

## Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

Lee Foust

### POISON AND ANTIDOTE

*"Low types they must have been,  
their pockets full of poison and antidote."*

—SAMUEL BECKETT

*The Unnamable*

#### 1 : GROWING UP

No, I won't open my eyes. I'll roll over, settle back in, and get comfortable again. I won't be delivered; I'll try to go back to sleep. But I probably won't be able to go back to sleep, now that I'm this awake.

Let the eyelids lay; keep 'em forced shut—seeing the orange, the red of the sunlight through the curtains—there isn't any reason to be right now, despite daylight. There's no point in turning over, either, only to have to settle back in again. Still, this now: thoughts I can't help but see, unavoidably—

Always, from this morning on, whenever I walk out into the streets, I'll grab any interesting face I find by the nose and pull the features forward with my left hand. Then, when the skin begins to separate from the sinews and the web of muscles behind the face, with my right hand I'll raise my hatchet high and slice downward from the forehead, pulling the face away from the skull by its nose, taking the startled expression up into the air and stuffing it into my burlap sack.

In the evenings, when I return home, I'll paste them—trimmed around the edges so that they resemble masks—in rows upon the white walls of my kitchen.

My mother, being afraid of strangers, doesn't approve of my collection of faces. She throws her head back, her nose into the air, and says, "Must you bring those *things* into the apartment?"

My collection remains incomplete, though, without mother, so I've reserved a space above the stove for her disapproving face. Someday she too will stare out over the pots and pans, her dried skin coated in the ever-falling dust that's glued to her features by the greasy fumes from the frying pan below, labeling my life a failure with her unshutting eyes.

These days she asks me over and over, "When will you ever grow up?" And is afraid—being always afraid of death—that someday I really will.

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### 2 : DAYS IN BLACK AND WHITE

There were probably days of color then, that autumn, sharper in the cold that blew itself in from the ocean. I noticed the change this time—the wind pushing brittle leaves and shreds of paper across dusty sidewalks. Things became new for me, for new reasons; I mean I changed.

I gave up waiting for buses and stopped picking up my mother's phone when it rang. I went out walking at night, looking into the well-lit windows of apartments and flats, always ending up out at the ocean. I caught my breath staining the air. There was a rhythm, walking, sometimes humming a tune I remembered, guys driving by with the radio cranked up. I should have tried to get to the desert. It wasn't all that far away and I've heard it's a good place to get lost.

It was twilight always, or it felt like it, in those streets—like in a de Chirico painting. I started seeing things through again, not only avoiding. I turned my head to look more directly at those things just in the corner of my eye, on the edge of my vision—but they weren't any different once I moved them into the center. It could be that boredom drives one to a kind of madness of minute observation.

I couldn't be alone all the time, but I tried. I wanted no urges. I crossed out smiles and was bored out of tears. The goal was to become as realistic as an animal.

I put on a show for the others, those who still managed to get through to me. But I didn't give anything away; I read a lot of books, stored up a million words and used them to build a few one-way bridges. I was reserved, in love.

Fashionably alienated, I might have grown into poetic dimensions—a man at last. Something made. The days themselves could have become different, summertime by now; I might have been persuaded into the sentimental life of those

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### 3 : LOOKING AHEAD

I must have been dreaming, last night, maybe just now, I can't remember. Only the struggle: shuffling back into another mother's arms. Looking away, in another direction, and then closing your eyes completely to the world they've built up around me.

Thoughts now, maybe answers later—whatever you have to have. This is easy, for the moment, eyes closed, words begetting words.

We're part of generations. Cursed by its forcing a name on us. Think of seeing it, your birth; crying, rolling in your mother's flesh, her food for you, christened in her blood. I see myself encircled, and dreaming out of it too, pulling faces from the crowd for some meaning. I knew that later I would have to turn against the triangle and away from mama, but come back to the ruins of my family too.

I remember; I was a difficult birth. I wrote a poem but nobody understood it. I'll tell you—I refused to breathe. They forced a tube and air into my clogged lungs and pumped me up like a balloon. Somebody told me I should forgive them, laughing. Not now, not yet, not in the frenzy of the present tense.

I was incubated, then, in a box: a box with glass walls.

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### 4 : A DREAM

I must have had a friend. There must have been someone brave enough to hold my hand. Maybe I've said too much; I remember his disinterested and unctuous green eyes looking off, through the smoke coming from the cigarette he always held in front of his face. I can still picture him, burning himself out on speed, looking for trouble, a pack of Export A's in his pocket.

Now I remember the dream—it was about the woman who came between us. Naked in an open horizontal freezer like we used to have in the garage when I was a kid, her hair knotted up in an ice-water bath. She's looking at me through the liquid and chunks of ice without much of an expression and I wonder how she can stare at me so calmly 'cause I can't keep my eyes open under water—it hurts. I reach down into the numbing liquid and put my hands around her throat, holding her still. I'm listening to the clacking of the ice cubes as she sways in the ice water, like someone trying to get comfortable in bed. Still looking me in the eyes, she remarks casually, "This is stupid." I agree, we laugh about it, and I let her up.

