom when I got home. I told my mother I was sick, so she kept Marcelene busy until she went to sleep, and I went to bed right after supper. Marcelene isn't so much trouble now, but when she was a baby she was real colicky. She used to cry all night, every night of the world. And she'd never take more than a couple of ounces at a time, so I had to be feeding her about every hour or so. I used to feel so sorry for her when she cried, I'd cry right along with her.

I'm real sorry about the bank. That's the one place I've worked that I've ever liked, and now they probably won't want me back. Well. I don't care, I'd do it again. One's enough trouble without having another one to take care of. Poor Marcelene. I never thought anybody'd ever find out. And even if they did, who's going to mind, really. It wasn't ever really alive. It never cried just sort of coughed a little, and then I put it in the bag, and that's all there was to it. I don't see why everybody got so upset. Especially my mother. When she opened up that chest and found it I bet she had a fit. It was starting to smell a bit — that's probably how she found it, by the smell — but I don't think it was all that strong. It's funny, I used to smell it myself, but I never got around to doing anything about it. You'd think I would have got rid of it right away, but I sort of just kept putting it off. I just couldn't think of where to take it, that's all. It's funny because

nobody ever knew at all. I used to wear a girdle all the time that was a small. It was real hard getting into it, but it sure did the job — made me look just like always. Gladys even said once how much weight I was losing. You know, I don't think it was ever meant to live, anyway. I mean, I never did really show, even without the girdle. Before I had Marcelene I was as big as a house. My brother Johnnie — he's in the army now — he used to say I swallowed a watermelon seed and it took root and grew. But this time it never showed at all. Even my mother didn't know.

I suppose everybody thinks I'm bad for this, but I just couldn't have another one. I mean, I love Marcelene, but even so. And the funny thing was, it hardly hurt at all. You'd think it'd be impossible, wouldn't you, for somebody to do the whole thing herself with nobody to help. It isn't, though. I just made up my mind that I wasn't going to yell or scream, no matter what, and I didn't. With Marcelene, I yelled all the time. My mother told me she could hear me all the way out in the waiting room, but I don't believe her. I don't remember it so well, though, because they gave me something. I do remember hearing Marcelene, though. She started to cry as soon as she come out — the doctor didn't have to spank her at all — and she kept right on crying until they took her away to the nursery. But this one didn't ever cry, just that one little cough is all. And it was smaller than she was, too, so I guess the whole thing was easier this time. One thing's for sure — I didn't have those stitches in me this time. I don't know why they cut you like that, anyway. I didn't tear a bit, so it was a big waste. And I didn't have to shave, either. Being shaved is the worst of all. It makes you feel naked, like a little girl, and then it itches. For weeks it itches, till you think you'll go out of your mind.

BACK DRINKING

If the bottle has taught me
any one lesson
it has taught me
all moons are the same.
I have pulled over on
many nights
by the side of the road
to pee
and stood with a light
I knew at that very instant
was welcoming the beetle's
wife home.
Was removing the shutters
from every frog's throat
that thought even slightly
about croaking
while saying to the field's
washwoman
we are all the same
and that I should get
back in my car
and ride.

— *James Bardon*

POEM FOR HOWARD MOSS

Emotion cramps into your poems like a small tide.
Call it the controlled directives of a warmer heart.
A valved metaphor that may open or close
Like a ribbed radiator adjusting its steam
Or a window someone happened to shut against the cold.
It's probably not even that interesting
But you want us to try. You believe some conditions
Demand our eye or as you would say "the phatic
Assessment in the understated concern." Poems usually
Do that sort of thing. Yours tell us
That the sea looms like a necessary
Agreement between the clouds and land
While tossing tiny discrepancies if the wind
Disturbs it in storm or birds
Reach out in thinness to their
Prefaced shadows below.
While across this believable water
Someone will wake from his common dream
To prepare a meal. Being breakfast. Eggs.
Realizes the sun pouring its simple vision
Into darker imperatives of speech
And love falling in and out with neighbors
Down the street.

