

Cultural Daily

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Edward Field: "The Last Bohemians" & "Old Acquaintances"

Edward Field · Thursday, August 16th, 2012

Edward Field is the recipient of the W.H. Auden award, the Bill Whitehead lifetime achievement award, the Lambda Literary Award, and is the author of ten books of poetry, including *After The Fall: poems old and new*, in which can be found his poem, "Mae West," published by University of Pittsburgh Press, © 2007.

The Last Bohemians

for Rosetta Reitz

We meet in a cheap diner and I think, God,
 the continuity, I mean, imagine
 our still being here together
 from the old days of the Village
 when you had the bookshop on Greenwich Avenue
 and Jimmy Baldwin and Jimmy Merrill used to drop in.
 Toying with your gooey chicken, you remind me
 how disappointed I was with you for moving
 to Eight Street and adding gifts and art cards,
 but little magazines, you explain, couldn't pay the rent.
 Don't apologize, I want to say, it was forty years ago!
 Neither of us, without clinging to our old apartments,
 could pay Village rents nowadays,
 where nobody comes "to be an artist" anymore.
 Living marginally still, we are shabby as ever,
 though shabby was attractive on us once—those years
 when the latest Williams or Stevens or Moore was sold
 in maybe five bookstores, and the Horton
 biography or Hart crane an impossible find.
 Continuity! We're still talking of our problems
 with writing, finding a publisher,
 as though that was the most important thing in the world.
 Sweetheart, we are as out of it as old lefties.
 Someone came into my apartment recently and exclaimed,
 "Why, it's bohemian!" as if she had discovered
 the last of a near-extinct breed.

Lady, I wanted to protest,
I don't have clamshell ashtrays,
or Chianti bottles encrusted with candle wax,
or Wilhelm Reich, Henry Miller, and D.H. Lawrence,
much less Kahlil Gibran and Havelock Ellis,
on my bricks-and-boards bookshelves!
But it's not just the Salvation Army junk she saw
or the mattress and pillows on the floor.
My living style represented for her
the aesthetic of an earlier generation,
the economics, even, of a time,
our time, Rosetta, before she was born.
The youth still come weekends, though not to
"see a drag show,"
or "bull draggers fighting in the gutters,"
or to "pick up a queer or artist's model."
But there is something expectant in them
for something supposed to be here, once called,
(shiver) bohemian. Now it's I who shiver
as I pass them, fearing their rage against
an old guy with the sad face of a loser.
Daytime, it's safer, with couples in from the suburbs
browsing the antique shops.
I find it all so boring, but am stuck here,
a ghost in a haunted house.
At a movie about a war criminal whose American
lawyer daughter blindly defends him, blasted by the critics
because it is serious and has a message,
the audience is full of old Villagers, drawn to see it
because it's serious and has a message,
the women, no longer in dirndls and sandals,
but with something telltale about the handcrafted jewelry,
the men not in berets, but the kind that would wear them,
couples for whom being young meant being radical,
meant free love. Anyway,
something about them says Villager,
maybe the remnants of intellect, idealism,
which has begun to look odd on American faces.
Nowadays, there's nothing radical left, certainly not
in the Village, no Left bank to flee to, no justification
for artistic poverty, nothing for the young to believe in,
except their careers and the fun of flaunting
their youth and freaky hairstyles in trendy enclaves.
Leftover from the old Village, we spot each other
drifting through the ghostly
high-rental picturesque streets, ears echoing
with typewriters clacking and scales and arpeggios
heard no more, and meet fugitive in coffee shops,

partly out of friendship, but also, as we get shabbier and rarer,
 from a sense of continuity like, hey, we're historic!
 and an appreciation, even if we never quite got there,
 of what our generation set out to do.

Old Acquaintance

Deirdre! Come out!
 Come out from behind that screen.
 I've been hiding behind screens
 since before you were born.

— Bette Davis, in *Old Acquaintance*

Old friend, we've come through
 in pretty good shape, so far,
 better, in fact,
 than during those angst-filled years
 when you wrecked my life
 and I wrecked yours. Remember?
 But, back then, we didn't appreciate each other,
 did we—like an ill-matched couple,
 a bad job by an incompetent marriage broker,
 or who just got married out of general horniness
 rather than any real compatibility.
 I never liked your looks or size,
 and you had ideas of your own
 I couldn't figure out,
 though I responded to your goading
 and roamed the nights away.
 My God, what you led me into,
 and I got you into some pretty tight fixes myself.
 Life is less strenuous now.
 In our golden years, you make few demands.
 We've both come to like a bit of a wank,
 with none of the old recriminations after.
 And I've learned to admire,
 as I pose in the mirror,
 your silky length,
 respect your sulky independence.
 I wonder that I ever thought you
 insufficient, myself under-endowed—
 or else you've grown.
 Best of all, I'm impressed
 by how good we look together—
 the proportions seem just right.
 So, Good Cock,
 dick, prick, dong,

lul, bite, schwantz,
wang, willie, weenie,
and all your other names,
if you've a mind to, now,
and I'd say you've earned it,
stand up, old friend, with me
and take a bow.

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