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Breathe Their Faults Quaintly

By Brenden O'Dell

How true it is that words are but vague shadows of the volumes we mean.

Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*

Players and painted stage took all my love / and not those things that they were emblems of.

W. B. Yeats, *The Circus Animals Desertion*

He works here because he wants to. This or a library seemed a good and pro/Babel goal. Out of high school he went to college for a degree, the kind that could move one's career by several degrees, but was unimpressed, then stressed and strapped for cash, took jobs where he could find them not where he could want them. And he was found wanting still after BarberShopSweep, MidnightShelfStalker, and even once a TaxSignSpinner (all minor, prefixed SS divisions; feel free to assess yourself). Nonetheless, he would gather the hair, rotate the stock, and stand on the corner's curb in oversized foam, crowned CREDIT KING, royaling away the workday with verses vroom forwhoming through his no/gain:

Thine hours the pining sores take. They crack their billy club stick thrice upon the skull like a sponce beside a gate and ask does my hand pass through or is this a door? Yet, lest you resist, at

once they make *ha(i)ling* harder, breath like taxis weaving *in-* and *ex-* sitting traffic; extra(f)fickle.

Fantastic, are the beliefs needed in order to be ordered about.

And it was this immense distrust of the fascist that had him taking such odd bumbling jobs. Those *theys* that *they* proposed confused him, who had long dropped the T and said 'hey that's U.S. Of course, even now at forty-seven it still proved hard to put on the outfit. He had avoided this sort of work for so long, despite his size and stature, afraid of the drapery required. Not so much did he feel it would turn him but worried it would depress him and permanently *rouge* his cheeks; where if'n U take one step Fuhrer ya find 'r face gone *rogue*. Dead-eyed shrugs and stares. Sim/complicity. Sim/comulation works too if you're alright with mixing your U's & your O's. Oh, you cheeky devil trying to hold me to documented spellings. Well, me and you could come to some agreement in the old Latin where we both *com* together and *cum* together. Such redundederivations make for popular Beatles' songs, surely (go ahead, sing us a micropolyglottal lilt, Pauli boy). But all of that's neither here nor there, what I mean to say is that our Heinrik here is a heretic. He be/lives in a world of work and truth. An ad man he could not be despite advertisement's Bloom in this year of our lord's century. Hell, bloomin' near busted forth, really. Ever since he was a child sat alee the TV on the shag of his parent's honeymoon home, ads sang songs of soda's splendidness, but no matter how long he sat staring singing never came to him whilst sipping Sprite, not without spirits that is. And what a spirited young man he had been. All those long nights after work, staying home alone with a case of Bud or Miller or any other friendly sounding sort like Jack and Jim.¹ Life's ever richer with friends, he would toast to no one. But he cut a lot of that out eventually. Well... not out, but down. Way down. Only two drinks a day now, since turning thirty-seven. He's got a heart to look after y'know. A heart that never found anyone to love so twisted into one big knot: HE&ART. Which is why he wanted to work here. Why he still works here after twenty-three years.

1 Twas inevitable that Jill would finally *come home to Jesus*, as they say, and all she had to do was insert an extra dangly bit between those two (l)ong (l)egs of hers.

Now, I know what you might be thinking, and no, his daddy never hit him. He never had one long enough to hit. But his friend's daddies hit them and though those welts never sympathetically materialized across his back they did lash his brain. He knew then that this world was wrong and that he'd never play part and parcel to it. However, despite the rebel rousing and the lack of scarring across his bum he still tries his best to shit as quietly as he can; just isn't comfortable with corpo(rate)reality. And *quiet* is a hard thing to muster in an art gallery bathroom. They typically don't employ the sports bar strategy: pumping in b(old) g(old)en (old)ies to deafen the sounds of defecation. In fact, the Dadaists had already removed the last remnants of exclusivity between the toil/*et* its toiler. Luckily, Heinrik has this trick of folding up a bunch of squares of tissue and holding them against himself to muffle any possible perturbations that may slip out. Typically he would only go for the bathroom in the security office because of its single-person occupancy, ass/urine/ss of privates/see, but as he has gotten older he's found his malapropinquity² to a bathroom requires a shorter and shorter leash. A daily strengthening dependency. Youth's greatest freedom is the freedom to forget one's body every once in a while. Don't waste it! because one day, if luck will have it, you'll be like our ol' Heinrik here is now: nearly exploding in a stall betwixt two other stalled patrons.

