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The Iowa Review

Volume 1
Issue 4 *Fall*

Article 23

1970

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Recommended Citation

Coover, Robert. "The Reunion." *The Iowa Review* 1.4 (1970): 64-67. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.1129>

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The Reunion

Robert Coover

Outside, in the night, before the door, Thomas pauses. He does not seem happy with himself, embarrassed maybe. He steps over to the window and looks in. The room is lit by candles. He is the only one not there. Evidently comforted by this, by the discovery that no one else has stayed away, he returns to the door and knocks boldly.

“Oh, so you have . . . you have decided to come after all,” says the man who comes to the door. Is there something unpleasant in his tone? Is he alarmed?

“Yes,” says Thomas, glancing back for a moment over his shoulder. Why did he do that, he wonders. It is a dark night, dense, not warm though. He turns back to the man and smiles gently. “Yes, I have come,” he says, and enters, closing the door quietly behind him.

The others look up at him and silence falls. He greets each of them, one by one, respectfully, cordially, and after he has been among them awhile, they come gradually to accept his presence. Conversations resume.

Some of the people stand, though most of them sit on chairs or on cushions that have been tossed on the floor. Their talk is muted, serious, yet, there’s something festive about the gathering, too. A woman is serving wine and dry pastries. Thomas, accepting a glass of wine, observes that the woman, who has been morose, ill-tempered, eremitic, almost morbid, over the past year or so, in fact as long as he has known her, is tonight relaxed, even gracious. He withdraws to a small group and enters lightly into a discussion of certain legal questions, but he continues to watch the woman with interest. The wine is sweet, not to his taste, so he drinks little of it.

In the room, which is square, rustic, not very large, there are the chairs, cushions, and a long table. There is a vase on the table, empty, an odd touch. On the wall, someone has sketched something rather roughly. It might be a fish, but then again it might not. The woman serving the wine puts the pitcher on the table and leaves the room with the pastry plate, which is almost empty. She returns in a moment with more pastry and another candle. She sets the filled plate on the table, near the wine, lights the new candle, and fits it into the empty vase. She looks at Thomas—or rather, toward him, for she seems not to notice him, even though he is staring directly back at her. She seems happy, self-assured, self-contained even.

Peter, on the other hand, alone in one corner of the room, is pale, rigid, drawn up as though in pain. The fixed smile on his face suggests not pleasure so

much as the prospect of some violent gesture. He eats and drinks nothing, though he clenches an empty wine glass in his right hand. Thomas leaves the small group and walks across the room to Peter.

"Good evening," Thomas says. "I wanted to thank you for inviting me here, after all."

"*Now* you will see!" replies Peter imperiously, almost as a threat, and he strides abruptly away to another corner.

Left alone, Thomas gazes out upon the room. It is fairly well lit, there are several candles scattered about, yet it is also deeply shadowed, and the walls, losing definition in those nervous shadows, seem much less substantial and fixed than they doubtless are. More of the group are now standing than before, and there seems to be a certain restlessness creeping through the room. It is not early.

The woman who has been serving approaches Thomas with the wine pitcher. "Would you like some more?" she asks softly.

"Yes, thank you, just a bit," replies Thomas, too grateful she has asked to refuse.

"Don't mind Peter," she says. "He really wishes very much to please you."

"I'm sure," says Thomas. He holds his glass out, but she seems to have forgotten.

"It is only that he is upset," she explains. "He returned here long before sundown, and he has eaten nothing."

Thomas notices that the woman has combed her hair, something she rarely did before, and that there is something unusually deep-set, pensive, about her eyes, something he has never seen there before. She is, in short, astonishingly beautiful this night.

When Thomas does not reply, she continues: "We think that it is somehow significant that you have come. It is as though you have signaled for us that tonight, perhaps . . ." Her voice trails off.

"There have been failures?" Thomas ventures.

She does not answer him, but runs one hand through her hair and stares absently at the wall behind him. "We are happy that you have come," she says at last, and turns away. She returns the pitcher to the table, still having failed to fill Thomas' glass, and leaves the room.

She remains away from the group for some time. When she does return, the group is much as she left it, although no one is talking now. Some sip wine solemnly, but there is no moving about. They glance at each other as though seeking some sign. Peter is alone, as before, still smiling the same skewed smile, still clutching the unused wine glass. Thomas is also alone, leaning meditatively against one wall. The woman stands by the table, staring vacantly out upon the room.

