

Their Spirits Collide

February 28, 2020

Oh! Almost collided—did they not?—as they rose
Up from—well, what *now* would you call it,
Besides ‘the dead’?—

He with a spleen full of flint and dogwood
The other with lung and heart pierced with lead.
And yet, no collision, strangely enough,
But rather almost a kind of merging
As each swerved into the other to leave
The junegrass hills and the Big Horn surging.

But oh, a vastly unlikely merger this:

He, the Cheyenne, who was leaving behind
All the things that once mattered to him:
A death-stake and tether; a coup-stick and bow,
A handful of scalplocks, that once had much meaning
Until the hand that held was forced to let go
And still from behind the dread white of that mask,
Still from behind its fearless black bars
Eyes that keep searching now...
...longing to know.

And those eyes, what had they seen?
Oh, he would tell you,
If you might dare to ask:
“A blue pack of devils of Chivington’s breed,
Throwing torches into the villagers’ homes
And shooting whatever fled for the weeds:
Women and children, the old and infirm,
Our young men and warriors being off on a hunt.
I stood on the bluff, wide-eyed with rage,
Gripping my Grandfather’s hand till it ached,
And cursing the turncoat Crow and Osage
Who had fired more rounds than the bluecoats that day.”

And the other? A lieutenant of the 7th Corps
Rising now, fleeing with astonishing swiftness
With no hesitation, not even a glance
At what was now lying behind in the grass:
A thoroughly empty and motionless uniform
That no medals or crosses of hammered brass
No ribbons or epaulets of twisted braid
Would ever animate again,
Now that honor and valor and spirit had drained
Through the deep-red portals that the flint had made.

And what brought him here,
 You would ask, if you could.
 “My father raised rye on that stretch of high ground
 Where the Sinker Creek swerves and flows into the Snake.
 My mother and I shivered ‘neath the timbered floor
 Watching through cracks in the cellar wall
 As Hunkpapa raiders ran him down in the yard,
 And then, ruthlessly lashing him to a stake,
 Riddled his torso with shaft after shaft
 And then, with his screaming reduced to a moaning,
 They knelt down and painted themselves with his gore.”

But now!—oh, now!
 Now as the orifice opens wide
 Exposing a vista that expands without end
 And the daunting, embattled road through it all,
 Where enemy forces of different realms
 Amass and maneuver on every side,
 And the dread senses churn over reckonings looming
 While the sacred causes and callings of Man
 Settle with the dust on the field left behind,
 As they both turn together toward what they must face,
 Now do their spirits arise and collide,
 Or is it, perhaps,
 A fearful embrace?

Bixby Bridge

Big Sur December 2015

Odd to find, after all these years,
 The tire tread of Kerouac’s taxi
 Right there in the dirt beneath my feet,
 As I step out.
 Or is it merely my own?
 Though his—oh!—no less imprinted there,
 Just several sad and ruined layers
 Of civilization down.

Those self-same age-old Santa Lucias
 Rose up against his long hike in,
 Just as they do this very day
 Against me
 And every other intruding Bohemian soul
 That dares to come this way.
 Their rolling California suede
 Defying the endless miles of surging blue.

Everything that spans must also curve,
I've heard them say,
And what timeless golden-ratio-laden equation
Bends this spandreed thing, I'd like to know?

An oblivious world speeds blithely by
Not hearing the howling windswept wail
And the plaintive ebbing roar
Of dead and long-gone crews of welders, blasters,
Shovellers, hoisters, haulers, pourers
And their barking foremen down below,
All of whom once conjured up this arcing mid-air wonder.

Residents tucked in canyons back
Still claim they sense from time to time,
The spectral presence of Rumsens they've displaced,
—Who never learned to span or curve,
Nor ever felt the need to—

Who surely must have balked right here
At the yawning roiling maw of kelp and surge of flotsam down below,
Then took the ancient arroyo-twisted path around the bay,
The long way around,
The only way around,

—Went with the flow—
Which was the same old path they always took
And perhaps still do,
And always will,
And the same one Kerouac took that night
When the edge of *his* world broke away.
Though the bridge was right there
In plain sight.

I Have Seen Satyrs

Piute Creek 2015

I have seen satyrs—and don't give me that look!—

Making their timorous cloven way
Down faint, unknowable paths that wander
Roughly along some brook and then
Wade...out...out to the very haunches
To stand on the surface of the moon itself
In the midst of a midnight lake.

Shake their shaggy manes apace
And then look to the right and left to see
(Erroneously!)