An' selm keep her, he hears the right whisper. The left jingles a belt in response. Handsome keeper 's who we're after. The stall latch clacks and door creaks open. I'll keep the stream going as long as I can boys. Wish me luck. The young man's voice drifts toward the mirror escorting deep exaggerated breaths like a bugler before battle, then drifts gone, beyond the threshold.

2 In Sanskrit *mala* means impurity, which eventually turned into the practice of mala: prayer beads. But be warned if one should pray to *all*, or possibly to a man named *Al*, one would be remiss and full of the Hindi word *malaal* (मलाल), meaning remorse. So, instead of praying for props, let us simply reverse the phrase and prop up our prayers with Arno's glorious etyms.

I's got six *doors*, an' selm *keys* for em. Plus eight ways of *lovelockin'* each.³ That's six, selm, eight ways of being odd one out. Up ways and down ways. Through ways and back kind too. Side ways and tangential. Omnidimensional and the kind that ends at the beginning when its ending comes round once again. *Am Anfang*: in the big/inning. Bottom of the ninth. Round once again. Creeks and streams! What did he mean, long as he can? Battery or otherwise? Better follow the fellow out'n'around a bit. See just what it is he is up to. Heinrik steps out of the stall and in front of the mirror. Look at that ridiculous outfit! Captain no less too. Cum on, com on. You heard the man: Anselm Kiefer is who we're after. Outside of the bathroom, he walks with a duckish sort of stride which always looks a little fonny when he is going at it at full walking speed: as fast as one can go without breaking into a jog or jig. I mean, you're either in a hurry or you're not, right? So he slows down and waves away his lieutenant, Kristen, who is now gawking at his coin coining through the modernist section. She trots toward him regardless.

What's wrong, is something up?

No, just heard a kid say something weird in the bathroom. It's nothing.

Well, nothing or not, maybe we should check it out. Where ya headed?

Kiefer.

Of. Course.

What's that mean?

No/thing.

3 Excluding the one in the epitaph of course, which'd make nine.

Continuing on, they pass bon vivants and dilettantes both frivolous and dabbling. And anyone who wasn't a di/latant⁴ was a di/luent as far as Heinrich understood the thing, either thick with hidden meaning or just a wash, like that little piddle/prattle slop/slosh one does with one's hands in the sink after using the *lu/O*, I see now... corporeal! The body makes mediocrity out of humans. Neither faster than a speeding bullet nor leaping buildings in single bounds, yadda yadda. No, humans aren't even the fastest animal on *this* planet. Who's to say about any other? Not strongest or better at holding breath or averting cold or surviving deserts or jumping highest or living longest or even being free. It's why we make things. And why we want to be the best. Whatever that is? But where we are already best, away from them bodies and into one's head/p(1)ate⁵, most fail to move much further; (a)trophy gathering dust in a has-been's attic. Though there are school groups here too, tiny tikes are not tall enough to have an attic and thereby also have nothing to feel shame yet for. Heinrich is happy to see field trips but worries that only living experience gives keys to the sorts of emotions that come from these paintings and sculptures. Shame sometimes being chief among them.

Heinrich and Kristen stop in the room adjoining the one where *Am Anfang* hangs. They peer through the archway, into the mostly empty space. Upside-down, bathtub-like coffers grid the ceiling. Their bottoms have no end and daylight spills from them overhead. Never direct. Always diffuse. Sifted through layers of filtering fabrics. And on this rainy day only radiates a soft glowing grayness onto oak plank floors. Each wall and pedestal keeps a two-inch gap from the floor so that not just the art but each element of the museum's construction appears to be floating; all awash in a bath of rays (t)racing from supplemental spotlights which hang across that same ceiling grid.

4 For a physicist, a non-Newtonian fluid is a good example. Which means if one tries knocking one will find a solid, but if one settles down and sinks slowly in instead, a light will come on at the end; hand en/sconce/d in oobleck. Both gate and door! Yet, knowing little of Newton your poor optometrist simply uses dilatants to broaden your vision as well as his vision of yours. I'd say that's a t(win)ty/t(win)ty. Those latent, Latin Gods are most certainly hiding here, eh?

5 Aka a wall plate. Aka the foundation for your roof.

There's no one here, Kristen says.

Yeah. Let's hang back. See if he shows. Take off your belt and shirt and put em under the bench.

