

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

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Words from a Dream

My dreams speak to me, but I've yet to crack the code. Last night's dream dissolved as I awoke. Only two words stayed with me as I opened my eyes in the morning light. Prist and quist. Any meaning they may have had faded with the dream. Plenty of such easy to pronounce strings of letters would serve as good English words, if they could only be given a meaning. If we ever need a word for a spaghetti sauce stain on a clean white shirt we could surely find it among the thousands of letter combinations at our disposal. Perhaps splot would do.

Life goes on in the waking world and it's all good, except that my computer has gone down. Tom has taken it away to his lair, that room with its perpetual Christmas lights and computer equipment where so many nights we've drummed and danced in happy abandon. No emails coming in or going out, no idea whether the stock market is going up, down or sideways. I carry on in joyous ignorance, my heart beating, my lungs sucking up oxygen, my feet tapping to an inner rhythm. Oh the quist of it and the prist of it, whatever that may mean. This is how we lived before computers enslaved us and we managed all right. I'm enjoying this vacation from screen fatigue, viruses, updates, popups, and spam. Today the joys of the slow lane are all mine. With pencil and paper I write in the ancient manual mode. I could happily get used to this and learn to love it, but at the same time, I have an ear cocked for Tom's phone call.

As I stare at the empty space where my computer stood the noise of distant traffic is a constant whispering roar. People out there are commuting from A to B or contrariwise from B to A, each the center of a life, the focal point of an unwritten novel. To write a story one has to carve away 99% of what goes on around us. Let's say the hero walks down the street. The life behind all the shuttered minds is ignored as the hero walks his narrow narrative path to get to the 7-11, purchase his cigarettes, and make that oh so important phone call to Kitty, while the rest of creation orbits its own joys and sorrows. We could let that teeming multitude be called the quist and the solitary journey of the hero be called the prist. There. Now they are real words with meanings firmly attached. For them to enter the language it remains only that people start using them. I promised myself that I'll say prist or quist whenever it makes sense to do so, maybe even when it doesn't.

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Poets of the Far Future

1

After the extinction of the humans
a few million years may go by

before the voracious roots and suckers
of the immortal vegetables

will erase our highways and parking lots,
leaving only rusted metal junk

and shards of everlasting plastic
festooned with foliage.

Even our graves and landfills
will dissolve into mush.

Giant birds will roost
on the vine-covered skeletons of skyscrapers.

2

Big brains will climb again
to the top of the food chain.

Perhaps they'll be almost human.
I picture them with tails

and a third eye
to foster empathy.

Alchemists of the far future
will discover gunpowder.

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Only a few centuries of experiments
before they'll invent the hydrogen bomb.

Historians of the far future
will offer some groundless speculation

about their predecessors,
who they were and where they went

without knowing a thing about
our mad glorious tragic history

or what they could have learned
from our mistakes.

3

Poets of the far future
will reinvent all the tropes and styles

of the long extinguished human poets.
Some will celebrate the exploits

of latter-day warriors and kings
without ever having read the Iliad.

Some will sit in rusted cars
playing with the steering wheel

and write odes to the mysterious beings
who left their trash behind

when they sailed away
in their sky chariots.

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At least one, copied by
a whole school of poets,

will get drunk
and drift downriver in a rowboat

while looking up at the moon
without ever having heard of Li Po.

And that same moon
that enchanted the ancient poets,

will have moved into a lower orbit,
will loom larger, create higher tides

and wield greater power
over the moon-addicted drunken poets,

who alone of their tribe
will foresee their successors

marching again down the same path
in a beautiful moonlit world

where the sun will go on shining
until it doesn't.

Too Many Chickens

Get those chickens out of here, Sergeant. Chickens, sir? Yes, chickens, monkeys, aardvarks, whatever they are, I want them dispersed. Those are not chickens, sir. Those are the men of the 14th platoon securing the perimeter. Whatever they are, they are disturbing my composure. Get rid of them. Yes, sir. And one more thing, Sergeant. I'll have no more of your insubordination. I don't want to be contradicted. See to your duty. Those chickens must go. Yes, sir. The word went down the line. Up the line. It came to the attention of the general that Major Potts was out of his mind. The disease was spreading. Four years in the trenches had taken its toll. The best officers were dead. The rest were pacing in circles, giving senseless orders. The men were ground to their bones, and after numerous advances and retreats, they found themselves in the same trenches as at the start of the war. No end in sight. No way out but death. Bombs were falling from the sky all over the world. The humans had embarked on a mad race to annihilate themselves. The few sane ones were afraid to speak, for those who did were lined up against a wall and turned into hamburger by a stream of angry bullets. Finally the guns fell silent. Sheer exhaustion. The disease had run its course and those who still lived dragged themselves to their feet and looked around at their destroyed world. Slowly the cities were rebuilt. The trees grew back. The flowers bloomed again. Once more humanity resumed its peacetime occupations, the usual crimes, the normal greed, ordinary murder and rape. The economy strengthened, business flourished, new alliances were forged, and the world healed enough for another war to begin.