— *James Bardon*

THE ERROR IN THE EPITAPH

The old woman sighed when she died and died in
The bed she's spent a lifetime in;
Asleep on nights when the seas were low,
Awake on nights when the winds were high,
Alone on nights when the light on the fog flashed by,
And the foghorns groaned at being alone,
And the breakers were cold as they rolled in.

They laid her down in a graveyard where
Over half of the stones bore her family name.
She'd seen many mounds of loose sand raised up there
By the sexton's spade and blown flat by the wind.
And as time passed, the sand of her grave did the same.

The sand of her grave as it settled, was blown,
Revealed the words she'd desired on the stone.
They said, the Christian course is run.
Ended is the glorious strife,
Fought the fight, the work is done,
Death has swallowed up the life.

But even as the mourner's turned to go,
The error in the epitaph was clear.
Before they came, before they left, when they were gone
The work could never end but only carry on.
And so it has through long successive years.
And so it does as strangers pause to puzzle out
The dim sand-blasted messages on stone.

So underground, bent back into a bow,
The woman lies and grins without
The benefit of skin, which long ago
Was leeched away by the many mouths.
Her atoms, which she knew nothing about,
Are now dispersed through the ground and ground water.

She is the cricket on the leaf, the leaf,
Subterranean in worms, aerobes and
Anaerobes, diffused throughout the porous earth,
Infused into the diet of the reef,
Aloft on nights when the seawind is high and thin,
Alight on nights when the light strikes the sea and land,
Alive when the sea birds cry and the sea gives birth,
And at home in the cold constant waves that roll in.

— *H. Keith Monroe*

WHAT DOES THE DREAMING FETUS DREAM?

Science has discovered movements of the sleeping eye.
When rapid, dreams are what they signify.
Thin electrodes introduced in unborn brains
Of children, floating — pastel — in the amniotic sea,
Have produced an unsuspected mystery.
The sightless eyes of larval humans
Dance in time to the established theme.
What does the dreaming fetus dream?

Is it contemplation of another life's finale
These about-to-be-reincarnated creatures see?
Does the moment of birth correspond
To the death of a body previously occupied?
As they sway gently on their liquid ride,
Do the unborn live elsewhere, kick out when they feel pain?
And do the dying know when birth is near downstream?
What does the dreaming fetus dream?

Some say that, as the embryonic life metamorphoses and grows —
Recapitulates the evolution the species had to undergo,
So the visions, likewise, allow the unborn to be
Now protazoa, fishy slug, true fish, reptilian worm;
Now tailed amphibian, a rodent, now a thing with primate form.
Is it this viscous history that owns the fetal mind
And its remembrance that makes the newborn infant scream?
What does the dreaming fetus dream?

No one, it may be, will ever learn what transpires in
The grotto where each one of us begins.
Thus, the way is clear to speculate. And so,
Why may the dreams of fetuses not be previews
Of lives they soon will be born to?
Similarly, may not our own dark dreams
And dream-like lives perplex and haunt our heirs
As we are puzzled by those of our fetal forebears?
Why not? We know we are not end, but means,
And so perhaps should ask of our own dreams:
What does the dreaming fetus dream?

— *H. Keith Monroe*

THE GOVERNOR'S MAZE

From here I can see the weathercock
Frozen green atop the tallest spire,
Atop the tower that holds the clock.
And, though the tower is not in view,
I know the four-faced clock is there —
Looks one way in the carriage drive
And two ways on the mansion's wings,
A fourth way toward this hedge maze where
I occupy one avenue.

This maze has walls which are alive
And corridors which may fatigue,
And therefore now and then along
The geometric paths a bench appears.
On one I sit as the tower's chime
Recalls to me the world of time,
As the passing of a bird in song
Reminds the eye by ear of speed.
The outside's known by what one hears.

But one shouldn't enter the Governor's maze
If one has an interest in outside things,
For a few small sounds and fragrances
Are all that reach the ear and nose;
And the weathercock and the vacant sky

Are all one has to instruct the eye
Save the blue-green twelve-foot walls of shrub.
The interior of the Governor's maze
Is meant for senses the five oppose.

