

Classic Poetry Series

B H Fairchild

- poems -

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Body and Soul

Half-numb, guzzling bourbon and Coke from coffee mugs,
our fathers fall in love with their own stories, nuzzling
the facts but mauling the truth, and my friend's father begins
to lay out with the slow ease of a blues ballad a story
about sandlot baseball in Commerce, Oklahoma decades ago.
These were men's teams, grown men, some in their thirties
and forties who worked together in zinc mines or on oil rigs,
sweat and khaki and long beers after work, steel guitar music
whanging in their ears, little white rent houses to return to
where their wives complained about money and broken Kenmores
and then said the hell with it and sang Body and Soul
in the bathtub and later that evening with the kids asleep
lay in bed stroking their husband's wrist tattoo and smoking
Chesterfields from a fresh pack until everything was O.K.
Well, you get the idea. Life goes on, the next day is Sunday,
another ball game, and the other team shows up one man short.

They say, we're one man short, but can we use this boy,
he's only fifteen years old, and at least he'll make a game.
They take a look at the kid, muscular and kind of knowing
the way he holds his glove, with the shoulders loose,
the thick neck, but then with that boy's face under
a clump of angelic blonde hair, and say, oh, hell, sure,
let's play ball. So it all begins, the men loosening up,
joking about the fat catcher's sex life, it's so bad
last night he had to hump his wife, that sort of thing,
pairing off into little games of catch that heat up into
throwing matches, the smack of the fungo bat, lazy jogging
into right field, big smiles and arcs of tobacco juice,
and the talk that gives a cool, easy feeling to the air,
talk among men normally silent, normally brittle and a little
angry with the empty promise of their lives. But they chatter
and say rock and fire, babe, easy out, and go right ahead
and pitch to the boy, but nothing fancy, just hard fastballs
right around the belt, and the kid takes the first two
but on the third pops the bat around so quick and sure
that they pause a moment before turning around to watch
the ball still rising and finally dropping far beyond
the abandoned tractor that marks left field. Holy shit.
They're pretty quiet watching him round the bases,
but then, what the hell, the kid knows how to hit a ball,
so what, let's play some goddamned baseball here.
And so it goes. The next time up, the boy gets a look
at a very nifty low curve, then a slider, and the next one
is the curve again, and he sends it over the Allis Chalmers,
high and big and sweet. The left field just stands there, frozen.
As if this isn't enough, the next time up he bats left-handed.
They can't believe it, and the pitcher, a tall, mean-faced
man from Okarche who just doesn't give a shit anyway
because his wife ran off two years ago leaving him with
three little ones and a rusted-out Dodge with a cracked block,
leans in hard, looking at the fat catcher like he was the sonofabitch

who ran off with his wife, leans in and throws something out of the dark, green hell of forbidden fastballs, something that comes in at the knees and then leaps viciously towards the kid's elbow. He swings exactly the way he did right-handed and they all turn like a chorus line toward deep right field where the ball loses itself in sagebrush and the sad burnt dust of dustbowl Oklahoma. It is something to see.

But why make a long story long: runs pile up on both sides, the boy comes around five times, and five times the pitcher is cursing both God and His mother as his chew of tobacco sours into something resembling horse piss, and a ragged and bruised Spalding baseball disappears into the far horizon. Goodnight, Irene. They have lost the game and some painful side bets and they have been suckered. And it means nothing to them though it should to you when they are told the boy's name is Mickey Mantle. And that's the story, and those are the facts. But the facts are not the truth. I think, though, as I scan the faces of these old men now lost in the innings of their youth, it lying there in the weeds behind that Allis Chalmers just waiting for the obvious question to be asked: why, oh why in hell didn't they just throw around the kid, walk him, after he hit the third homer? Anybody would have, especially nine men with disappointed wives and dirty socks and diminishing expectations for whom winning at anything meant everything. Men who knew how to play the game, who had talent when the other team had nothing except this ringer who without a pitch to hit was meaningless, and they could go home with their little two-dollar side bets and stride into the house singing If You've Got the Money, Honey, I've Got the Time with a bottle of Southern Comfort under their arms and grab Dixie or May Ella up and dance across the gray linoleum as if it were V-Day all over again. But they did not. And they did not because they were men, and this was a boy. And they did not because sometimes after making love, after smoking their Chesterfields in the cool silence and listening to the big bands on the radio that sounded so glamorous, so distant, they glanced over at their wives and noticed the lines growing heavier around the eyes and mouth, felt what their wives felt: that Les Brown and Glenn Miller and all those dancing couples and in fact all possibility of human gaiety and light-heartedness were as far away and unreachable as Times Square or the Avalon ballroom. They did not because of the gray linoleum lying there in the half-dark, the free calendar from the local mortuary that said one day was pretty much like another, the work gloves looped over the doorknob like dead squirrels. And they did not because they had gone through a depression and a war that had left them with the idea that being a man in the eyes of their fathers and everyone else had cost them just too goddamn much to lay it at the feet of a fifteen year-old-boy. And so they did not walk him, and lost, but at least had some ragged remnant of themselves to take back home. But there is one thing more, though it is not

