

HEEL

A Life

By
John Tessitore

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Can't run no more
with that lawless crowd
while the killers in high places
say their prayers out loud.
But they've summoned up
a thundercloud
They're going to hear from me.

Leonard Cohen, "Athem"

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After all the lies, the artifice,
you should not be surprised. The circus
life has led to this. You know the greatest
illusion has always been the hero
fully-formed, the effortless champion,
the company man. You know you've never
been one of them. Your creation is pure,
seamless, a life's distillation, the victor-
victim of your own story. Nevertheless,
your character is also a fiction.

Even your scars are not a true record
of your journey, the crooked, the swollen,
the sutured on the surface. The real costs
are apparent only when words fail, when
they pummel us quiet, our injuries
a nuisance compared with that silence...

Then come the distant voices of the ghosts
on the wind, the hushed wordless sibilance
that fills the gaps, the thin white whine across
the plains. When the music's almost over,
listen for the whisper. Hear what it tells
you, son. It's okay to be broken.

~

Maybe it comes to everyone with age,
friends fading, one sad ending after another,
good guys going down with the criminals,
everyone losing their way before the end.
Maybe the sadness is the real wisdom.
Boys seldom worry about soft landings.
Boys have too much energy—the moment

calling, the present limitless. Boys try hard not to learn lessons. But boys are never men until they are stripped of their pride, broken, until they realize they can't start again.

~

To be seen, recognized. It's in their eyes, their need to be acknowledged, to know they're alive. Such a modest ambition, in its way a tribute. Yes. *We coexist, We take up the same space, and both of us feel like shit, like dead men walking, homesick brothers, washed up fighters. Am I the one you want in your picture?* You're the face here, where everyone else is anonymous—the fathers and mothers...and their children, always running, reaching out, hearts racing. Scowl until they smile. Learn to be civil. They're paying you to be a symbol.

~

You, they understand. You, they know—the man as a cartoon, the man in two dimensions, the image of all their bad intentions... as if you don't realize that winners win, as if you lack their imagination for the main chance, and dream the wrong dream. Everyone feels they're in on your game—except the pain, of course, neck broken, joints crushed

to sawdust, a secret stash in your suitcase
—because you never quit. That's your best act,
in fact: you walking tall, scowling, making
them wait for the insult...then shouting it.
You've been shouting through the pain for years,
decades, and you'll keep shouting if you must.
You'll never stop shouting. You'll die first.

~

A rare week of rest. Your goal is to protect
the children, and your wife, who honors her
agreement with herself—God knows why, but
no questions asked—to shield them from the fiends
you've known, to outrun the greedy fuckers
(which costs a fortune) and hide your sins
at the end of a long, straight gravel road,
with steel gates closed. Even so, sin slips
the bars sometimes, along with your crimes.
But it's a very steep climb to a house
on high alert, where you tuck the kids into
bed at night, and always carry a gun.
The loneliest souls mistake fact and fiction.

~

The weak get hurt and never come back. One
bad break after another. Your first bruises
were not your goal, nor were they under
your control, but now you call the shots.
Tired hands learn to plan for every fall.
And yet...what good is self-determination

if every conclusion is foreordained,
if the men with the money choose who wins?
The price of survival, even now, is pride.
The competition is brutal by design,
almost as brutal as the contradictions.

~

From behind the veil, through the smoggy air
of a shared room in a once-grand hotel,
in the gem-like light of empty bottles,
the shadow play of pharmaceuticals—
lines of hungry girls waiting in the hall,
every pleasure out there, on the other side
of a chained door—as if from the wrong end
of a telescope, you see yourself
as you believe you truly are: a demon.
Forgive the actor his own confusion.

~

To the villain goes the spoils, the evil
one with charisma, his lust the secret
heart of every man in the crowd, winner
or loser, who knows your face could be his
own but for the grace...Oh, how you seduce
the narcissist, the autoerotic,
the well-dressed thief at Sunday service...
To be the pariah, the enemy.
To be the monster they made you and need
you to be. It all comes so naturally,
dragging darkness to light for them to see,

the worst of your character on pills,
coke, liquor. How the anger circles back
to love, if you're generous, interesting,
convince them that you're giving everything.

~

Unto the people, a terrible noise,
the grating grind of a player who
does not play to comfort but to provoke,
to frame a reckless will with the chill whine
of the tundra, to wake the well-rested
and fire the embers of their discontent,
to blow across black coals until they light
again. It is the music that makes us,
not we ourselves, the sound of angry voices
that keeps us burning, alive enough to know
the structure, the formula, how the hero,
like the Lord, needs the fallen to renew
his virtue, to wake the well-rested,
to make us care about tomorrow,
to sing the song of Satan until our
boundaries are clear, the stakes of our fear,
and everything else can fall into place.

~

“The regimen is not the education
of an entertainer, or the training
of a boxer, or bootcamp for a soldier.
I'll skin your hide and steal your blood
before it's over. Your life will be meaner

than you know, your body a fistful
of clay for the savages strong enough
to squeeze. Survive and you may win someday.
Come back tomorrow and you may know
a moment of peace. Sooner than later
with a boost from your elders. But these bumps
you take from me, right now, are exactly
what you need until you learn the dead stare
of the veteran. That is the regimen.”

~

You leave the streets for fewer broken bones,
a controlled environment with clear rules
of engagement enforced by men with money.
You learn quickly. There is no security
as sure as pleasing the men with money,
as turning their profit by doing what
comes naturally. “Okay, pretty boy. Show me.”

~

The shadows mistake you for a baby
face, try to touch you or, worse, steal your fix.
Whatever keeps me warm, you think, *and avoids*
another beating. “I’ll give you some but then,”
you warn, “I promise you’ll never come close
again, and you’ll leave me the fuck alone.”
They almost work, these bargains you strike,
but these are the choices that hurt most later:
when Option One is near at hand and Option

Two only lives in a distant future.
A kid on the lam needs a little more luck.

~

That first step over the threshold, that leap
is the furthest of all. Like every fall,
it's easier after a push. Do you
provoke him as a way to free yourself?
Or is each fight another source of guilt?
Do you slap the rabid dog on the nose
to confuse him, to lure him to attack,
permit your next act, your life on the run?
Or do you stay still and pray he goes away?
Whatever you decide, don't try to make sense.
Can you think of a single reason why
a young kid like you should be an outcast
before he starts, before he can protect
himself? What's your crime? What have you done?
Forget him. Make him pay with his conscience.
The great ones learn to make their own music.
The best thing, for you, in this situation,
is a shove, a kick in the pants. Good riddance.
To be a street rat now...that's your only chance.

~

Cold city of the plains, empty streets, wide
for the wind to blow free, a wild wind
with steely eyes, a steady wild with ice
in its teeth. A sad boy can see beyond
himself, past these years, know he's nowhere,
left behind with a prairie sort of love—

thin, low density, at the old man's mercy,
a cruelty hard and ravenous, and violent
even in its comforts—this vast expanse
where you are raised on a whine and a fear,
where the boundaries aren't clear, nor the stakes,
and nothing ever falls into place.

Roderick George Toombs
2015-1954

John Tessitore has been a journalist and biographer. He has taught history and literature at colleges around Boston and directed national policy studies on education and civil justice. He serves as Co-Editor Across the Pond for The Wee Sparrow Poetry Press. His poems have appeared in a variety of books and journals. He has published several volumes of poetry, a novella, and hosts a poetry podcast, Be True, available on all major podcast platforms.

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