

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

David Thornbrugh
When in Rome

Human blood, so Pliny the Elder tells us,
is curative for epilepsy. Thus the trade in sponges
soaked in the pools formed under fallen gladiators.
To enter the taxi, we had to step in deep puddles
of rain water, thunder obscuring the traffic drone.
“I have a friend in Austin—a very old soul—
nicknamed Pliny. Now I know why.”
That the spirit leaves the body in the instant
before impact is impossible to refute,
but isn’t that the point? The bobblehead dolls
of Pope Francis couldn’t agree more,
whether they are nodding to the vibrations
of passing pedestrians, or the violated air.

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Thirst

The water she brings me from the well
tastes of the clay jug she carries it in.
The small brown ponies of her eyes
carry no memory of my betrayal.
The dust on her feet is as clean
and smooth as talcum. When I left her,
her hair flowed black as the background
making the Milky Way sparkle,
but now holds the clouds that have passed
between us in its strands. In the distance,
on the terraces where her father supervises the planting,
smoke rises from small fires.
Sometimes, after the workers have finished
bathing in galvanized tubs,
flecks of gold, even antique gold coins
settle on the bottom.
If I squint hard enough into the sun
setting behind those rows of shrubs,
I can glimpse the outline of the house
we might have built, hear the laughter
of the children we might have birthed.
When I leave, my pockets will be empty.

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“The Horror, the Horror”

Know this:

at the end of the movie,

the monster has not been consumed in the fire,

blown up in the explosion,

swept to his death over the waterfall.

Even the pool of bubbling steel

cannot melt the black heart of the killer robot.

The rounded breast of the grave will vomit a clawing fist.

The lips you kiss in triumph will sprout twin canines.

Now you understand why the bunker door

locked from the outside

and the inmates stayed inside their cells

after the guards opened the doors and fled.

The end of the movie

is never the end of the story.

Somewhere, Rosemary is picking up her baby.