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James Frazee

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Five Poems · James Frazee

THE LAUGHING BOY

It was that rare late August day the word dusk
or evening fails to define, a kind of near dark
with an edge of craziness, not twilight,
but the blue sky deepening into a brief
yet perceptible mischief you sometimes hear
quiet the neighborhood. I had been reading
Chekhov's "The Duel" on the porch, feeling sorry
for Laevsky caught in his maze of petty lies
and subterfuge, never able to tell the truth,
when I began to think we are just as enslaved
by what is true of ourselves as we are
by our fabrications. Not really a new idea
but one that brought back to mind, as a boy,
how my mother once ear-tugged me to attend church,
and my backtalk: an under-the-breath *fuck*.
In that sliver of time that must have passed
like a slow motion home movie, this single
undercutting profanation transformed her
into a mother I really didn't know, a mother
who surpassed her tight-lipped smolder of anger,
who felt my cassock, surplice, altar boy's Latin
rise through her like flakes of ash out a chimney—
and I stood in amazement, my hands pocketed.
But the quickness with which I said that word,
the lack of horror—and after that, my immobility—
surprised me even more. So instantly I felt
a boundless esteem, a drunken giddiness,
that when her hand struck my cheek
I let out a long unspooling laugh.

Ten years later I left a discoteca in Barcelona
danced-out and boozed-up crutching the sharp shoulder
of a lanky blond who wouldn't quit reminding me
she was a model from Tasmania as we lumbered
through hosed-down streets rattling windowpanes
with our fingernails, caterwauling, teething
earlobes and then French-kissing, leaning against
two towering Gothic doors that swung open to us.
We fell into the foyer of an empty cathedral
lit by votive candles glowing like an admonition
of mortal sin. It happened this quickly:
her hands mechanically unbuckled my belt
and skidded my blue jeans to my ankles;
her upturned mouth—its meretricious grin—
coasted up the inside of my thigh; her wispy hair
brushed over me and then the brisk grip
between lips, the rocking like an engine idling—
it was an inextricable mixture of wrongdoing
and pleasure. And when what I had done
tapped my brain and broke into the memory
of being slapped by my mother, I let out
a rollercoaster laugh that lilted in the air
the moment I stopped. The vindictive snicker
of a boy is what I heard, myself, a boy
who had purposely let a communion wafer
drop off his tongue onto the hardwood floor
where it quickly fastened and wouldn't pry loose.

It would be easy to say all I have said
is a shrewdly plotted lie to conceal another past,
or is hardly the thing one chooses to remember,
but these accidents spray through my mind
just as the sweeping arc of the lawn sprinkler
permeates the air with its fine gray mist,
and they touch me with such conviction and clarity
that finally it really doesn't matter
who knows or doesn't. Beyond the porch

the indolent wind picks through the treetops,
the dusk flicks on the streetlamps, a church bell
appeals over rooftops, and I sit in the dark
with my elastic kind of laughter, resilient and true,
the harder it pulls forward as a man,
the harder it falls back as a boy.

INTIMATE LIGHTING

After the last house lamp is switched off
and the wet emerald glow of the city night
intrudes between the parted draperies,
the living room assumes a less familiar shape
and draws us into what the mind regards
a darker and more indelible world.

To you by now, your abortion today
should bring on hot blinding light,
a white noise like traffic in gridlock,
or perhaps a warning from God,
the Bible falling from the bookshelf.
But it is quiet. There is only a tinny sound
in your head, not the ringing of ears,
not the taunting rasp of lost motherhood,
just that you feel nothing.

On the green grounds of the clinic
I had circled a man-made pond
which was like a window into a womb
but where nothing seemed to move.
While you lay under anesthetic
I thought of why we are drawn to water,
that its clear pacification is a kind of sham
we don't avoid because of its other-worldliness:
the link between floating inside our mothers
and evolving millions of years from the muck.
But this is half of what I wanted to say,