Time here has nothing to do with time pieces.
Seasons blend into timeless seasons
As fire and water melt into snow.
Likewise, there only are forms to see here,
And forms mean nothing when viewed alone. Since, then,
The outside of the maze may not be known,
And since there's nothing graspable within,
The empty maze may stay, secure from reason,
As empty yet as crowded as a mirror.

I sit surrounded by the maze,
Within the turnings of its paths.
My mind reflects the shrubbery walls,
The weathercock, and someone's laugh;
Reflects it all, is not involved.
The Governor's maze behaves the same.
In everything the emptiness reclines
As I do in the maze's corridors
Which I percieve are straight, unravelled lines.

— *H. Keith Monroe*

THE DEDICATION

All your life
you've been a
chicken-boner
for the Campbell's
Soup factory in
town, and now
we all know cancer
is cutting
away at your
meat, separating
light from dark,
something you
did especially well.
Tonight, all of
us gathered around
your deathbed, kith
and kin,
dedicate this
bingo game to
you. (Everyone
agreed you should
be allowed
to play three
cards at once.)

—John Blackard

NIGHT RAIN

With the heat sweating out sleep
And every cell sucking for water,
It has gotten so I can't
Travel at night without the rain.

The wind curses in a sudden gust,
But, sick in the soft parts,
I can't rise to the challenge.
When the rain starts, the wipers

Slap me back to life.

The night rain sizzles me
Down the empty highway, lying
Locked between the fields of black grass
Like a self-inflicted wound.

For miles after passing through
The small towns and their spasms of light
A scab of foxfire is scored
On the back of my eyelids.

I follow it until it disappears.

— *Andrew Hudgins*



The Passing of Rice Sausage

HUGO HILDEBRANDT

He was in an easy grace. There were daffodils now, waving in the sun, bending to the right under the push of a west wind. There were mountains all around him; the passes were choked with snow and the snow was covered with the tracks of a dozen different wintertime animals. He sat alone in a field; cattle grazed in the far distance, and pigs, just beneath the shadow of one of the white mountains. He felt so pleasant in his body that he sat back and named colors, read books. Work had no existence; it was gone. He was a king of sorts, but he had no subjects. He grinned and wondered about various futures he could have when Helen arrived.

Outside, in the plant, Ernest was supervising the making of Polish sausage. Ernest could make it as well as anyone alive. The odor of fresh sausage crept through the cracks in the old door and jumped onto his lap. It came to him as a child to its father. He was not its father, though; his grandfather was, who once sold it step by step, door-to-door in the rain. His grandfather was a man who owned legends, dead twenty-two years now. The old ones in the plant said that he had been the smartest man who ever was, and that his son, who died before his time, had probably been the second smartest. He was so smart, they said, that he knew exactly what you were going to say long before you even thought about saying it. He was smart about business too. Such a small man, and how he could tell anyone what to do and they would do it. They had been afraid of his grandfather, but they were not afraid of him; they called him by his first name. They would not

have called his grandfather or his father by their first names if they had gone down on their knees and demanded it.

The door to the office opened. There had been no knock. Ernest walked in.

"Richard, the first batch is done." He spoke with a German accent.

"Good."

"Richard, I'm sorry to hear that Helen's so ill."

He nodded his head. "We just have to wait and see and hope for the best." Ernest left.

The phone rang. "I'll tell the bookkeeper," he said and hung up.

He pictured a fat man, a fat man in a car, a Cadillac, a smart man, driving from store to store shaking hands with all his managers. They were all his people now, he explained to the nervous managers, but there was nothing to worry about. The man's hair was black and greasy, his suit fitted his body like a glove, a doeskin glove, very soft. He did not smoke cigars, but he kept a supply of them, some smuggled in from Cuba. He had never had a mistress. The man was indeed smart: he was deserving of all his riches.

The daffodils began to flutter. He counted them: there were six rows of seven just outside the limit of shade set by a maple tree. Helen sat under the tree, gray haired, tall even when sitting. He watched her eyes play with the snow on the mountains, making little drifts, causing harmless avalanches. She giggled, then she dictated her wedding vows in a musical chant. He was in the tree watching her. They had always loved one another. The air was warm and it smelled like gingerbread. Then Helen was a baby and was wearing diapers. Small, white, crackly, starched diapers. He smiled and felt dizzy. After a while the dizziness hurt.

