Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Richard Jones: Two Poems

Richard Jones · Thursday, February 1st, 2018

The Black Raincoat

I'd like to say a good word of praise
for my long black raincoat,
how it reminds me of those heavy wool greatcoats
once worn by intrepid Londoners
to fend off the tireless English rain
or the fur-collared, ankle-length velvet coats
that warmed the Parisian ladies
in the chilly days of the Belle Epoch.
Where I live people wear insulated winter coats
that look like inflated sleeping bags
with puffy hoods—
the raincoat now old-fashioned and out-of-date.
But I love my old black raincoat
and find myself at home in it.
If I were in Paris
and the French sky thundered and cracked
and the heavens opened up,
I'd cry out,
"J'adore mon impermeable!
J'aime la pluie!"
I'd think nothing of strolling
through the Tuilleries in the rain
or standing under a long-handled umbrella
in the 8th Arrondissement
and fumbling with my guidebook
to my find my way
on the drizzly Champs Elysees,
though here in Chicago
I'd probably search for someplace dry
and maybe let the rain pass.
I'd step into a storefront doorway
as if stepping out of this life
for a few brief moments.

From my raincoat’s inner pocket,
I’d take my silver cigarette case
and my flask of glass and leather
and drink a toast of love to the world.
When my best friend on earth died,
I walked in the rain to the funeral home.
On a silver tray in the parlor
I left my calling card—
a black card of sympathy
with my name in white cursive.
I slowly took off my black raincoat
and hung it in the hallway.
Before gathering myself
to go in to the reposing room,
I stood there and watched my raincoat weep—
a few raindrops stubbornly clinging to the hem,
a few raindrops rolling down the empty sleeves
and falling.

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Bedlam

People vanish. They lose their minds
and their loved ones no longer find them
hiding behind those empty eyes
that are no longer windows.
In old London the mad were taken
to Bethlehem Hospital,
which in their thick accents
the citizens called “Bedlam.”
Bedlam was a place where,
according to the mayor in 1450,
one would find “many men
that be fallen out of their wits,”
an infamous place known for cruelty—
chains and manacles, freezing baths
and bleedings, solitary cells for the purpose
of depletion and purgation.
If it were 1750 and I was seeking amusement,
the tour book says I could pay a penny
and go inside and walk the wards for the titillation
of seeing lunatics starving on their filthy mats.
Foucault in his *History of Madness* claims
96,000 visitors a year. I shiver. The day is cold.
Walking in Bishopsgate, chilled from the damp,
I imagine standing outside the tall iron fence
of the original, long-lost building.
I count the barred windows

and note the glass reflecting waterfalls of light,
as if there were still hope for desolate humankind.
In my mind I see the wide gardens
and hear a cacophony of birdsong,
London’s birds hidden in nests in the winter branches.
“Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.”
I open the gate to go in. The iron hinge creaks—.
That someone has come
after all these years, startles the birds.
Hundreds lift from the trees and take flight
as if all the birds had suddenly come to their senses
and remembered they had wings.

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