

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

Tomas O'Leary

Epistle from the Scribe of the Floggers

In fine weather we flog ourselves
outdoors, sweet breeze and sunshine
smiling on our penitence. We whack
our backs with knotted leather strips
because tradition orders it. Even
the Deity thinks well of us (we have been
told, and we believe) when we tease out
traces of blood, and modest scars.
When winter forces us indoors, it saps
our vigor slightly, but not
the joy of ritual. Day in, day out,
we press our souls to prayers and chants
and garden toil. Before all that, there's nothing
greets a dawn like cheerful flogging.

And yet, this caveat: All things in moderation.
A youthful saint has come to join our abbey.
He fashioned cords with sharp-edged iron crosses
and beat himself a bloody mess first morn.
We were appalled. We were distraught.
He had a fortnight's respite in a coma
and woke up asking for his flogging kit.
We knelt around him, days and nights that followed,
whispering mercy, tempered rhythm.
His crosses confiscated, he makes do.

As abbey scribe, and sole monk literate here,
I draft my fair epistle at late hour
and cast it to the winds. These are the last days.
Our sanely measured flogging
is certified for best-of-show redemption.
We deplore the full-flush, gushing purge
of martyr-minded cloisterers, such as huddle

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in that abbey up the road. There is no
enmity between us, but they're boisterous.
We hear them late at night, roaring
their groaned laments in mangled Latin.
And yes, we've seen their corpses on occasion,
bloody as all hell, rolled out on the cart.

Our abbey thrives, invested in sound reason.
"I flog, therefore I am" is who we are.
I'm up quite late composing this.
The Abbot hovers over me, suggesting
my curlicues might want a bit more flourish.
I suffer him, delighted, as with flogging.
Though he's as literate as the abbey dog,
I sense him sure-foot at the heights of sainthood.

Oh stranger, blest of letters,
you chance upon me in the abbey rubble,
my gist such pithiness as this:
Flog prudently, and watch your spirits lift.
Myself am off to my thin cot just now,
three hours of slumber, wake, and flog.
Were I a dog, I'd be bereft of means.
We have one dog. He does not flog.

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Gable

When intentional consciousness blows me
clean for an instant now and then, some word
will waft in, unbidden and sassy, and sucker-punch
my meditative hum. Today it was “gable”
sprung from nowhere, no spawn of whatever
my occupied brain had been rehearsing
before I dimmed the lights and chanted OM.
Just let it go, I thought, but then Clark popped up
because Gable, Clark Gable, but hey, no thanks.
Went back to my breathing and Clark became smoke
which brought on a coughing fit which subsided
and all was serene again. Until Hawthorne
showed up (what the hell I thought, oh right
those gables, that house, there were seven).
No sooner had Nat and his novel
resolved into ether, an r
crept in and along came Betty, yes
Betty Grable, no sooner a wisp swept away
with her r than up loomed Cain, the brother
of Abel, Cain himself no slouch at being able.
Meditation can lift you right up through your chakras.
This was not a model session.
From gable to able the babble persisted,
so much to think about not thinking about.
I drew the line at fratricide. My lunch was on the table.

Genius and Moron

A genius and a moron sat
together at the tidy bar of
an upscale saloon saluting with
shots of schnapps the fact they were
childhood friends who'd just
chanced to meet on the sidewalk
after lifetimes of no contact
and recalling now that instant
when the moron, then 11, intervened
to spare the genius, also 11,
from a throttling at the hands of
ruffians who were neither
morons nor geniuses but merely
ill-bred vainglorious louts
who thought the genius a smart sissy
in need of corrective blows,
but hadn't figured on the looming
presence of the moron whom
everyone knew as gentle and friendly
and huge and strong and mute
who posed no threat of imposition
on their surly sport, yet
thrashed the lot of them just enough
to set their fear and scatter them.
The genius was astounded by
the moron's clear intelligence, his
detailed recollections of their
short-lived but eternal youth, the way
he phrased, poetically, plain truths
of days they'd shared, the moron
pleasantly dumb, the genius
incessantly vocal. "Seems we've
evolved past our stereotypes," said the

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moron, who identified as such
simply to sustain the context.
“You’re a genius,” said the genius,
who felt like a moron for his rude
evaluation back in boyhood.
Since no one knows (as both agreed)
what fate attends mind’s limits,
they made a pact they’d meet again
while both still had their wits.

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Kilmartin on Kindness Day

The Day of Kindness came, and all refrained
from thinking rotten thoughts of rotten neighbors,
or going batshit in an endless line
but rather chatting up one's fellow shoppers,
and all across the nation great flags flew
depicting smiles on faces so sincere
you had to smile back, no one was immune—
except perhaps for diehard grump Kilmartin
who felt compelled from inner depths to loathe
all he beheld, be they sentient beings or objects.
Wouldn't you know there'd be a traffic jam,
Kilmartin among the importuned, cursing, seething,
while other drivers exited their cars
and shared laughs and swapped recipes,
because it was Kindness Day. A little girl
next car ahead, flanked by her rear-window cadre
of fuzzy animals stuffed with bits of plastic,
thought Kilmartin was bent on entertaining her—
at which, by the way, he scored at least a ten.
She laughed so hard she vomited her small
tummy's overdose of holiday goodies, brushed
her mouth with a glass-eyed beagle, and went on
heaving waves of helpless laughter. Apoplexy
ruled Kilmartin, contorted his flexible face
to extremes of cartoon fantasy. In wrathful
thrall of his normal excess at such a moment,
he noticed he'd acquired an audience.
It was an aggravation so unnatural,
this thing called Kindness Day, yet he was smitten
by innocence, a child's mistaken notion
he was trying to make her laugh. He wrapped
his lips around his nose and wiggled fingers
for a soft salute. She felt transported. She couldn't
stop laughing. It was her best Kindness Day ever.

When Your Brain

When your brain can't afford
the idleness it relishes
right when you feel the urge
to put it to work
you've got to remind it
you can't think without it
and threaten to evict it
if it doesn't come across.
A smart brain will know
there's no advantage
to procrastination,
will shrug off
its sluggishness and pony up
the tuppence you'll put down
on a horse you hope will win
on a track you hope exists
way out of town. Now
look, you're groom and mucker
of stables beyond number.
Surely you knew there'd be
horseshit involved,. Surely
some sense surrounded you
that walls of sense cave in
when you harass your object brain
when you're feeling brainless.

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Tomas O'Leary

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His New & Selected Poems from **Lynx House Press**: *"In the Wellspring of the Ear."* Previous books of poetry: *"Fool at the Funeral," "The Devil Take a Crooked House," & "A Prayer for Everyone."*

A teacher for many years — (college, high school, elementary, adult ed) — he has worked for the past couple decades with folks who have Alzheimer's, playing Irish accordion and eliciting cognitive and emotional responses through songs, stories, poems, & free-wheeling conversation.

He grew up in Somerville long before it became the Paris of New England, and has lived with his wife Lee in Cambridge for over 40 years. Their son Devin lives in Chicago, son Sean in Somerville.

Tomas is pleased to reveal the unhidden fact he has been poet-in-residence of Wilderness House Literary Review since its beginning.