So much for deterring.

I just want to know what he's up to.

At the center of the room, in worn-white undershirts and dark-onyx pants, they sit silently on the veggie-friend(lie) leather of a pommel-horse-shaped bench. Henrik stares into the textures and layers of paint that have so captivated⁶ him many a night-shift before. He brews and mulls and oaks over each other stroke warming the blue-gray banality of clouds and waves. The painting's cracks compress time and its histories contain both the aesthetics of geological formations and inherited symbols so long-standing they seem inseparable from the experience of living. Its horizon: a crossbeam of a missing savior's final perch. And the tall winding post that anchors the rood and falls in a heap on the floor is only a reel of photographs taken of concrete shacks, each one stacked atop the other like many little towers of Babel.

In the be/gaining G(l)ott descended the ladder from Heathen. She was surprised to find *void* turned to *soil* as if the *c* that lives in *d* had kicked the *v* on its side and sat atop glo(a)ting. She wondered if it was a dream or if in a dream she made it real, unbeknownst to her waking world. At sixty feet in height, sycamore trees and bristlecone pines brushed and blushed her face as she ran with glee through the newfound land. She cycled round the earth for one hundred years until it began to spin on its own, then tired, at midday, she laid down on the shore near the ladder's base. Waves tickled her toes and a nearby hill became her pillow. After ten thousand years of napping, the tide had moved far out and the sandy soil had swallowed Glott w(hole). Ten thousand

6 A captain vatted! The best spirits come of age inside the best barrels as there is no way to avoid the influence of a vessel's flavor, Hero(l)d says, slaughtering the innocent, because any who has not contended with art—not merely viewed it, or read it, or heard it, but staved off a good appetite then devoured and digested it—has not yet come of age. One must eat from the tree of knowledge before one can lament life's little length.

more passed before the first man, Adapa, climbed from Glott's subterranean loins, (mantel)ing the earth's crust, dawning into the first light of day(ity). It was midday and the sun shone high above the highest of ladder rungs that Adapa could see. So he began to climb, looking for his origin, until a strong southern wind blew and blew the earth away. Adapa cursed the wind and shamed it from its bellowing but the earth maintained its spinning ellipse far out and away from Adapa. He kept climbing, with no other place to go, but began to grow old before he could reach the end. Glott's parents had been watching the struggle. They took pity on the protoplasmic man and out of sympathy, they molded him progeny, who now climb in his stead in eternal beginning a/gaining.

Heinrik looks down and sees a small hole in the floor near his boot. Presumably, some knot had been stomped and kicked and broken free from the board and left a breach for fluff and dust to gather in.⁷ Knots are formed from long lost limbs grown over, slowly embedded into the trunks of trees. These dead remnants have so few connections with new growth that they will often be the part of the plank that falls out first, leaving the rest of the board weaker for its leaving.⁸

Ever notice how silence gets louder when someone else is in the room with you? Kristen with a hammer to the ice. I've noticed something about you: you talk a *bit* when you're happy. And a hell/lava/Lot more when you're angry. But when you're sad, and I'm not saying the kind of sad that you all/ways are—not that I mean that in a bad way or anything—but when you're sad in that oppressive way—that way we all feel sometimes ya know it's not just you—but when it *is* you... you're come/please/lay silent. I mean a lost to this world kinda quiet. Like now, Ur doing it now what gives?

Some days are harder than others.

⁷ *Once more unto the knot, dear friends, once more; Or close the floor with pocket lint instead.*

⁸ If the classics bore you, you're likely full of holes.

That being true and all, still, I can't buy it. As un/*bridle*/d as you normally are, I know there is more going on than that.

Heinrik looks toward the waves again and says, *I call him happy who still hopes to rise to the surface in this sea of—*

Finely, we found it! Displaces a *gunda*⁹ maze, the twentysum kid says seemingly to no one as he walks into the room. He stops and stands facing the painting holding his arms out as if to be/hold. From Heinrik's point of view, since Twentysum hadn't even noticed him or Kristen and so was standing directly in front of them, he divides the painting into four rectangular quadrants; rift and quarter cut. Twentysum walks closer to the painting and examines it while shimmying back and forth until he finds a spot he is content with and says, alright, ear it is, let's work.

