

# 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.

\*

## 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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