

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

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The Birds and the Bombs

THE REFLEX WAS SURE TO BURST: "That's what you get, when you hit a badge," my dad screaming through a fit of coughs. Primal senses emboldening in his age, the old vulture could smell blood.

They were two males; at one time, sons. One lie on the pavement in Dallas, the other, in the sand of the Golan Heights. There was hardly a shade of difference between the two, but their bandanas and feathers gave each away.

The news would be just breaking, but the levels of enthusiasm expressed around the room would vary, no longer unanimous in the new decade. In my youth, the bombs and last breaths echoed into the room in a raucous applause. Increasingly though, it would earn from me nothing more than a quick glance and a sigh. Even the blonde orators on the various channels seemed to mostly mumble the subject, devoting at best a byline and maybe ten generous seconds. Once seen as a popular theater, the constant stream of gore, past a trickle, flooded the whole house.

Sometimes they wouldn't have the picture. My dad would be fine with that. As long as they listed the suspects' charges, everything would go smoothly. Or if they held up a badge and talked statistics and social intentions: nothing to see, his naked hands and erupted ribcage were merely one in one-hundred graves. From the couch, from behind the kitchen knife: a chorus sang, it must be alright, it must be alright. Then, a silent mix of cheer and disguised fear, click, click, chop, chop. Ding. Swallow.

But they would have video this time; the lethal images beaming in from the scope of the camera instantly damned both kids to the critical dopamine-pit of couch panelists.

Ocelli emerald and bronze, the one with the bloody black napkin currently stained the screen; seen there was movement only from his sweaty mesh. Fatigued combatants circled with cigarettes, and a shadow of a helicopter floated above the boy's breathless, cloaked carcass weighting the aggravated sand. The orator slipped some acronym of letters. I barely had time to wonder if they had not been arranged differently the week before.

It was the Texian next, his fifteen seconds of fading. The clouds above could not withhold from his folded, broken wings, an inherit opalescence of copper and bass-violet rings. I saw his tinged neck twisted parallel to a path of cement, his cut ears left victim to the convected rumble of new boots. Beating in the wind next to his still wings, his green bandana could almost be heard howling in mourning. Retribution, they estimated, assured. He had struggled against the licensed heroes, interrupting them as they were making off with his plants, striking, from spread-eagle on his stomach, one or two of his thieving assailants. The next, they said, was justified; and they had even peered into their holy books to appeal to the correct scripture.

Because he hit me.

The quote was painted on the lower portion of the screen, frozen. A matter of procedure, of course. Meanwhile, baking on the pavement, glis-

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

tening ebony silk rifted into a deep pit: a canyon of crusty and bubbling blood.

"A wolfish pair of wicked, miscalculative maculae and their ruinous, son-of-Satan blood-vessel bastards," my dad explained to me one day, mourning his old sight. "Recently, the doctor became suspicious of such mischievousness after an eye exam. Of course, he confirmed their presence and condemned the rebels. 'Sanctions!,' he had demanded, 'such defiance must be dealt with!' And so I was mobilized, for a while, to fight: creamy napalm-balm and pill-launchers, steroidic bombs behind those. One way or another, at all costs, he assured me. Now I learned to know better, though."

He would indicate toward his heavy cane resting on the sleeve, with a nod accentuated by a large quivering appendage like a fleshy wattle. "It's not so simple in war. It's the very perpetuation of vitality, where the parasitic potpourri of prophetic fungi riotously convulse the ancient, faltering knees of the Old Elms. A horse begot a horse begot a mule. Under the sun, it's a mutiny, emboldened in sin and integument wrinkles, fatefully mastered by the now-disgruntled cornerstone, who, while originally impressed and so loyal to your pursuit, overestimated your merit and now shrieks for your head. Babel's construction would not go on; *'and slime had they for mortar.'* From the heights of the Hellespont bridge the Ghost of Darius is heard whispering his condemnation of Xerxes' transgressions against existence: *'some god to cloud his better sense.'* Dust to dust."