The floor in the office was old and stained. The desk his grandfather had used was closed and locked; it had not been opened in many years. He looked at it, squeezing his eyebrows. It should be burned, he wanted it to be burned. At least it should be taken away to a closet and put away forever. Among other things, it was out of style. There were no secrets in it, his grandfather had been a very straightforward man.

Ernest came in. He laid a piece of sausage on his desk. Ernest was angry, his pink cheeks had become a deep red.

"Phil's Deli sent it back. The whole batch they made last night must be ruined!"

He looked at it; the edges of the casing were discolored.

"Smith put too much preservative in the mixture, Ernest." He would have to speak to Smith.

"Will you please say something to that man? Your grandfather would have fired him months ago. He should be thrown out on his ear!" Ernest left, not quite slamming the door.

Ernest, he told himself, you sometimes forget that Smith is a shop steward. My grandfather would fire *you*, for calling me Richard. Don't you know that Smith hates you because you make him work so hard? Everyone under you hates you. Please, go eat your boiled and salted pigs feet. Go drive your new wide-track Pontiac. Go watch your people: Simski has just taken the one they call Fat Alice upstairs and is this minute screwing her by the piles of cardboard boxes. Go to hell.

He hated the old ones, the stupid ones who begged to be kept on after retirement to work-work-work. They would come into his office, sometimes showing real tears, and beg to be kept on part-time. He would have to say no most of the time, for it was impractical and the union did not like it, and then they would start on him about his father or his grandfather, who had first hired them when they were boys. They all drove beautiful wide-track Pontiacs now. His grandfather knew what he was doing, it was not just sympathy for another who was foreign-born, he hired them knowing that they would work hard for him forever. And they knew all the old recipes, all the old skills; they ate the stuff themselves, his grandfather would say. The best worker in the world, his father would say, is the son of an Austrian or Polish farmer who cannot speak the language.

You descend the stairs about eleven o'clock, drink in hand, covered and furry to protect yourself from the cold. It is gray, but clear. You know a hundred dirty songs now and you are prepared to sing them all. You smell the hotdogs as they are gulped and dropped by the people walking alongside of you. Cutting across the brown grass is the quickest way, you take it, sniffing the air as you trot, not walk. The liquor must be hidden; it must stay hidden until the seats are filled in the stadium. Even as you watch the gray skies and the colors of the scarves the girls are wearing you know the pleasure may never be beaten. It may snow during the game. Everyone will collect snow on the brims of their gray hats. You look down and see an ocean of topcoats. The sky will be gray, the color of the walls of a monstrous office building after it has been rained upon. But the jerseys will stay blue, they will run for daylight if there is but one slimy crack of it. They find it; they win. All the white streamers can't begin to justify it. Grandfather, sitting on the fifty yard line, will grin-- all those strong young boys will soon be hard at work forever. No, it won't do; Grandfather ruins even that.

Helen was up from beneath the tree and picking daffodils in a mindless manner. She wore yellow; she was pregnant. He liked the looks of her, the bulge; he liked the way her eyes, very warm, never missed a movement in the trees behind her.

He saw his mother's favorite cleaning woman. She was as old as he remembered her. She was like his grandfather -- and his grandfather had loved to speak with her in Polish or German. He

remembered her eyes when they spoke; they were as bright as his grandfather's pocket watch. He always inquired about her family still in Europe. The hair was dirty, filmy brown, streaked with gray, long, tied in a bun. She wore the same faded blue dress, the same black shoes. The face was cracked with ruts; it looked as if it had been scratched by a million ants. She looked weak, but when he was a child, when she was middle-aged, when his father was a young man, she could lift the dining room sofa and retrieve his ball — when his father could not. But now she was smoking a filtered cigarette and holding a whiskey sour on the rocks and she had the manner of a granddaughter. She was sitting in his grandfather's chair, flicking ashes on the carpet.

"Your children were brats," she said.