a fact. When I see my friend's father staring hard into the bottomless well of home plate as Mantle's fifth homer heads toward Arkansas, I know that this man with the half-orphaned children and worthless Dodge has also encountered for the first and possibly only time the vast gap between talent and genius, has seen as few have in the harsh light of an Oklahoma Sunday, the blonde and blue-eyed bringer of truth, who will not easily be forgiven.

B H Fairchild

Motion Sickness

I am tired of the heave and swell,
the deep lunge in the belly, the gut's
dumb show of dance and counterdance,
sway and pause, the pure jig of nausea
in the pit of a spinning world.
Where the body moves, the mind
often lags, clutching deck, anchor,
the gray strap that hangs like the beard
of death from the train's ceiling,
the mind lost in the slow bulge
of ocean under the moon's long pull
or the endless coil of some medieval
argument for the existence of God
or the dream of the giant maze
that turns constantly in and in
on itself and there is no way out . . .
I am sick and tired of every rise and fall
of the sun, the moon's tedious cycle
that sucks blood from the thighs of women
and turns teenage boys into wolves
prowling the streets, hungry for motion.
Let me be still, let me rest
in some hollow of space and time
far from the seasons and that boring,
ponderous drama of day and night.
Let me sleep in the heart of calm
and dream placidly of birds frozen
in the unmoving air of eternity
and the earth grown immobile
in its centrifugal spin, and God
motionless as Lazarus in his tomb
before he is raised dizzily
to fall again, to rise, to fall.

B H Fairchild

Song

"Gesang ist Dasein"

A small thing done well, the steel bit paring
the cut end of the collar, lifting delicate
blue spirals of iron slowly out of lamplight

into darkness until they broke and fell
into a pool of oil and water below.
A small thing done well, my father said

so often that I tired of hearing it and lost
myself in the shop's north end, an underworld
of welders who wore black masks and stared

through smoked glass where all was midnight
except the purest spark, the blue-white arc
of the clamp and rod. Hammers made dull tunes

hacking slag, and acetylene flames cast shadows
of men against the tin roof like great birds
trapped in diminishing circles of light.

Each day was like another. I stood beside him
and watched the lathe spin on, coils of iron
climbing into dusk, the file's drone, the rasp,

and finally the honing cloth with its small song
of things done well that I would carry into sleep
and dreams of men with wings of fire and steel.

B H Fairchild

The Art of the Lathe

Leonardo imagined the first one.
The next was a pole lathe with a drive cord,
illustrated in Plumier's L'art de tourner en perfection.
Then Ramsden, Vauconson, the great Maudslay,
his student Roberts, Fox, Clement, Whitworth.

The long line of machinists to my left
lean into their work, ungloved hands adjusting the calipers,
tapping the bit lightly with their fingertips.
Each man withdraws into his house of work:
the rough cut, shearing of iron by tempered steel,
blue-black threads lifting like locks of hair,
then breaking over bevel and ridge.
Oil and water splash over the whitening bit, hissing.
The lathe on night-shift, moonlight silvering the bed-ways.

The old man I apprenticed with, Roy Garcia,
in silk shirt, khakis, and Florsheims. Cautious,
almost delicate explanations and slow,
shapely hand movements. Craft by repetition.
Haig and Haig behind the tool chest.

In Diderot's Encyclopaedia, an engraving
of a small machine shop: forge and bellows in back,
in the foreground a mandrel lathe turned by a boy.
It is late afternoon, and the copper light leaking in
from the street side of the shop just catches
his elbow, calf, shoe. Taverns begin to crowd
with workmen curling over their tankards,
still hearing in the rattle of carriages over cobblestone
the steady tap of the treadle,
the gasp and heave of the bellows.

