

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

Tomas O'Leary
A Civil Bird

The vulture is a civil bird,
its only wish that we should die
accessibly, beside some road
above which vulture likes to glide.

We too are known to like to glide,
like to challenge the fascist limit
placed on speed, so we race like a comet
over the asphalt, lift off, and fly.

There's nothing more beautiful under the sky
than the upside-down crush of a very fast car
to that keen-eyed carnivore lolling above,
radiating its special love
for the meat of a crash-daring culture
that aspires to be one with the vulture.

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Away With It

I need to save everything
because what I would throw away
would surely come back to haunt me
and I'd be nagged by ghosts of words
I'd likely never have revisited
but now can't, leaving me bereft.

This very thing I just retrieved
tosses its mask, strips to the bone, yet
parses insecurely, makes no leap
over the chasm between itself
and what I'd save. Away with it then!
Fat chance I'd ever return.

But no, I must save everything. And once
in a thousand times, called back
to what lies buried, I dig one up
and practice life's attention, if only to see
how blest or damned I am
to give the common dead a fresh kick.

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Blank

To pen an inkling of a page unblemished
by words you'd write because you're stoned
on two tokes of superior herb, you cut
a dicey deal with paradox.

So far so good. The page remains quite blank,
the wash of words an airy wish.
You find mortality and ink amusing.
You form a bond with this blank page.

You are not writing on this page
your bold intimation of a thing unsaid
upon a page still blank and useful.
Yet, yes you are. O paradox!

Should it ever come home to you
that you cannot write upon a page
and leave it blank at the same time,
move along:

a second blank page addressing any errors
you can't have committed on the first.
Deny them all. Leave this page too unblemished.
Abandon paradox. Get some sleep.

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Bless

When we gather up life as though death
must sign off on our extravagances,
dare we not hunker down and blare back
eat shit, death, fuck you, though of course we mustn't.

All that is civil and allowed arranges us
the way finches fill the branches of the dogwood.
We came out empty and saw them
and were still empty, but happier.

As gladness strives to rise without formula
from this unconditioned mess,
let it be there's a world all around us:
Bless it. Bless.

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Thieves and Maker

What you've created, let's just say,
outstrips the almost everyday
creations of mere geniuses in our
in-house employ. Oh, you're our boy:
a quantum paradox in a glass dome,
faux snow flakes as we shake you.
You're the muffled grandeur of purity
in a ropeless boxing ring
throwing punches of coded thought
at the absence of conspicuous opponents.
Yet because you're supremely high-tech
the cavalry arrives none too soon
to pull the arrows out of your brain, to
sedate you with scrupulous measures
of soldierly rum. Then the gods of
all the space we freely grant you synchronize
their epiphany watches. With cavalier
toasts they swallow your franchise.
Your brilliant concept flies, pilot
anonymous. We find it really works.
Nice going. Well done.

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dharma toads

two little toads
climb up a wall
window open
lama teaching
paste their bodies
on the sill
riot of camouflage
fabulous feet
blast the dharma
with loud notes
signal presence
to the sangha
draw sweet awe
and dharma camera
minuscule imps
posing in splendor
for the dharma
the lama
the sangha
the camera . . .

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Rogues at Bread

We gnaw the golden crust and work our way
to the warm heart of this amazing bread.
“This is nice bread,” a slow soul says,
“this bread is the bread of the baker.”
The baker brings out marmalade and butter:
“Slather up, folks,” he says, “eggs
are coming, bacon strips, home fries,
second, third and fourteenth cups of java.”
“What the heck is java,” the same soul whispers
to a mate, but the baker picks it up, and since
he’s serving many roles and short on patience
says, “Java? Really? Java?”
Embarrassment sustains the scene;
more coffee comes, more bread.
This is the way we breakfast out
one time a week, together.
We’re more or less familiar to each other,
rogues at a brunch, able to be
conversant in the litany of thrown words,
receiving them with grace, answering back.
Because we know we like each other sometimes,
we’re glad to gather for the love of bread.

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The Compassionate Gardener

If there were comfort in my bones
I'd strive my best to lay them down,
but they prefer to pick me dry
for all that I would woo their marrow
outright, like a loving ghost.
I do not know my bones, nor why
I'm pushing this wheelbarrow
filled with manure, topped with debris
across an impossible landscape.
It was an act of congress, I am
not alone at this. She wields
the spade as if it were a wand, and
makes the dirty earth comply.
If I were good at this I think
I'd move with greater vigor.
She knows my gardening
is mythical, and grants me leave
to be my bones, my living bones.

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Heathen (Intransitive)

To heathen is to hasten hither
where the zephyrs ride the heather,
no one decked in lace or leather
or at all. All celebrate
the body's joy of naked soul,
the dancing feet, toes curled in soil
still springing green and good.
Look at them. Look! They're mad,
the lot! Heathens heathening, others
othering. Up with their madness and
down with distraught, snaking worship!

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Measuring Up to Indolence

Born between nanoseconds
trillions of times each day,
we seldom fail to forget
how freshly turned to nothing
the living are. Suddenly
chores are in our face, we must
sacrifice philosophy for garbage,
the hammering down of
porch boards.

It's not by committee decreed
our hours be counted
and banked with meager interest
against our demise

but by ourselves
who stand to lose no soul
when indolence and vision merge
and grant us respite
from the doubt we are
or are not.

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Jones

Called away from ourself
we go there promptly and say
we cannot be here now.
Time takes our temperature,
space likes to watch,
and life disdains to recommend us
in lines we thought to follow.
We must romance the life
that feeds us forward, suffer
the interloper that split second
of dismissal, then leap back
to our diminished effort
at some crappy little poem.
Such is the glory of creation
when you've got a jones
for cranking one out.

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Off With the Layers

Off with the layers, off they go
to flash and settle on the sprawling lawn.
We answer the call of the Solstice
encrypted in tiny breezes.
What body not slowed by rigor mortis
would spurn the full touch of this night's moon?

How naked we are is the measure
our skins like to take of our spirits,
while the drummers drive our bodies
in heated, hilarious dance.
The night is warm, the grass
a dream of heaven to bare soles.

We are wildly modest,
getting younger by the minute
than the older we grow.

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The Box

“Who brought a box of bothers
To my Featherhead Fiesta”
The apoplectic host demanded
Through his silver-plated bullhorn

Clear as caution, there the box sat
Unattended, grimly grinning
As apocalyptic boxes
Often do. But credit us:

We snapped awake, we seized the box,
We marched it off to the Town Hall,
A simple, civic, swift deposit:
Box was gone, the party on

We have yet to weigh the danger
(If ever there was danger)
Against the light fantastic
That fills us head to foot

As we whirl around the garden
In our Featherhead regalia
Thinking not outside the box
Thinking not inside it either

All giddy with the manic Host
Of Featherhead among us reeling,
Easy with how he knew the box
Belonged at Town Hall, not with us.

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zen ascendance

hand me nothing
says the master

young monk
slurps his noodles

zen bowl coursing
archways, valleys

on the lookout
nothing hiding

only noodles
likes his noodles

nothing like them
close enough

offers master
bowl of noodles

master now