

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

Roy Bentley

Apollo 11 Moon Shot, Cape Kennedy, Florida, 1969

—photograph by Garry Winogrand

Onlookers in the NASA bleachers aim Nikons
and Leicas, Kodaks and Polaroid Land Cameras,
toward the rising human payload. Spectators
are facing in approximately the same direction.
Many guard their upturned eyes with a hand.

However, a woman in a white dress
is pointing a camera at the photographer.
To her, in this instant of great national pride,
what's most interesting isn't the *sturm und drang*.
Of course the metaphor is of drowning

in the blinding sunshine of wish fulfillment
and needing to look away. This small act
is my hope, my poem for my country—
this looking elsewhere for the truth
or the thing worthy of opening

our hearts to. Something other than
more lies about God and the Good Life.
Must I be carried from Florida to heaven
on fire-breathing Saturn V boosters
to feel anything but tired and far away?

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After Repeated Voting, Edgar Allan Poe Collapses in a Baltimore Alley

“During electioneering in Baltimore, Edgar Allan Poe is kept drunk by a gang of political hacks; in four days he is dead.”

—*A Book of Days for the Literary Year*

Twenty ballots, the story goes. Ten each way.
Then coughing up blood as bright as a signature.
Your greatcoat, pulled close, is missing its buttons.
A ragman covets the coat. Asks if you need help.

While from a proud tower in the town
Death looks gigantically down.

All that watered bourbon has worsened an ulceration
aggravated by his lifting you from a snowy bench.
You black out, wake on a bed, the stench of him
a poem of the body you begin writing, revising.

By a route obscure and lonely,
Haunted by ill angels only...

On the floor, your islanded clothing. The coat,
pixelated moonlight, your muddied shoes.
Shouting from the street plays at coming in.
The ragman is beginning a fire you wait to feel.

I have been happy — tho' but in a dream.
I have been happy...

He tends you like the blue flames he feeds —
What are you doing? you rise to ask,
then fall back pointing to papers thieved
from the coat. Enlisted in the task at hand.

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Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument: Montana, 1993

We'd been on the road from Columbus, Ohio for days,
the three of us in a Ford Ranger. Why not stop and stand
in the Palm of the Hand of What Shines and Quickens Us.
North of Sheridan, Wyoming, trying to be The Good Father,
I left the wide smooth white concrete of Interstate 90 West.
So my sons Matt and Scott could walk where they had fallen—
the 'they' part of a gathering of 250 men and Custer himself
who didn't expect to die by lance or arrow or bite of bullets.
It was mid-June, sweltering, but they set aside Gameboys.
Neither was anxious to step onto where the 7th Cavalry
and the Lakota Sioux and Northern Cheyenne walked.
Scott said he'd heard rattlesnakes in the taller grasses.
There wasn't any leaf-black shade. They complained.
Why had I brought my sons? They were growing up
without me. Like the slaughter at the Little Bighorn,
this rash shortsightedness was the fault of one person.
Matt (13) was bringing his passion for everything *Titanic*.
Scott (8) came from an undefeated season of basketball.
I wasn't thinking of loss as I watched them run around.
That day, with them, walking the Little Bighorn Battlefield,
I had yet to down a bottle of Xanax and a fifth of whiskey
in an act of desperation. Some suffering may be as tacky
as a Pat Benatar song. However, love really is a battlefield.
You get ambushed. Odds are titanic. And you're no match.
That day, the sky a rodeo-days parade of blue and black,
the Truly Awful Thing hadn't happened. I was undefeated.
Once, lucky. Like Custer, the Golden Boy. Then, stupid.
Shut up just shut the fuck up, we should say to ourselves.
That afternoon, I said it to: *Dad, why did the Whites claim*
what wasn't theirs? How many Sioux and Cheyenne died?