

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Lee Rossi: Three Poems

Lee Rossi · Tuesday, October 4th, 2022

Rules Of Thumb

That the reason for any action is buried beneath two or three coats of paint. That a foundation lives longer than any other part of the house but will crack and decay, just like a motor mount or the motor in your chest. When caulk dries, a tear streaks a child's dirty face, the lobes of the bishop's miter swell. Think of all the things that dry and crack—paint, caulk, even glass sags given enough time. When you look outside, there is light bringing grass and neighbors. This means they exist even if you never speak to them, breathing your air before it gets to you. Think of all the shelters you've found—a snow fort, a cave, a hole in a road cut, a pair of hands. When a young man turns his back to the sun, this means that the grove has stripped herself for winter. This means yes, that a harsh light rakes the ground and a widow's mottled hands. People move through the house brushing teeth, cooking Spam, arguing and making love, like thoughts in the dream space of the skull. That a house turns many faces to the world. Grim to strangers, it smiles on friends, shielding you from other people's pain. Now go inside and rest.

*

Spirit Train

In the morning I went to the station. It was an old building, surrounded by other old buildings, a bank, a church, and museums for everything the army had stolen in the last war. The station was almost empty, so I asked the Station Master's daughter, "How do I get from Prague to Chicago?" And she said, "You'll have to do what people did back in the War. You'll have to take the Spirit Train." "I don't want to die," I told her. "You don't have to," she said, "but you'll have to change many times." That sounded bad enough, but I wanted to get home. So I found a bench in the Great Hall and waited. I guess I fell asleep, because the next thing I knew someone was shaking my shoulder. "It's after midnight, time to go," she said, the same girl but older. I found the train, and soon we were moving through the countryside. At first, I was a dog, a water spaniel, and then a giant boar. When we got to the coast, I changed into a tuna, a shad, a mackerel, a school of mackerel. We were moving very fast, and I couldn't keep track of all the changes. Soon we arrived at another coast where I became a turkey, then a vole, a freshwater trout, a mole, a catfish, a mule deer, and then finally as we pulled into Chicago, a man. I should be glad, I suppose, that I didn't spend much time as an insect. My parents were waiting there in Chicago. (How did they know to meet me?) With a girl, who looked familiar, but whose name escaped me. All of them hugged me, and I guess I hugged them back. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know how to act. And it's been that way ever since.

*

Not Brave, Not Free

—after Tony Hoagland

All morning some virus has been conducting
military exercises in my throat—
napalm, aerial bombardment, artillery.

Bombing the dam was the last straw.
“You sound sick,” my wife says
solicitously. “No I don’t,” I insist,

struck by the uncharacteristic rumble
of my vocal chords, the *basso profundo*
echoing in my ear bones. “I sound sexy.”

I wonder if my penchant for lying
to myself is a personal peccadillo,
or something hard-wired into all of us.

I know that, I know that, says the kid
in the back row, face red as a stop sign,
hand waving, high in the air.

I ignore him. After all, I’m the teacher
in this little classroom, and even though I too
know the answer, I need to pretend I don’t.

Like those balloon faces floating on my TV,
asking if, after the latest shooting, the President
will finally bring the nation together.

They know the answer, but their investment
in our collective stupidity is building interest
in Switzerland and the Cayman Islands.

Meanwhile California redwoods,
the few survivors, are in emergency conclave.
“Where’s the fog?” they want to know. I know,

but have no way of telling them.

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