Shit, what's he pulling out? Suddenly Heinrik's feet float underneath him as if he is being pulled by strings and before he knows what is going on those feet fetch him forth and he is sprinting. No waddle here but as he closes in on Twentysum he looks like a bird coming in for a landing. His wings stretch out, alula in air, and before he knows what is what again he is atop the fledgling gripping his coat and angling toward the floor. Twentysum's head makes impact on the painting first then, sliding down, his chin catches upwards then backwards until his body falls at rest¹⁰ facing down while his face stays facing up. There is no struggle but Heinrik feels the (*lad*)*aka*'s back muscles twitch underneath his fingers and the *junge* is seizing and sounds that Heinrik has never heard persons make escape pursed lips while the *puer*'s feet try pushing but only squeak his sneakers on the floor and by the boy's sides the hands clench and release and clench again, those final fading signals of a marionettist who's long since fled this Punch and Judy show.

9 (हूलीगं) Hindi for hooligan : ruff'n'tuffian : Larry(cousin)kin, the Australian: rap(scold)jion : ne'er-door-wellian.

10 *A body at rest stays at rest...*

The Next Day (After Hours)

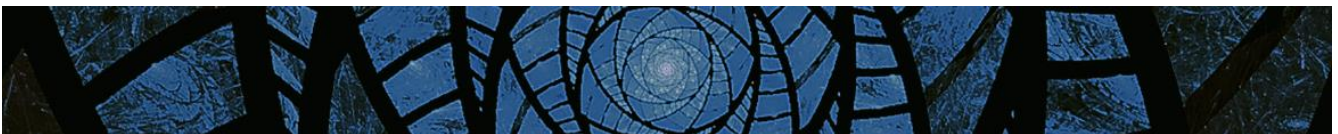
Comoguin dal adios a hermos ay joven quier morir. Laid damn down and died. Slow syllabic swallowing of Glott whole in guttural gleams of hopes gone faded away. Twitching trapezius traps thee with us, traipsing ‘cross tight ropes and under crossed trapezes swinging in time, on beat, on key. Lived experience alone, he said. Be/lived, he said. Them’s the keys, he said. Schopenhauer show them the hour, how it’s all for knot and twisted pining love lets slip sliding in those double aye ess ess ee ess ess ee ess (ess)es. *Ego, ego, numquam ego dico.* Always opposed and naysaying never saying aye. But *this*, this I did. This I’ve done. Did-done did-done the double hit of his head on the floor facing me. A new face to me. Younger than aye’d thought. And a little red bottle of acrylic paint was all it took for me to tackle em. Tack them on, tack those years on, or fine me my life at the hanging tree. Why did they not charge me!? A pound of flesh I’d readily pay. Hell I’ve got pounds to spare, flabby and soft I is, my weight crushed him it did. Crush and crack and crick and fuck your Sandymount shores. Twas never (war)th it. Twas never warth’a’ting. Yet, it is I that speaks these syllables unsoundly in my head. Carries them with me up the ladder like the soft flabby flesh of history pulling down on my bones, down to earth, a foundation blown away some time ago. And if these things make me make sense of things then how do I oppose them even in this fleeting light of a day giving in? Perhaps my own bottle’a’red speaks for me now. No! Response/ability. *From each according to his own* to each accordion player clenching and releasing and clenching again. Was I not capable of staving off that insidious bastard that lives inside us all? He brews and oaks and moans for sure but never on the shore does

his mulling mull over, only waxing allegory as if for all & glory he shifts his silent prayer beads. Keeps his love to himself like a lost labor of Hercules. In madness, he killed his family. And in madness I killed my love, my tether to the work itself. Like a shame-filled parent of junkie kid who hopes for best and enables the worst when he lets his child steal from him. Yet steel only cuts so deep, and we all know the deeper wound is loving one who wants to die. Big Thief's Forgotten Eyes. That's right James, I still remember that time we were coming home from a job out on the coast, just you and me in the work truck, and you asked me, even though I was so much younger then, what I thought about your situation because you thought my intelligence could answer the question but it couldn't because I could not understand at twentysum what it felt like to have my car stolen by my child and couldn't say whether your wife was right or wrong when she took the boy, who was older than me, real sick-like withdrawin' to his dealer's house and gave him twentysum bucks so that he could fix just long enough to be able to get out of bed again. Love slip slides away down saline streams. I still can't answer and now have questions of my own. Was there a moment in which he knew? Did his sinews send news of my sin by seizing out one final plea? What's he doing, I thought. Up to no good, I thought. Stop him, I thought. But stop from what? What matter was it to me if the kid live streams his slinging paint on Kiefer? For some lost cause no doubt. Some botched interpretation devised into action to make the rich listen. But the rich don't hear the paintings' woes inside this building and if they can't hear that, well my boy, then they certainly can't hear you. Lived experience would have told you that. But what was it that you wished to say? What was it that you were going to write? Or was it that you'd only sling the thing about, make some big mess and shout? I know what it is our marionettists are trying to tell us and I'll take up your cause as my debt now. Write it on the walls I will, for all to see. But how does one say unsayable things? *Progress is its form, but making progress ain't one of its features.* Yes, yes that certainly speaks to infinite ladders. If I'm climbing that ladder

