

PAUL BRESLIN

Refraction of Herbert's "Virtue"

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,

He cannot taste it. Not as sugar is, but as the light can be, lingering late in the English spring rounding toward summer, bringing forth the rose to be mentioned later. Or he means the delight of being alive in such air, fragrant with newmown grass. He drinks at an open window looking west, at clouds stained wine red by the sun. His wife places one hand on his shoulder, raises her cup, and drinks with him. Nothing has to be said. The married clergyman, secure in his licit pleasure.

But the day is no seamless *ens*, the same to all eyes. To the east, it is past midnight, foreday of tomorrow. To the west, yesterday winds down with late carousing and sleep. At the antipodes, night falls early as the twilight dwindles. Another winter draws on.

The daylight comes from the sun, a cauldron in which his flesh would be instantly vapor. Dark storms ripple its surface. When the moon obscures it, you see the flares it spits into space, twisting snakelike hundreds of thousands of miles. In the North American mainland, wind rakes the central plains with a violence he cannot imagine, uprooting boulders and trees. About the time his rose finishes blooming, huge wind-knots will sweep west across the Atlantic, exploding over the Caribbean Sea.

The bridal of the earth and sky:

The old dream, that when we marry, what the Chinese called the Ten Thousand Things dwell with us, forming a sort of ménage à tous. A man and a woman draw earth and sky through the sacred hoop of their embrace, then fling them wide again, linked now to human fortunes despite uncrossable distance. It is a dangerous religion, polygamous, polyandrous, pagan. We do not understand why he has agreed to marry them and called us to witness, but we are not surprised when he turns away. When he turns to face us again, he talks about death.

The dew shall weep thy fall tonight;

The air chills, its source of heat withdrawn. It goes numb as a people from whom God has turned away. It contracts as its molecules huddle together for warmth. No more room for the water it drank up so eagerly in the morning. No more room for charity. Out you go, H₂O! If we meet again I don't know you. The dew has no tears for the day that drops it cold. It weeps for itself.

For thou must die.

But it starts over next morning: the air welcomes the dew, the calm if not here goes somewhere, perhaps arriving where yesterday storms had driven it out. The brightness supplants the chill of night with its temperate cool. And since the day is no infrangible whole, only what enters one pair of eyes, the statement confesses under torture of allegory. Oh, sure, the grammatical referent is day, but no one is fooled. This pronominal bell tolls for the whole kit and caboodle.

The day is not going to die, it is going to behave like Sisyphus after his death. It is going to draw up the dew and put it back down again every twenty-four hours for billions of years. The sun is going to disperse its violence until our side of the globe rolls away, and then it will give the same thing to the other. High noon in Death Valley is night on the Gobi, and vice-versa. At last the sun will blow up to the orbit of Jupiter and swallow the earth, and then we might speak of the day dying, were any "we" left to speak of it. Not the day, but our days. The dew is us, too.

Sweet rose, whose hue, angry and brave,

Or rather a blend of music and logical demonstration so exquisite it cannot entirely mean what it says. Below the eloquent mouth and tremulous throat, behind the pulpit, disloyal hands carve something resistant. They are enjoying their work.

And all must die.

A sort of relief in that; no more wearying chase for transcendence, the sonnet that gives eternal life, the heroic death in battle that pays for too much chit-chat and recreational sex.

Only a sweet and virtuous soul,

Just when you were ready to lie still and go into the compost, he points to a door in the box. Not all of 'you' can go through it. If you are attached to the shape of your body and exercise of its parts, you must cut all that off to get free of the trap. Only the wraith of sweetness that can be virtuous, or virtual as the image a convex lens hangs in space is, may pass through the door. Which is to say it is no door at all.

Like seasoned timber, never gives;

Now he places the thing he was secretly building on top of the pulpit for us to see. Four braced boxes of four panels each. You can see the grain, richly varied yet harmonious, and the impeccable join at each corner. His smile betrays his pride in it. If he wants to get out, he will have to leave it behind.

But though the whole world turn to coal,

We agreed on compost, but that would permit the detritus of roses to feed the roses to follow. As sentimentalists, we say that one day, or rose, or spring is as good as another, extracting from this species-life a watered-down immortality. Which, he insists, is trivial. The detritus has to be burned. We make a cruel discovery: seasoned timber that compacted lies is, quite precisely, coal.

Then chiefly lives.

The colourless soul afloat above blackness, the scorched earth abolished, defilement and savour

consumed away. “Who calls that livin’?” says impious Sportin’ Life, and no one is moved to reply. In what minerals was this timber seasoned, that it cannot burn?

We live as coals live, eaten away by fire.