

Contrappasso Magazine

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The line drawings in the text are by Floyd Salas from his 'Rogues Gallery of the Insane.'

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Special thanks to Noel King



Poetry by FLOYD SALAS

Kids Born In 'Thirty-One

Kids born in 'thirty-one
wore shoes had lunch on relief
Adolescent years
shipyards
fears
Ma worked
bright coin
and grief

A Lament on Original Sin

I.

Haloed by caul and born from carnal room
my first suck was a goat's pap
and the hollow tooth of a bear's claw
 my first and truest spoon
But on the plaster fount of a concrete church,
in the shallow sight of streaked glass --
 the pane of skyscrapers --
the red-eyed vision of a traffic light
they circumcised the forepart of Adam's sin
and awakened the shame of lust in my skin

From that time my smile was a harelip
My mirror reflected a pallor of ash
A reek of molding lie rose from my tongue
and the serpentine specters of Eve's
 recollection
crawled though my sleep like the mildewed streams
on the wallpaper print of tenement rooms

Worms of flesh seethed in my coiled scrotum
I sought the velvet mattress and cushioned buttocks
 of blond whores
 the neon blight of corner bars
Eve's pant was a bellow in my ear
and nerves of sulfur smoke branched through my brain

But how the green bile of gall vomited
 from my spleen
at these copulations in dark closets
and at the spasms of other guilt-hunched men
who, in the chinked lids of my sight,
 hid
under temple roofs
 as corrugated
as the wrinkled limbs of their sin

How could we stucco these walls of vermin wood?
these unblessed halls of public good?
and succumb in a weather of pious stench,
safe as the superstitious stains of our souls
our lives a testament of Christless fraud?

II.

My soul creaked like a swollen bladder of holy water
I sought the salvation of men
 with my locked knee
So I quit the plaza for the clean air
journeyed to the desert of Judea
 in crepe and weeds
longing for locusts and wild honey
ran with the bush-tailed fox and the jack-rabbit
sweated under the prickly shade of cactus
 communed with the sand-sun
 cast my sperm on desert rock
to the congo beat of my penitent pulse
 under a blood moon

And on the fortieth day
 red-boned and black of foot
took the martyr's trek to the city wall
 under a cross of stars
the glowing moon of Christ's redemption

III.

Yet, brows of shadow dimmed the bone crevice
 of my eye
 its glint of religion
comb-waved heads rippled from my path
 like the red sea

They feared the nettle-clot of my long-stranded hair
the goat-hide stench of my loin cloth
the burnished bones of cheek and hip
the lank bronze of bicep and thigh

For how could a savage reach a seer's height
 with the civilized?
and my prayers reverberated in my chest
like the percussive thump of enemy boots
 in the evening gloom

There was an edge of teeth in my cry:
"Oh, unstitch the thorns from His knitted lips
for Paul froths in an epileptic spit"

And down a gauntlet of their blue-coated
 billy-clubbed peace officers
 hooded vigilantes
 I was driven
droopbacked and blinded by their sentinel stones

IV.

And now in the loud night and silence
 of isolation
in the mistrusting glare of a coyote's stare
the cap of my knees
 in dark-root dirt

my shoulder rubbed by pine bark
and the omen hoot of an owl in my ears

 I ask my Father
Can I repair that rent in my chest
while it is concealed by a cloak's fold?
Are men so stricken by those dark veins
 of sediment
that rise to the surface of their sallow loins
 those dull hints of doom
they dumb the healer in a hermit's cell?

Or do I brood on the stinging flesh
to the detriment of a springtide air?

Am I to be just the missionary of my own soul?
the scourge of its speckled blot
only witness to my outcaste's Golgotha?
drink solo from the pumping vessel of grace
in my chest?

Serve thee, Father, by standing sullen
while each man suffers the folly of his own pain
and redemption?
achieves his own salvation
—whether in fogged air
or under the sheltering dome of a cathedral?

If this is thy will, Father
and I have tread a fool's path
then, Father, in thy name, Father,
ease these bitter constrictions of memory
and artery
tangled in my heart, parasites and host,
ease the throttling muscle in my throat
the glare of my chalk eye

Let this right hand bind the fist of the left
let them clasp palms from fingernail to lifeline
let them suffer the odour and salt
of mutual sweat and crossed thumbs

Father! in the name of the Father!
let me forgive myself and men



God and the City

It was not like this in my grandfather's time
There was brawn and flint in his knuckled grip
it was a blood crest and a signature
a living coat of arms in a handclasp
and as sure as prayer

But where the cross of stream and blood was
rust coats the kidney and stone
on the altar of a dry creek

Where sweat made a halo of holy water
out of his hatband
and eroded the dirt in his cheeks
judge and barrister
stamp barrels of ink
with the thumb of the law
on the parchment
of a notarized oath
spend out their salaries and seasons
in the puzzle of its labyrinthine print

Can you hear the pulse and clapper
of the streetcar bell in my heart?
to tune of "Here Comes the Bride"?
the last Ave Maria
of its cathedral echo?

Can you hear the sob in the spanked flesh
of my still-born
unbaptized son?
the crack of my mother's rosary bead knuckles?
her spirit-husk bones?

Poetry by Floyd Salas

Can you see the skull and molars
of my father's splintered grin?

The drums of blood thin to the vinegar
of stagnant wine
in my time
and helmeted flies cluster like calvaries
of poison grapes
on the uncrossed stems of an anemic vine

And I pray alone on a tenement roof
of asphalt and gravel
the church rock of the city
under a blue-print sky
a galvanized sun
the cloud of a giant cop's badge
pray for my brother and every brother
who died of the ague
in the marrow chill of institution and fear
with the tattooed grin
of the insecure