and I've started in the middle, inherited my position, then how do I know how far I have gone? How far I've come? Well, tie a yellow ribbon round that old oak rung, of course! Ah, but how does one make sense of the distance? Even if now one knows the number of rungs one has moved one still does not know whether that distance is large or small, as one has no other such measures to compare. And equally disconcerting is whether or not our one-on-the-ladder has been climbing in the right direction. Adapa looks up to find his origin but climbed from the ground. Never mind, it's much too much, let's not lug Ludwig into this. *Unter/such(e/j)ungen. Weiter suchen, jungen.* What else we got? We have his eyes, not forgotten, staring up towards that goon da(mn) painting. Kristen's eyes too, looking at me and bawling forth get off em's, get off em's, as if I were an animal. Yes, snuck up on me it did. All that time so careful to avoid a place in this world that contributes to *progress*, I'm sick with the thought even now. Yet, I made a false idol of art and forgot to hold true to what art points to. Me and you, my long gone dead gone by gone boy. It's for us to know each other. Misanthropic manifestations come from forgetting this. But the exhal(t)ations are not so kindly received are they? May as well all be sico/phantom/ly spitting on the work itself. Oh no, there it is again that hatred blooming up into multisyllabic a(ss)a(ss)inations. Do I help the son who so sickly bemoans, or stay the true path and expect him to cut loose cold tur(n)key? When the criticism comes I camp in the latter, but when my mother's crying on the other end of the phone because I've told her I'll never be happy in this phony world I find myself in the former category, each of us willin' to compromise anything if only to subside the pain just for a little while. Rung rung rung the phone is ringing calling back to me from the grave she must be. I'll not answer now, I'm busy. Traipsing a tight rope we is. A fall in either direction: disaster/is. Perhaps Aris(tot)le's temperance is key, yet, then again what temperance is found in, *nico/mach/us*: victor of battle? Raskol(niko)v certainly mocks us with his courage to right a wrong that's only then made wronger. *Love one another?* No, too trite, too far gone like a

word one says over'n'over until its meaning's been worn so thin it starts disappearing like a favorite t-shirt. No. It must be damning. It must equally damn me, my false idol, and the false martyr that I've now made of this twentysum kid. What is Art to me? I shall tell.

Heinrik unscrews the cap and empti/he's a tin of tu/repent/time into a small bucket on the flow/hour. He faces Kiefer once more, holds his arms out as if to be/held, and breathes in inheritance. He drops his arms quickly and picks the bucket up and without he/sedation heaves its contents across *Anfang*. He steps back over the yellow police ribbon tying up the room and watches the layers of oil melt into a puddle around the lead sheets of babbling photographs. After some time watching, he pulls out a bottle of red paint and a two-inch brush. He walks to the empty part of the adjoining wall and pours the paint into a pile at his feet. He kneels and dips his brush in it and then pauses for a few moments of consideration. ONLY TURNING ONE IMAGE INTO ANOTHER is what he writes and when done writing he sets off the alarm and sits silently. Silent as a door that's been locked by a long-lost key. Cops eventually bustle about and he stays sitting silent. Wise this guy work here if hates art so much, Heinrik hears the right ask and decides it's true. H/e'd halved himself and tried to pour in what he loved: *h/ärt/e*. Which gave him some german strength, sure, but when he began to leave out the *our*; that most central and connecting principle, the only thing he had left was hate. So he stays sitting silent. Assessing himself. Why do I work here?



Brenden O'Dell lives in Northwest Portland, OR with his spousal equivalent and cat. When not working on his novel he can be found playing jazz keys in the window of his apartment. More of his work can be found in the *Wake Review* and *Rubbertop Review*.

