June 2014

In Praise of the Bathos

Albert Goldbarth

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview

Part of the Poetry Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview/vol40/iss1/9

For more information, please contact southerr@usfca.edu.
Workmen drained the lake below the Roller Coaster at Blackpool’s Pleasure Beach to find hundreds of pairs of false teeth that had fallen from the mouths of screaming passengers.

—unattributed news clipping

Immediately, the fine, rose line of sunrise is as solid as a shawl thrown over the shoulders of Chichén Itzá. In 1904, in the jungled heat there and the chill of the limestone shadows, Edward Thompson starts in part by dredge and in part by terrified diving, seven years of reclamation of artifacts out of the famous Sacrificial Well. The drop is sixty feet, to sixty feet of ropily slime-choked water and forty more of shifting guck. From this, on March 11, the jiggle of pom—of resin incense—“the size of a baseball” lumpishly appears and, soon, the rest of the splendid, testamentary fragments of a way of life and its deaths begin appearing: dart-throwers (also darts) of obsidian; plaques of jade and discs of low-grade alloy gold; flint chisels; masks; cups; copper bells; and yellowed skulls and ribs, of victims given over now for 1500 years to the mineral interwork of bone and water. When I remember the week I thought I was dying (waiting the blood tests, scrutinizing every cankerette of each purported symptom under the magnifying lens of my imagination) I sometimes set that puff of death-thought in relief against the background-scal vastness of the horror at the Well, the way against its crowded gallery of darkly godcharged remnants I might set recovered dentures from the lake at Blackpool’s Pleasure Beach—that is, with honest fondness. History squanders its dramas; an individual needs to conserve and condense. And so I’d easily believe a coaster groundscrew worker pockets one—that amphitheater of fake teeth pinkly domed—and keeps it, fingers it in secret talismanically, and understands the high-mode indication of human hungers and human loss it comes to represent in its own low-mode vaudevillian way. Of those two poles, most lives that I know circle the second. Edward Thompson said, referring

Published by USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center, 2014
to his suited exploration in the stirred murk of the Well
(the copper helmet alone weighed thirty lbs., plus iron shoes
and lead necklaces), "I fancied that I was more
like a bubble than a man clogged by heavy weights"—and by the time
this observation from the realm of exotic and eminent
accomplishment is translated into my daily concerns, what
I see is a boy of five at his grandmother's bedside table,
where a bubble rises sluggishly up a glass of water
in which her teeth are parked for the night. They're not just
pink, they're the shockingly tropical pink of snorkeling
—coral and anemones—with thick discolorations
of a tetra-like canary, and he studies the homegrown comedy
and humiliation inherent in this object, as if rapt in front
of a sacred memento upfathomed from Atlantis itself. I
know this: that the signs by which the universe exalts us,
shakes us like pig knuckles in a tin cup, parses, scorches,
and redeems us—these can be as small as a ticket stub,
as tacky as the fuzzy dice they shill at the carnival booths.
One summer night not long ago I clumped in line to ride
a risky upsytwisty thing they called The Boomerang. In front of me,
a couple—she was fifteen, maybe; he, a year more, tops. She
nursed an infant underneath her see-through blouse; its fuss
undid the scant deployment of the cloth enough so that
one lovely cinnamon-color shoulder was suddenly naked
to the midway wattage. And on it, in it, clearly: a love-bite
freshly reddening, every tooth defined. A fossil
of sexual passion, one school says. Another school: a fossil
of our foreknowledge of death, that sets us loving madly.