

Classic Poetry Series

Andrew Hudgins

- poems -

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In The Well

My father cinched the rope,
a noose around my waist,
and lowered me into
the darkness. I could taste

my fear. It tasted first
of dark, then earth, then rot.
I swung and struck my head
and at that moment got

another then: then blood,
which spiked my mouth with iron.
Hand over hand, my father
dropped me from then to then:

then water. Then wet fur,
which I hugged to my chest.
I shouted. Daddy hauled
the wet rope. I gagged, and pressed

my neighbor's missing dog
against me. I held its death
and rose up to my father.
Then light. Then hands. Then breath.

Andrew Hudgins

The Unpromised Land, Montgomery, Alabama

Despite the noon sun shimmering on Court Street,
each day I leave my desk, and window-shop,
waste time, and use my whole lunch hour to stroll
the route the marchers took. The walk is blistering--
the kind of heat that might make you recall
Nat Turner skinned and rendered into grease
if you share my cheap liberal guilt for sins
before your time. I hold it dear. I know
if I had lived in 1861
I would have fought in butternut, not blue
and never known I'd sinned. Nat Turner skinned
for doing what I like to think I'd do
if I were him.

Before the war
half-naked coffles were paraded to Court Square,
where Mary Chesnut gasped--"seasick"--to see
a bright mulatto on the auction block,
who bantered with the buyers, sang bawdy songs,
and flaunted her green satin dress, smart shoes,
I'm sure the poor thing knew who'd purchase her,
wrote Mrs. Chestnut, who plopped on a stool
to discipline her thoughts. Today I saw,
in that same square, three black girls pick loose tar,
flick it at one another's new white dresses,
then squeal with laughter. Three girls about that age
of those blown up in church in Birmingham.

The legendary buses rumble past the church
where Reverend King preached when he lived in town,
a town somehow more his than mine, despite
my memory of standing on Dexter Avenue
and watching, fascinated, a black man fry
six eggs on his Dodge Dart. Because I watched
he gave me one with flecks of dark blue paint
stuck on the yolk. My mother slapped my hand.
I dropped the egg. And when I tried to say
I'm sorry, Mother grabbed my wrist and marched me
back to our car.

I can't hold to the present.
I've known these streets, their history, too long.
Two months before she died, my grandmother
remembered when I'd sassed her as a child,
and at the dinner table, in midbite,
leaned over, struck the grown man on the mouth.
And if I hadn't said I'm sorry, fast,
she would have gone for me again. My aunt,
from laughing, choked on a piece of lemon pie.
But I'm not sure. I'm just Christian enough
to think each sin taints every one of us,
a harsh philosophy that doesn't seem

to get me very far--just to the Capitol
each day at noon, my wet shirt clinging to my back.
Atop its pole, the stars-and-bars,
too heavy for the breeze, hangs listlessly.

Once, standing where Jeff Davis took his oath,
I saw the Capitol. He shrank into his chair,
so flaccid with paralysis he looked
like melting flesh, white as a maggot. He's fatter now.
He courts black votes, and life is calmer than
when Muslims shot whites on this street, and calmer
than when the Klan blew up Judge Johnson's house
or Martin Luther King's. My history could be worse.
I could be Birmingham. I could be Selma.
I could be Philadelphia, Mississippi.

Instead, I'm this small river town. Today,
as I worked at my desk, the boss
called the janitor, Jerome, I hear
you get some lunchtime pussy every day.
Jerome, toothless and over seventy,
stuck the broom handle out between his legs:
Yessir! When the Big Hog talks
--he waggled his broomstick--I gots to listen.
He laughed. And from the corner of his eye,
he looked to see if we were laughing too.

Andrew Hudgins