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Three Poems

Alden Nowlan

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Three Poems

ALDEN NOWLAN

The King of the Woods

To become priest you had to kill
the priest. After that, you didn't sleep.
A twig breaking was enough.
You mistook a bat for a nightjar:
this was your first mistake.
The moon, which had been an ally
— how you cursed her, the white bitch,
now that she walked with him!
You began to talk to yourself.
Old man, if I had but known
I'd have drawn the knife across
the throat of that boy I was.

That's music for election night.

The Premier on the telephone
to his wife. "It's a bad one," he says.
The crowd evaporates.

Half an hour now he'll be alone
here, the television screen
crammed with the face of
a mocking, none-too-bright boy.
It almost always ends like this.
A hotel room, spilled ash-trays,
empty bottles, dirty glasses, bread-crusts,
a scum of ice all that's left in the bucket.
An old man with tears in his eyes.

His Day in Court

The others who have been arrested
stare at me, an old dude in flannel
and black oxfords. None of them can be
much more than twenty: unbaked clay
figures in absurdly formidable boots
who speak a dialect so different
from mine that in another time
a listener would have said
we belonged to separate tribes.
The Judge will be surprised
and it's risky to stand out
in a herd that's being inspected.
Why didn't I do this years ago?
It was bound to happen.

My lawyer and the Crown Prosecutor
wear shirts, socks and neckties
that almost perfectly match
one another's suits.
I notice this because
they discuss my case
as if I wasn't there
and my defence is
not to meet their eyes.
"My lawyer," I say
but the truth is
he isn't mine, I am his:
it is I who must ask where
to wait for him
or be led there
and it is always
up or down another
flight of stairs

or at the other end
of the corridor
— never where I thought.
I belong to him and to the cops
who are the good-humoured sort
that treat their prisoners as imbeciles.
Curious how a policeman comes
to resemble his conception of
a prisoner. I swear, in all kindness,
that these could readily be
mistaken for the inmates of
a well-conducted Home for feeble-minded adults.
The Sergeant actually drools
although he hides this well
with the aid of three handkerchiefs.

I feel great remorse,
my lawyer tells the Court.
He and I are standing now.
Everyone else is seated.
His face and voice
are so remorseful
that, for an instant,
I'm ashamed of having
imposed such guilt on him.
And if I seem to be
poking fun at his performance,
that's not how I feel:
I love him.

Still, why couldn't this have happened to me
twenty-five years ago?
If it were done with
I'd know my lines.
They'd say of me now,
he used to be a street punk
and, foolishly, I'd think well
of myself for it.
A time comes when the game
of pretending who you were
when you were a kid
is almost as much fun
as the old game of pretending
what you'll be when you grow up.

Mercifully, we don't have to
spend much time in the present.
It's a rough country.

Until that Night

"You don't love me!" he said.
And, oh God, what a weapon that was,
until the night (actually, it was between
four and five o'clock in the morning,
he was three-quarters drunk, half-sick
and nobody anywhere in the world
or no matter how much it would cost
was answering the telephone),
until the night when he thought
to himself, all of a sudden,
merciful Jesus, maybe it's true.