

Three Poems

Tamar Yoseloff

THE PAINTER IN HIS PRIME

i.m. Léon Spilliaert, 1881-1946
(for Sean O'Brien)

The painter has been dead more years
than he lived, which suits his disposition
he found the corpse within when young

and carried it through brooding boulevards
until it was dark enough to begin
then he climbed inside the night,

the city his sick bed, its patients turned out
to wander under sulphurous lamps,
mourners at their own wakes.

A couple of wars, an epidemic; he's seen it all,
his bulbous eye like a periscope
rising from a dim sea.

LEVEE

I brood inside my boudoir, skin like
a chalk cross on the plague house door.
This is the grave talking, where I've been
holed up, feels like years. Once I was in
the pink, but all flesh stinks when it goes bad,
king and clown alike.

If it keeps on rainin,
levee's goin to break, says the ol blues tune,
been raining all afternoon, and no let up.
A fine day for suicide, in my Sunday suit,
fancy tie my handy noose, if I wasn't lately
expired. No light through the trees,
just more damn trees.

There's always work
for the cold cook, whistling while he digs
that ol blues tune, *when the levee breaks,*
mama, you got to move, that's what he sings,
loud and clear from the field of bones,
thinkin bout my baby and my happy home.
But the light's gone out.

No body's home.

(Preceding poems from *Belief Systems*, forthcoming 2024)

BEARSKULL

My uncle was a recreational hunter.
His house was crammed with the skins and skulls
of his kills. Jackrabbits, bighorn sheep, wild cats,
black bears. He fashioned ashtrays out of hooves.
All his rugs had heads.

There's a photo of his wife, her pale hair
falling over her face, a hint of a smile,
with a grizzly stuck in mock attack behind her.
The bear reaches out as if to hold her close
in his furry paws.

She couldn't stand all those glass eyes staring:
it's either me or them.

I lift the skull from the box with both hands:
did the bear rear when the shot hit, his huge head
swaying side to side, dead brush crushed
as he fell? Did my uncle feel the chamber's release,
the bullet forced towards the bear's heart?

The sky closed around them, bear and man;
the air sang with the stink of meat.

My uncle never thought his wife would go first;
she was so much younger. He paced the bare rooms
she'd redecorated in French Provincial style
with swirls of flowers and fruit,
lost in his own house.

(from *The Black Place*, 2019)