"You used to make them slippers when my mother brought them to your house. You made them out of wool. Once, you made them for me."

"I remember it well."

"You are remembered very fondly."

"Your mother ruined you. Your wife has ruined your children. You know that bitch came with your mother once to my house and when I poured the children wine she poured the wine on my flowers. She thought I didn't see. I'll bet your house is dirty now. Your wife kept house like a pig. I used to hose down your father's porch every morning."

"That was tradition; it wasn't needed."

"There are too many windows in your new house. It's not dark enough."

Empty. Children gone for several years. One was dead. His grandfather had lived so long that all his children had died before him. Just he and Helen. Now Helen was very sick. He thought of the mountains: nothing matters but that rain wash all the flowers clean of sun once a day, in the mountains there should be sunshine to melt snow and cause harmless avalanches. Helen could watch over it. She had traded dresses; she wore blue now. But she looked as she was—past fifty, her hair grayer than his own underneath her treatments.

The fat man in the Cadillac had a son at Northwestern who was studying to become a doctor. It was a very sensible idea. He had a son who was a dentist. His grandfather would have liked the fat man, even though he told dirty jokes and lived in the style of a Maharajah and played golf. They were both smart men—after all, they were both in business. Of course his grandfather did not know how things had changed, how the business and the people had changed. Perhaps he would be powerless now. They wouldn't stand for it, the unions and all. He wouldn't know what to do. But he was smart; he was supposed to know what people would say before they had even thought of saying it.

They had not liked Helen, none of them had: not his parents, his grandfather, or any of the others. His grandfather had conspired with his father to somehow remove her from his mind. The two of them worked well together, they were so much alike. His mother had been with them too, even his feeble-minded grandmother. If they had the chance, they would torment her for a thousand sins: she had raised sloppy, spoiled children who did not know the value of *anything*, who had no interest in business, who were lazy, who had abandoned their religion, who would burn in hell as atheists. They could not speak the language either. They did not even possess a phrase or two to be used in greetings, farewells, and at weddings. He could not speak it anymore either; he had taken pleasure in forgetting it.

Ernest was there again.

"Richard, they are behind over in shipping. We got to get that stuff out. Those deliveries are due in an hour."

He couldn't move.

"Promise them a half hour break." He looked up at Ernest, but he was already gone.

He must find a healthier past. Ernest could drive his wide-track Pontiac into the sky and will his savings account to his nephew who would use the money to buy himself a Corvette with every option. Ernest would find his own special kind of darkness. Ernest still thought that his nephew's family ate lockshencken, bratwurst, blood sausage, pigs feet, headcheese, beef tongue, blood tongue, kielbasi, rice sausage, pepper loaf and Dutch loaf every day of their lives. But they did not; he knew it. Such things were brought out and set on the table only when Great Uncle Ernest was there. Ernest probably wondered why his nephew's children did not wolf down their blood sausage at first opportunity; after all, he had supervised the making of the stuff. What they ate were beef roasts, grilled steaks, turkey, roast chicken, hamburgers, and leg of lamb. The best cuts. The family ate out a lot, and when they did they ate at Chinese restaurants or French restaurants. Ernest had never been inside a Chinese restaurant in his life. The nephew could afford it; he was an architect now. The delicacies Ernest felt himself justified in bringing home from the plant to give to his nephew's family were probably given to neighbors as interesting and colorful examples of European art and industry.

Well, he ate roast beef twice a week; his children had been raised on it. They had grown up not knowing what headcheese was: nothing but fat, spices, gelatin, skin, leftover pork, a few scraps of beef. It was originally made many many years ago by people who could not afford to eat much of anything else. But it was terrible stuff. Good beef was what people wanted now. Every year they sold less and less of it. There was only one man now, an old German, who knew how to make it

properly. Really, its passing would be no loss to the world.