The boy leaves the shop, cringing into the light,
and digs the grime from his fingernails, blue
from bruises. Walking home, he hears a clavier—
Couperin, maybe, a Bach toccata—from a window overhead.
Music, he thinks, the beautiful.
Tavern doors open. Voices. Grab and hustle of the street.
Cart wheels. The small room of his life. The darkening sky.

I listen to the clunk-and-slide of the milling machine,
Maudslay's art of clarity and precision: sculpture of poppet,
saddle, jack screw, pawl, cone-pulley,
the fit and mesh of gears, tooth in groove like interlaced fingers.
I think of Mozart folding and unfolding his napkin
as the notes sound in his head. The new machinist sings Patsy Cline,
I Fall to Pieces. Sparrows bicker overhead.
Screed of the grinder, the bandsaw's groan and wail.

In his boredom the boy in Diderot
studies again through the shop's open door

the buttresses of Suger's cathedral
and imagines the young Leonardo in his apprenticeship
staring through the window at Brunelleschi's dome,
solid yet miraculous, a resurrected body, floating above the city.

Outside, a cowbird cries, flapping up from the pipe rack,
the ruffling of wings like a quilt flung over a bed.
Snow settles on the tops of cans, black rings in a white field.
The stock, cut clean, gleams under lamplight.
After work, I wade back through the silence of the shop:
the lathes shut down, inert, like enormous animals in hibernation,
red oil rags lying limp on the shoulders
of machines, dust motes still climbing shafts
of dawn light, hook and hoist chain lying desultory
as an old drunk collapsed outside a bar,
barn sparrows pecking on the shores of oil puddles—
emptiness, wholeness; a cave, a cathedral.

As morning light washes the walls of Florence,
the boy Leonardo mixes paints in Verrocchio's shop
and watches the new apprentice muddle
the simple task of the Madonna's shawl.
Leonardo whistles a canzone and imagines
a lathe: the spindle, bit, and treadle, the gleam of brass.

B H Fairchild

Thermoregulation in Winter Moths

How do the winter moths survive when other moths die? What enables them to avoid freezing as they rest, and what makes it possible for them to fly -- and so to seek food and mates -- in the cold?

Bernd Heinrich, Scientific American

1. The Himalayas

The room lies there, immaculate, bone light
on white walls, shell-pink carpet, and pale, too,
are the wrists and hands of professors gathered
in the outer hall where behind darkness
and a mirror they can observe unseen.

They were told: high in the Himalayas
Buddhist monks thrive in sub-zero cold
far too harsh for human life. Suspended
in the deep grace of meditation, they raise
their body heat and do not freeze to death.

So five Tibetan monks have been flown
to Cambridge and the basement of Reed Hall.
They sit now with crossed legs and slight smiles,
and white sheets lap over their shoulders
like enfolded wings. The sheets are wet,
and drops of water trickle down the monks'
bare backs. The professors wait patiently
but with the widened eyes of fathers
watching new babies in hospital cribs.
Their aluminum clipboards rest gently
in their laps, their pens are poised,
and in a well-lit room in Cambridge
five Tibetan monks sit under heavy wet sheets
and steam begins to rise from their shoulders.

2. Burn Ward

My friend speaks haltingly, the syllables freezing
against the night air because the nurse's story
still possesses him, the ease with which she tended
patients so lost in pain, so mangled, scarred, and
abandoned in some arctic zone of uncharted suffering
that strangers stumbling onto the ward might
cry out, rushing back to a world where the very air
did not grieve flesh. Empathy was impossible,
he said. A kind of fog or frozen lake lay between her
and the patient, far away. Empathy was an insult,
to look into the eyes of the consumed and pretend,
I know. It must have been this lake, this vast
glacial plain that she would never cross, where
the patient waved in the blue-gray distance,
alone and trembling the way winter moths tremble
to warm themselves, while she stood, also alone
and freezing, on the other side, it must have been
this unbearable cold that made her drive straight home

one day, sit down cross-legged in the center of
and empty garage, pour the gasoline on like a balm,
and calmly strike a match like someone starting
a winter fire, or lost and searching in the frozen dark.

B H Fairchild