Thomas straightens, takes a breath, then walks across the still room to the table. Because it is the only motion in the room, the entire group watches him. At the table, his back to the others, he places his glass in front of him, picks up the pitcher, fills his glass slowly, returns the pitcher. His hands lie lightly on the table. He gazes for a moment at the candle burning in the vase. There is little of it left. He does not pick up his glass, but turns instead and, resolutely, faces the

group. They are all staring at him, all but Peter who continues to glare, grimacing, at the whole room, focusing on nothing.

“Look,” says Thomas firmly, “the man is dead.” His voice sounds harshly in the hushed room, and he himself is startled by it. He clears his throat. “I know it is terrible and that we are sorrowed, deeply sorrowed, by his death. And murdered, yes, the cruelty of it, the injustice—but, but don’t you see, we can’t let our grief make fools of us! When a man is hung, whatever the cause, he dies. When a man dies, he is buried. When a man is buried, he decays. This is our truth, all we have. And all our wanting, however desperate, however sincere, will not change that truth, *will not bring that man here tonight.*” Their attention is still fixed on him, but there is hostility now. He knows what he is doing to them, what he must do, and he can only hope. “I like to think I’m your friend,” he continues. He wishes his voice might express the gentleness and love he feels for them, but the silence is too deep. “We’ve been together a long time, most of us, we’ve suffered together and we’ve dreamed together. I’m not above suffering and dreaming. As you have wanted things to be, just so have I wanted them to be. As you came here tonight with hope, so I came with hope. Do you understand that? But there has arrived that moment when we must confront reality honestly and bravely, our own wishes be damned.” He pauses, clears his throat, tells himself there has been some softening in their stares. “I know how hard it is, after all the hardships, the joyful plans, our boasts to the world, I know the easy thing would be—”

Suddenly, without warning, the door whips open with a resounding crash. A woman screams. Candles flutter and die as though plucked. A damp wind sweeps through the small bare room. Those sitting, those standing, those crouching, all wait, frozen, watching the door. There is no one there, just the night. Only Peter does not look toward the door. The wine glass slips through his trembling fingers and smashes on the floor, clay cracking clay.

Thomas, at the table, is opposite the open door. He half expects a shape to emerge from the night outside, but there is only darkness and the wind. He knows that it will be difficult to resume his speech with any effect; in fact, he has no intention of resuming it. His right knee is shaking, so he leans back against the stone table for support. The room has become very dark, only two candles burn now, and the shadows are sharper, more agitated, more immense. Thomas knows that what is needed at this moment is for someone to cross the room and close the door. He looks at the woman who has been serving wine and finds that she is clutching her apron in her mouth, her composure shattered, her face all stretched apart with frozen terror. She frightens him, he looks away. His eyes rest for a moment on the wine pitcher, reflecting one candle’s unsteady light. He takes a deep breath. When he turns back to the doorway, there is a man standing in it.

The man is of moderate height and build, dressed simply, wearing sandals. His hands are long and slender and hang without motion at his side. He stands erect. But the most remarkable thing about the man is his head. It is not connected except by skin to the body, and is lying, precariously, on his left shoulder. The neck is thin and strung out, burned red. The face is chalk-white, harshly vivid in the black doorway. The mouth is open, the dark tongue out taut, and there

is dried blood at the corners and on the chin. The eyes are dull, opaque, look at nothing. It is the head of a hanged man.

The man now walks straight into the room and thus straight at Thomas. He walks with a strange rigid solemnity, planting each foot flatly as he steps, rising as though rocking on the ball of the other. Thomas, no less pale than the hanged man, does not move. Why me? he cries to himself. The man walks directly into Thomas with a stunning thick thud, rocks back, stops. The head rolls off the shoulder with the impact and dangles like an ornament on his chest. One hand rises slowly, mechanically, trembling faintly, and lifts the head back upon the shoulder. Thomas, in terror, is not even able to breathe. For a long time, the hanged man stands motionless before him. The eyes for all their opacity are extraordinarily large.

“Bring . . . a chair!” Thomas gasps at last, appealing to anyone who might hear. His voice escapes him as little more than breath. “A chair! Please!”

Peter, no longer glaring, no longer smiling, slumps to the floor and gapes at his feet. The entire right side of his face is twitching in a cruel spasm.

It is the woman, finally, who edges a chair toward Thomas and the hanged man. With his foot, Thomas, still confronting the man, draws the chair toward him, until it touches the hanged man’s leg. The man drops instantly as though thrown into the chair. Again the head rolls off the man’s shoulder, and now dangles over the back of the chair, staring upsidedown, at the circle of distraught faces that stare back. Thomas sees that the man cannot, by himself, return the head to his shoulder, but neither can he bring himself to help the man. Instead, he stares down at a stark and brittle body whose head has disappeared behind its back. The man in the chair does not move. Nor does he ever move again. It is a long and cheerless night
