

Pietro Federico

translations by John Poch

Alabama

2006 – Birmingham

Three walls collapsed from a fire.
The western one from the altar end
that dragged down the lateral walls with it.
Now you can only enter this church
or exit it through the wall at the entrance
where the stoup still stands,
and you can cross yourself with rainwater.
The roof is an enormous, open rib cage
arching inward as if under a whip,
its black back bent down, on all fours.
There is an elegantly-dressed, old woman
who comes every Sunday
at sunset and sits in the back row.
The back of what? You might say, as there is only one wall left.
But there's something magic in those who don't forget,
in her so nostalgic she can see into the future,
in those who don't ask for words but for an entrance away
from the world into the world, where the sky is a sanctuary
and the tabernacle is the sun.

Massachusets

Boston. Fred Boyce. One of the victims of the Fernald School in Waltham, an institution built in pursuit of a eugenics policy supported by the United States government in the first half of the twentieth century until the 1960s.

Do you think you know what it feels like to be alone?
I oversee the carousel from a kiosk.
These children coming in droves enter
from the night into this rotating tent of light.
There are those who spin and those who hold
back with absolute faith, reaching
for someone who will take their hand.
And a grownup arrives like clockwork
every time.
I already understand
the shy anxiety of the poor little innocent
for whom nobody will come out of the dark.
But you know there is worse. Here I am.
With my heart broken when I was a child,
I could only dream of the prison of things already seen.
Before going to sleep
I would say *Run away* to my heart and *don't come back
tomorrow until you have . . .* I meant to say this
and this and this, but what?
I was stymied and fell asleep crying
because I didn't know what I was really saying
when I was saying *come back, tomorrow*, let alone
a snack please, the hands of my mother,
or the slight pressure I see on that boy's back
on the carousel, although he will never fall.
With Joe and some others, we set the institute on fire.
But how does one escape a childhood
when almost all the world is nameless rage?
I was nineteen when I walked out that fucking door.
I didn't know how to read or write, or what it meant.
I could barely feel what I felt.
We knew so little how innocent we were.

But one evening Joe comes to find me.
I talk to him about the twists of fate,
or more precisely why fate
had never joked with us.
*How can your fate make jokes
if destiny is the state?*
I say, *To joke you have to have a face.*
Joe's face is cut by the lights,
the right side of it sculpted by the bulbs
from the dartboard booth.
The left is in the dark.
He asks, *Remember the name of that fucking church?*
The Holy Innocents, I answer automatically as if a dream,
not because I remember it.
Joe says nothing else, no need.
He drinks, looks at me smiling, waiting for me to get
fate's joke
about the loneliness we've always shared.
The innocents are not the innocent, I tell him.
I feel like a blind man whose sight has been restored,
but why is it still not enough?
I love you. Although fate may own your friendly face,
why is it still divided? I think, while smiling
at him with the left half of my smile.

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Maine

Gully Oven Hollow (West Lebanon, Maine) 1982. The fiddler is Arve Tellefsen.

My father is driving me through the summer.
I rolled down the window just in time.
That high note of violin
pierces the car through the open window
as if a sniper had fired a warning shot through it.
Around us only the pines
of Gully Oven Park.
It's August but there is no trace of the crickets
whose voices were crowding the air just a moment ago.
My father pulls over and opens the door
cautious as he did in the morning
when he saw that footprint from the street,
a huge specimen, the black bear
who is now lying dead on the trailer.
We hunt her down for an hour.
One footprint at a time
my heart in my throat and the rifle in my hands
with the gunsight ready.
Before shooting he whispers
Don't be afraid of her scream,
in fact, maybe it's better if you plug your ears.
I want to prove him that I'm a man,
but dad knows me and knows that sound.
He knows I'm brave
but also that from the day I was born
I walk on the border with a dream
that he doesn't understand.
He takes the shot.

When she screams, the bear speaks our tongue
though it seems she can't say a word
only because too much blood floods her lung.

Dad holds his trophy from under her chin,
and he keeps her face turned upwards.
She stares at me with her whiteless irisless pupils,
so black... almost as if absolute darkness had a face.

Now we find ourselves walking through a pine forest
tracking a violin.

I don't think dad did it on purpose but I notice
that he has brought his rifle with the gunsight
as he were chasing it.

I don't know how my father cannot recall
but for me it feels like it was yesterday.
I remember the absence of any other sound,
the heat, the bees, the mosquitoes,
the crickets, the cicadas, the wind in the foliage
everything was suspended,
and the forest felt unbearable and good.

Two minutes and I glimpse
a clearing in the heart of the wood.

A woman for every child,
they are sitting on the edge of something,
looking down into the place
where the violin plays.

My father loses interest
or maybe he's afraid because he doesn't understand
and retraces his steps but I do not.

He calls me. I do not acknowledge.

I want to see what those people are looking at.

And when I get to the edge I look down

and I see a blond man
as blond as I've never seen
and it probably is the sun
gathering in that cavity
right in the center of the clearing
as in a well.

All the insects missing from the forest are there.

There are thousands of them buzzing and fluttering
around the fiddler.

I have never been able to explain
the spell and terror of that sight.

You are a fool who wants to run away
and like a fool you stay.

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That man was the wood he was playing in,
but more than a tree or a river or a bear could,
it was the center of that place, it was a god,
it was the where, the when.
I have witnessed something
that not even my father could teach me.
You can't hunt this vision
as clear as the sun.
If this type of courage is a dream
I don't want to wake up.