

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/4

Ron Yazinski

HALLOWEEN UNDER EISENHOWER

When my brother and I were kids,
We went trick or treating in shabby costumes:
A little burnt cork on my face to look like the town drunk,
My dad's old army gear on him to make him a soldier.

We didn't go to the homes of neighbors
Where old women sat in the dark
Alone with their angry glares
Amidst the smell of boiled cabbage.

We went to neighborhood bars.
Luckily, every block had at least one,
And each of those was identified by a hand-written sign on its front door
"No miners allowed."
As a child who read,
I couldn't figure out why men who dug coal weren't allowed in;
But we were.

Especially to our favorite bars,
The ones that serviced World War II vets,
Like the VFW, or the DAV, or the American Legion,
Where we didn't have to sing off-key
Or do silly knock-knock jokes.

All we had to do is say that we were Leo's kids.
Then every drunk would laugh and nod his head
And scrape his change off the bar
To give it to us.

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THE FRENCH BUREAUCRAT

Goethe tells of the French bureaucrat who employed
The major painters of Frankfurt
In much the same way a conductor
Uses the musicians in his orchestra.

The first, he directed to paint the sky of his large canvas,
Because he admired the pinks and grays of his billowing clouds,
As if at any moment the sun or a god might burst through;

To the second, he assigned the trees and stream,
Because he marveled at the way the man reflected
Towering pines in the ripples of deep water;

And from the last, whose specialty was melding vulnerability and coquettishness,
He ordered the figure of a lithesome waif,
Looking longingly at the young soldier
Who was leading his horse to her trough.

Each painter grumbled that the proportions were all wrong,
That the shadows were either too flimsy, or falling in the wrong direction.
The first said it was too romantic;
The second, that it was too pagan;
And the last, that it was too Christian.

But the Frenchman, by all appearances, was pleased with his self-portrait.

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TEAM HOMELESS

On Philly streets, many of the homeless
Wear Penn State sweatshirts.
From Independence Mall to Rittenhouse Square,
Tourists can see them sleeping on benches,
Or panhandling, or standing in line in front of the soup kitchens.

At first, someone might think that Penn State grads have fallen on hard times,
Lost their jobs or gotten divorced;
But the truth is,
They just bought new sweatshirts and gave their cast offs to charity.

Which got me thinking that the tourist board
Might do something similar for Fairmount Park.
Instead of Penn State gear,
They could dress the homeless to look like garden gnomes,
With red, floppy hats, and wide, black belts over bright shirts
And, below their baggy pants, sturdy shoes.
Then they could encourage them to mill around the lawns and sculpture
of the Art Museum,
Or stand near Boathouse Row and the Azalea Garden.

That way, tourists might notice them and smile,
Instead of being reminded of scandals and fallen saints.

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LEAP OF FAITH

Before the start of an outdoor concert, we unfold our chairs
Next to those of a middle-aged man
Who has a pair of crutches on the seat between us.
On his left foot,
He wears a bright red cast.

As a way of introduction,
I motion to it, "Does it hurt much?"
"A little," he smiles, "but it'll be better
"As soon as my girlfriend finds the beer tent."
"How did it happen?" I ask sitting down.

"Because I was careful," he laughs, "but not careful enough.
"I was trimming a palm tree in my yard,
"Standing near the top of a ladder, which was tied to the trunk,
"Like they recommend.
"But foolishly I tied it to the smooth part,
"Not the rough bark where the fronds grow.

"I thought I was safe;
"But as I reached out, the ladder slipped.
"Twenty-three years as a lineman for the power company,
"Climbing poles every day of my life,
"And I never had an accident.
"But there I was, in my front yard, falling.
"Fortunately, I remembered my safety training
"Which stressed that the best thing to do in that situation,
"Is to jump;
"That way I'd land on my feet
"And not crush my back or head."

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He points to his foot,

"I have a crack about an inch long right here in my lower leg.

"But it could have been much worse."

He pauses for a moment as he reaches for a beer

Handed him by an attractive young woman

Who has appeared at his side.

"Which is pretty much the same thing

"I learned going through my divorce:

"It's better to jump into disaster."