Helen had been immune to it all; they had hated her for it, he had loved her for the same reason. She had irritated them constantly and she had not even known that she was doing so. The way she had pinched the cheeks of their children and her own. She liked lobster. She wore her hair short. She wanted a mink coat — he gave her one. She liked hotels, restaurants, cocktail dresses, ballroom dancing, golf, the country club. Going downtown to spend money on hats, dresses, and clothes the children did not need was a pleasure she could hardly contain. He had had an uncle once who had been proud of the fact that he had not been downtown in nearly twenty years. Helen had been shocked, really shocked; she felt sorry for him. He liked those things too. He was not as innocent of them as she was, but then she had not been born into the same things he had been. She was fifty-three and she was still a poor girl given the keys to the five and ten. The way the glasses at the bar always sparkled, the dark friendly face of the barman, the carpets thick, almost moist, the hardness and sharpness of the oak walls: the country club, a most exciting, wonderful place. His grandfather would have lectured him on foolishness, his father would have uttered a rare obscenity, if they had known that he had joined a country club, that he sometimes spent weekday afternoons playing golf. But they had no idea how pleasant it sometimes could be. They had worked him too hard when he was a boy — he had lost all taste for it.

They could have a small town there, lifted up to the top of a mountain. The land would be like big creases in overalls below them. In the rooms of their house would be all manner of books and pictures. The air would not smell of darkness and smoked meat, but rather of the mixture of milk poured over raspberries and the cleanness of green fairways on a bright morning. They could stay as they were, middle-aged, and live content forever. No, they could not. He did not like most of the people he knew there. If there were a small town and a country club, the fat man in the Cadillac would prance in — no, he would glide in — with his son, a doctor now. After a while the fat man would complain that there were no men around like his grandfather. His grandfather would leave his grave, they would meet, they would have long talks together. They would exclude him. And Helen would get along with the fat man and his son. He had drive, she would say. But she was innocent; she really didn't know him. She might laugh at his jokes, but she would not really know him at all. It would be better to be alone: just stars, bookshelves, fairways, and Helen.

Ernest was there again, irritated.

"What now, Ernest?"

"I've got next week's order list from Lucas Brothers." He waved a handful of computer sheets. "Down again this week." He shook his black head.

"Well, Ernest, we'll have to put something on special."

"We can't. We haven't made enough of anything to do that."

"I'll call Sam Lucas."

Ernest was gone.

Sam Lucas, the proud young owner of thirty-one grocery stores who also drove a Cadillac. He was like the fat man — but he was thin. He looked at the phone on his desk; it was black, white letters—it smelled of something. The phone had a kind of magic he would never possess.

He must find the proper cloistering somewhere. Helen had the only key, for he could do nothing alone. He could sit beside her and smell the golf sweat which did not smell, touch the red and blue dress she wore to church on Sundays, open eyes that a fake shallowness made bright and innocent. He worried for her safety, for his own, if she should die. She would become a ghost, like his father, like his grandfather. She would become the same as they were. The years would become yellowish, tinged. He would live lonely, with only intruding memories that spoke harsh, like the telephone. They needed to have the best time — now — to themselves. He could not fall back down to the early life. He needed a good, strong, four-square shield. Also a lance, and a rag to use both to polish and to smear.

He stood up from his desk, tossed down a sharpened pencil, and walked over to a window. It was late afternoon. The sun lightly touched the old houses across the street. The air felt warm. He put his hand to his shirt collar and began to loosen his tie. They could pack snowballs to throw at one another. They could stand in the snow and look down at the others and heave snowballs onto the tops of their heads. Then laugh together. He saw her beneath the tree, the ridiculous flowers across a patch of grass. She was exactly as she was. He did not want her young, like a daughter. They could tease about cold sores. They could play golf on Thursday mornings. They could drink from the silvery, smiling glasses in the bar. She would need him, too, as she always did when the hurts from snubs and a dead child made little pricks into her heart. There could be an everlasting joy, but if she left him now there would just be a slimy forever for him in the murky palaces his grandfather had built. He would sink into the family curse, an emblem for intelligence, for work, for frowns. They would swallow her up.

Ernest came into the room. He was so mad he was crying.

§ § § § §

DECEIVED

one warm wind wounded me worse
than winter ever will . . .
an indian summer in december
left me trembling in thin linen,
with no one to weave me woolens.

— *Tom Kerr*