It's yet hard to tell if I am ashamed for it, but, sometimes, I hoped he was right. The couch underneath him laughing from the belly of its coils after each respiratory thrust, I imagined it opening up and swallowing him whole. He would just sink into the checkered crevices, a falling Fat Man in the crumbling horizon, whistling into the rigid pocket of only my conscience. Maybe then the bombs would stop, I would beg. Now, I hope beyond anything that he was wrong. When my muscles twitch, when my stomach turns – acidic premonitions of impotency, pharmaceutical rainbows and oversized diapers begin to viciously rot out the marrow of my youth. The depths do become unmistakable, when the well drains.

When he finished screaming his frustration, he was smoking, in the throes of his reign. Burnt carbon-heaves and brown, cloudy mucus streams; the smell of cancer and various rotting excretions. Even when he was at work, the thick stink throughout the room. It kissed him goodbye before work, gassed him to sleep at night. A breath of it was like kissing a corpse. The toxic mist even contaminated the food in the kitchen. It fogged the quick distance between a book on the counter and a bird, where a quill had been tucked into a middle of pages, where she kept her moulted remiges.

What would come next, more directed.

"You don't even need a degree!"

My rejection would seem to make the pain worse.

Protect and serve, the explanation exploded again and again. "Like the boys on the TV."

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

He might be echoed by the bird in the kitchen – chirping, heating, stirring. She wiped the tips of her wings on an apron.

Anyway, the dust of habits had already settled in the house, insisting a list of the endless benefits of joining the ranks of the common police. The noise could be reduced in summation to screaming and polite, prodding squawks.

Just before the unbearable peak of collapse, in the summit of suspense, I would careen out the front door and leave, to anywhere. The bomb was to erupt, at any minute further. I didn't turn my head back.

As I walked further and further away, there sprang a brook, splashing from the core of my skull. *Erehwynna, erehwynna*, I'd chant it silently down the sidewalk, imagining what a place with that name would look like. A cave in Kentucky, *Erewhynna*, the ocean. Walking, watching the driveway scenes, I forgot bombs. I forgot every coercive force, every method of organized robbery, humanitarian monopolies. If I tried hard enough, I could hear only the warbles of perched birds. *Erewhynna*, out loud.

There were places on my journey, bearing almost the same name. Here and there, west, upriver, the image would never be as exotic as it sounded, upon arrival. They were mostly lights and flat promise.

Those scattered alchemists may have been charging a premium price, but there was forgiveness from many; their scheme, after all, was philanthropic in essence, even religious in some rites. After constructing the largest man-made mine in the tri-state, the charity checked no soul at the open door. The khakied clergy joyously sang a lively tune, as they would baptize each heath-dweller in pools of fool's gold profound enough to drown even the most aquatic of demons. Their holy ism assumed salvation for each individual in the communal fellowship around the felted tables of plenty. In matters of self-made renewal, there was no sweeter honey, no bond as corporate, as the degree of not-me that was teased by their sheepskin. Amen and another round of depressant gin.

The arching street-lamps had already been awakened, on my way home. I returned – the bird had flown away, and soon after her, the folds of the couch did really engulf my father.

That's why you'll see me look out the window. Or occasionally try to burrow into the pit below the couch, peeling back the folds of the fabric. I'll even try to fly. It's not that I exactly miss them here. I just wonder where they went. They left with not even a fuss of feathers, a cane still resting against the ottoman. Gone like the boys on the TV: over and over again. Except, that the cameras never came.

So sometimes I'll think to look. It's the only time, when I will unlock and open all the windows and remove the pillows from the couch. Please excuse the mess.

There are times that I'll even turn on the TV. I'll scream and wave and curse at the digital devils, at the images and classifications still cycling through prime-time; at the blood, at the cuffs, at the aggression and apologetic routines. Some things never change. I'll light up a cigarette.

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/4

It does work sometimes. The seance will vomit the incubus into its former, decrepit, flannel throne. He'll not even skip a beat, creaking and screaming and coughing and shedding. My son will star, deep into my eyes, in awe of the transformation. From the branches in the window, a song of comfort to the boy, a bird whispering these words:

An exorcism, Erewhyna.