

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/4

Dennis Daly

Rage Along the Merrimac

Behind the fleet Abenaki,
Leash-pulled by leather thongs,
The captives ran, cut
At ankles—pickets,

Grass blades slashing. Up the Merrimac,
Days in high pitched whines were ripped
From them—acute frequencies
Bursting their devastation.

The black-toothed sachem
With proper accent spat anecdotes
Of ritual torture, his palate soaked
In excitement: gangrene of hope.

Nights fell blank, whirling—
Greased flanks and indistinguishable
Thighs took their prize at leisure;
Gauntlets formed in cankered parallels.

Leaving vagueness, wash of these
Initiate rites ebbed; captors and captives
Ripped skin from fish, from tail to gill—
One people, flesh-eaters

Ate as comrades—all unbound.
Pretense waited stealthily—a hatchet
Hidden in skirts of she-hater,
Internal fester: her blood stunk

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Of dreams half remembered—
Baby's brains bashed against walls
As rabbit children scurried to woods.
Tribal hate welled up, gums hardened.

Conjoined, the bonded turned upon
Abenaki, salivating slaughter—
Hatchet fell breaking skulls
From sleep. Tally ten.

Course laughter, trophies lofted,
Torn from foreheads. Somnambulant
Trek triumphal—two women
and a boy

Cringed at forty-nine pounds
Awarded for godless scalps hung
In goodly ceremony, strength
On garrison walls.

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The Institute

Past men's shop, and mall, and armory, the façade
Appears and dissolves to a single woman:
A greeting without explanation, a summing
Up of exterior. You enter the hall
Of gifts, ascend the marble staircase
To the gallery of fragments, where shards
Are turned by sight into delicate tea sets.

From behind a column a constable budges,
Indicates the antique weapons: a collection
Of cutlass, musket, powder horn, and ball
Encased in clear glass. Their contours
Correspond to a tangential reality,
A conversation, which crumbles if touched
By the objectionable, the fleeting hand.

Into a corridor a guide convoys you;
On your left a skeleton clock commemorates
A random hour; its physics exposed
To voyeurs, purveyors of inveracity,
And dilettantes. Two waste-high Chinese vases
Stand guard like eunuchs before an inviolable
Terminus. A wooden chest punctuates the doorway.

Inside a clement execution: the heart-seeking
Countenance multiplied. Stiff-collared, rouge-cheeked
Notables stare with suspicion, a gauntlet
Of eyes whispering a remembrance of old
Horrors. There are spectres now, confused and coming,
Progeny of past, of present. Your guide motions
You through an iron-plated door. You enter the library:

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A maze of innumerable stacks, a system
So self-contained that it suggests a sufficiency
In decay: at once proffering dust
To the uninitiated, and, equally,
Implying the possibility of infinite
Plot, character, idea. A matrix left to burn
In place, its compartments sealed, its symbols vanishing.

And the subsystems. Genealogy: the chosen
Families, or the haphazard, or the enduring.
A phantom searches for existence in a name.
It's enough to make you choke. Or the alternative:
The symmetry of lists like elongated
Sculptures wearing well over centuries,
A missing page here, a damaged section there.

Prints and photographs, denying duration,
Intelligible only as frames where something
Living costumes itself, seethes into place.
A street before the conflagration burns
With a merry innocence. Local residents
Emerge from a train station in a terrifying
Stupor. Members of a secret sect?

Local histories, travelogues, gazettes sate
This vast hotel that justifies insomnia,
Where ethical formulas grow damp and yellowed,
Where blood awakens to meet an undreamt
Dissolution, the curse of print. No prevision
Can prepare the novice in this turbidity
Of moonlight. He squints and hopes to understand.

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The guide leaves you. Somewhere (in the restored
Period rooms? In the storage barns? In the cellar?)
An administration makes policy, delivers
Fiats, sets the cost of admission, destroys
Slowly, but with mathematical precision,
The Institute's immense collections. Here, behind
Out transparent barriers, we deliberate.

All Soul's Day: Town House Square

Crossing Town House Square, where my grandmother
Took me store to store until finding magic,
The chaos of Woolworth's Five and Dime; other
Places hidden in time, the dense traffic

Of big-hatted women and boys searching
For green soldiers, leaden silver horses,
Yo-yos, bendable cowboys, tops; lurching
On the wooden floors, past the glass cases

In aisles that seemingly go on forever.
Years later a glint in her hair captures
Me, draws me into this square as never
Before. My future wife mocks, then lectures

Me with her wordless smile. In City Hall,
Just down the street, I was voted down;
Later sworn in, a political brawl
Powered by threats and firing of kin, a hometown

Donnybrook. Over there the treasure shop,
Daniel Lowe's. Under the rising vault
Of Salem's first Church, a Valentine Day stop,
I bought china and crystal there—my default

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Gift emporium. No madness of mall
For me. My grandfather passed some time here,
Placed bets with his bookie on football,
A bookie doubling as the city's mayor.

Now I step over the curb, the rumble
Beneath of phantom trolley cars vibrate
Today's pavement, an electric cable-
Spark shocks me awake to muse, to create.