I'm looking down into the empty freezer now, no one is looking back at me, and I am alone. Our love has become a gift pulled out of my hands, a rhythm broken. I wasn't invited to the most important event of my young life.

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### 5 : AFTERWARDS

How long will it take for the cold to thaw out my hands? Poor circulation, I'm told. Ice in the bone and some wanting, always that now, over and over again, and that must be the way to love.

(Now that you've said that, remember: You've got to keep on telling the truth.)

You've got to keep yourself occupied. You can't give in. You have no freedom, no free will, not really; you've never had that luxury. Everything hurts until you're numb; you're scared of being so numb you won't care anymore—you might fall asleep. Don't fall asleep; she's talking to you. There's something you have to work out, but you just want to go to sleep. After all, it's late. But you'll never get to relax—and if she let you relax it would be out of indifference and the pain of that would throw you into absolute fits. Sure, others can relax, they have that freedom; but you know you're the same as they are—sometimes you're certain of that. Remember, everything has the potential to be the most painful thing you've ever felt, but the numbness you force on yourself in its place will rob you of even that.

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### 6 : THE REVELATION

You want answers now? To cold—heat. A revelation! We've been trying too hard. To each other we're like sound in the air, shaking on through. We're simple, really. No, not that. We contradict. We want out. We want to fly. I began by dreaming and now look at me. We could just do our work—there are other possibilities. We're not forced to listen except to get at what we want. We don't have to be in love all the time (all the time). We could stay with these formulas or not. But why do we have to suffer for them so much, so often? It must be because we need to suffer, or want to suffer, in order to be, to change, to be other than what we were, to get out maybe, to get away from ourselves.

Is it so difficult just to be?

—Yes, it must be the most difficult thing there is, to know how to be able to be. And it isn't even the same all the time (all the time), sometimes it's easy and "Yes," and then sometimes it has to be "No."

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### 7 : THE IDEA

Would they let me run, though, if I wanted to run? What about some room in which to move, a city full of empty spaces into which we could all dig our own little burrows? Or a way of life into which we could poke some holes? A single great contradiction, maybe—a logical escape from the usual line-up to the mundane? An oxymoron might even give us some sort of salvation. An idea.

Do they care too much or not at all? Could I fly like in Chagall? My father used to scream because, as a child, I went around breaking the windows in every room of the house.

I put my father's name beside my mother's and one is longer. In this crowd I grow two more faces—I'm surrounded. I neglect everything for the woman; I neglect the woman for everything else.

You may have noticed that everyone's gone now. That happens—it doesn't have to be a tragedy. Left alone the pieces will let go of one another and move off in different directions. Each adept takes their piece of the broken jug, their tesserae, for future recognition. I could always try to pull the pieces back together. I might even be able to rest in-between efforts, if it's not too late. If that doesn't work, I may only have to try again. It could always be as simple as that.

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### 8 : A CERTAINTY

I've spared you none of the telling details, I hope. A writer, I love the feel of my pen rolling across the paper, making out words with the certainty of black ink. Words are so comforting in the instant you read them, so necessary once they've been written.

Later I'll probably get up and walk somewhere: across town, to the park, through the Sunday streets of another country. After all this, it's still only the story of getting out of one's parents' house, of yanking the triangle into a line, of remembering without repeating, of trying to get to the moral of the story.

Maybe tomorrow I'll find something else to work on, although I have no words yet for the images, no thoughts for the characters, no feelings for the furniture. I'll be absolved by getting out of the apartment—especially the kitchen.

This is the last image—I'm holding it close—and it's of a woman. I'll be forced to open my eyes now; but I'll also have the certainty of the image to hold, another message to myself. Remembering it as something that's already happened but which I'd forgotten about; remembering it suddenly, involuntarily, like a *déjà vu*:

She's in a train car, looking out the window—no, the window is open, gone, slid away behind the other pane, like in a Greyhound or a school bus. The wind, coming in through the open space, blows across our faces. Her eyes may be closed, as mine are now; she's only concentrating on feeling the wind on her face more closely. We don't have to be touching, but we aren't afraid to open the windows. Maybe the rushing air has made one of my eyes tear, because I feel it now rolling down the side of my face. Suddenly aware of the tickle, I realize that I must be awake. But my eyes are still closed. Only now they are becoming, the lids separating, bravely, no choice now, unavoidably, open to another day.

"Poison and Antidote" is the title story of Foust's forthcoming collection of nine inter-connected stories of the artists, writers, musicians, and Bohemians of the San Francisco art scene during the Reagan years.