Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Lee Rossi: Four Poems

Lee Rossi · Wednesday, January 30th, 2019

Foil

I ride the long arc of the freeway
through West L.A., the low, bland shops
and houses flexing in the heat like mats
of algae, distant hills and towers
wrapped in petrochemical gauze. I'm
thinking about love the way fishermen
on the pier must think about their tropical homes,
the shacks and shanties filled with children,
the carbide-tainted waters teeming with fish
every color of metal. Has the pollution
of their dreams been slow or quick?
I catch the glare off a taller building,
that hospital, and am nearly blinded
by the memory of a girl's copper hair.

*

Poker Party

Half a dozen seminarians,
future bureaucrats of the Lord—
we tried so hard to be adult,
smoking, drinking somebody's parent's beer.
Pitiful. That useless wad of flesh tucked
snugly in our underpants. Seventeen
years old and never kissed a girl
– although some of us dreamed it.
Some of us dreamed of kissing a boy.

Poker's no good if you're not playing
for money, for blood. Sucking on
cigarettes, giving our cigarettes a blow job.
We played for chips, for points.

Pointless.

Bored, we'd jump into some dad's Buick
and cruise the park, looking for fags
outside the men's john, or slide
past a long line of cars,
fog steaming windows,
fog of lust, fog of need.
We needed something to do
Saturday night, no girls in sight.
We'd sworn off girls for life,
our spiritual life—
a bunch of teenagers going crazy,
prosthetic hearts banging like a cheap drum kit
inside the smoke-filled darkness of our chests.

Sometimes we'd kill the lights
and slip behind a car,
then flip them on, shouting,
"God sees you," as we roared by.
Stupid. Plain stupid.
Trying to outrun some jerk with a hard-on.
I was a total jerk off. We all were.

I'll stop now. I can see I'm boring you.
But that was the point. The boredom.
You've got youth gushing from all your spigots
like beer at a sodality mixer,
and you just turn it off!
And everybody's smiling
and gritting their teeth
and saying what a good thing you're doing
giving your life to God,
fucking up your life,
and meanwhile everybody else
is jumping into the bushes with one another
and getting something, you'll never know what,
how good it is.

They're laughing their asses off. At you.
And you're a dumb skull, you even believe
you're giving your life to something
higher.
And then you don't.

*

Naked

I

If you never saw your parents naked
or if you can remember each time,
then you're someone like me,

someone embarrassed to take off
his clothes in front of his own children,
even when camping, even in the close

confines of a tent. In the seminary,
the freshman all slept in a large
L-shaped room, dressing and undressing

in the privacy of our bathrobes.
We called it "modesty,"
a habit I acquired at home,

where the four of us always changed
behind a bathroom or bedroom door,
privacy and shame our closest intimates.

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Missouri Roll

Whenever Dad walked into a new saloon,
he'd flash a wad thick enough
to choke the big-mouth bass
leering over the bar like a row
of gargoyles, passing judgment
on the drunks below. A roll of ones
wrapped in the thin blanket of a 20
and snugged with a burly rubber band.
What was he thinking? That the locals
would be impressed? He kept another roll,
of pennies, in his pant's pocket, the poor man's
brass knuckles—grip it in your fist
and slam it into someone's gut,
no broken bones and lots of extra
force. He'd been a boxer, 21 pro fights.
Maybe he missed the excitement
of the ring, the managers and cut men,
the hysterical, drunken crowd,
and needed some of that excitement
now that his life was just trays
of food and booze leaving
the kitchen and coming back empty.

But someone got wise to him.

He was only a welterweight
and could flatten the biggest guy
in the place. After a couple of beers
the barkeep slipped something into
his Schlitz—knock out drops—
and when he woke in the alley
behind the bar, his cash was gone,
the pennies too, and over all his body,
bruises bloomed like roses.

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