That they are yet safely unobserved.
Then bow their ancient faces down
To drink long draughts from the moon itself
With the cirque of a glacier looming high
And a galaxy spilling its Milk above,

Then lift their mythic heads aloft and bray!
A long, eerie, Roman sound
That screeches down the canyon walls
Down...down...to the very trailhead where
This journey first began.

With my own eyes I've seen this—
I do not care what people say—
Let them come themselves and see it,
Satisfy their skeptic hearts.
The trail is clear and clearly posted
I have the coordinates for their maps.
Though, after giving it some reflection,
It may have just been elk...
...perhaps.

Intense

To Sharilyn, 2007, in the wake of her diagnosis.

Neither of us take credit
for the expression, I suppose.
It's the word first used by others
in describing how we think...
and live...and proclaim!
It's the word we overheard
when someone spoke about our kids.
And now, looking back, how thoroughly a-propos
as a description of everything we've had
since everything began.

And what exactly have we had?
Oh, now, as for that, give up all hope of definition!
It's something only a Riviera jetty could explain,
or a torrid Mojave sand dune.
It's behind closed doors in a Dodge-Ridge cabin.
It's coffee on the cliffs...
Merlot among the cypress...
chowder on the wharf.

Nothing will ever lessen it;
nothing take it away.
I will not look for its replacement
when separation comes,
be it near in time or far.
And whatever might be left
in the wake of such an event,
it will not be loneliness
or emptiness
or longing or regret.
No! Not with what we've had.
It will be something speech-defying
stunning and immense.
Equally indefinable
and lastingly...
intense!

Among the Ruins of Bohemia

Carmel, CA November, 2018

Months after—or, no—it was years,
I came back to the place where I had once heard the howl,
rising up in desolation from among the leaves of grass,
and found them there—all of them there—huddled there—
restless, riprap-weary faces furrowed with age-old
dharmas of grief and defeat
that could only have been ploughed
during numberless lost and hope-strewn days on the road.

They hadn't moved in decades—centuries some of them—
wouldn't move...couldn't...
grim, doleful, care-glutted shades
of their former resplendent and celebrated selves,
now haunted and wracked under a shelterless sky.

“They will hear you if you speak,” said the Boatman,
with the same lifeless, listless, dispassionate tone
he always bore when he spoke,
and so, of course, I did:

“Where did it go?” I asked of the One who was shuffling closest by.
Uneasy under the approach of a stranger, he pretended not to hear.

And so: “Where did it go?” I asked it again,
“And why don't you bring it back?”
“One question at a time,” he growled and snarled
like a Cerberus chained to its gate,
though outwardly nothing more than a man.
None of them, now, anything more than mere men,
or the shades of men, rather. Then:

“Somewhere between Tor House and Highway 61
it vanished...gone...and none of us...
no one—no one, I say!—knows how...or why...or where.”
“And why should we?” A Second One
—darker, less substantial—came into view
to interrupt and object,
“What right, after all, did we have?
And who made us the guardians and arbiters of Truth,
when, in fact, we only thought we were?
But you, now! What, if any, do you know of these things?
And who gave you the right to inquire?”

“I’ve spent some days in Patterson.”
It sounded quite feeble the moment I said it,
“And I’ve hiked the old dirt road off Highway One
that branches off from the Bixby Bridge.”

A Third one, drifting silently by, floating perhaps,
paused to announce as he passed:
“Everything ends in bottles here, and needles and cankers and coughs
and one deathly stupor after another
and with something ceaselessly growing inside,
a weed, perhaps, or some dark ungainly, unstoppable sunflower
that branches and spreads with a vengeance
and eventually chokes everything out.

“But none of this—we see—finds any resonance with you,
so state who you are and why you have come!
To taunt us perhaps? To flaunt better things?”
“Yes, state who you are!” It was the Other one now
—the First One, emboldened again at last—
“And why, after all, should you be cast
as some kind of different breed?
What now makes you an exception to the grievous rule?”

“I’ve spent a few days in Patterson,” I tried it again.
“I’ve mourned in the lowlands and hiked the back country,
And the old dirt road from the Bixby Bridge...”

“And...?” asked the One, unimpressed so far.
“But what?” demanded the Other, more fiercely yet.

“But...I encountered...a Cross...along the way.”

There was silence then; a silence long
and just as tangible as the darkness itself.
And then, from the Third One,
faintly, timorously, almost a whisper,
as he drifted away toward somewhere forever:

“There must be no mention of such a thing here.”