

*Robert Lunday*

## **In Praise of Babel**

*a cenotaph for (ret.) Major James E. Lewis, disappeared*

Some nights that second year  
we spent at Benning, '74,

as he slept in his armchair  
with a cigarette burning in hand,

I'd lift a few of the half-smoked butts  
and beat it to the firing range quiet in darkness,

thumbing to flame the see-through lighter  
with a mermaid bathing in its fluid,

cadged as well  
from his drawer of retired effects:

old wallets, skydiving logbooks,  
medals and ribbons,  
insignia from past assignments,

and the breast-pocket notebook  
with the bullet hole—

metonymy of his heart.

What I stole was the little that we shared,

though he didn't know or didn't let on,  
 descending most nights into sleep in his chair

always waking  
 fist-hooked in nightmare.

•

His is a life that will have to be remade;  
 consider this the blueprint gone awry.

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Why build at all?—  
 remaking a life in sudden detour,

spiring underground  
 a tower razed to base perfections.

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Or aspiring words, trilobites,  
 millimeters of difference between silence  
 and the fossil eternity:

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consider this a writ of habeas corpus  
 for the body reinvented as history.

•

My own life  
 towers backwards:

the first memory,

of freaks in the back tent of a carnival,

one clutch of them flexing and posing  
each body's dissonant lyric.

The crowd towered above me;

spectacle was the very poverty  
of their response.

But what language other than looking  
fit the space

around the man with two stomachs,

or the man with the rust-colored hole in his face  
holding out on a plate  
the plastic counterfeit of his nose?

What to say, for the ordinary fellows  
shamed and aroused

by the beehived mermaid  
falsely scaled and finned

and so serenely bored  
she was hardly there at all?

Above me the crowd laughed and jeered,

And the beginning of shame  
was my own towering silence.

•

To have been born common  
seemed freakish in its constant need for confirmation:

The straitening separateness  
                                           of the custom-making self,

the pulse seeking forward for its conception,

                                          behind-horizons larger  
                                           as the wave diminishes

to now.

Sometimes as my second father slept in his chair,  
 spent of his rage, the rest of us played  
                                           against the kitchen wall

images of the earlier family, a golden age to me  
                                           before divorce and the coming war:

Clearlest was Châtelailлон, on the coast of France,  
                                           four years before I existed—

                                          its summer beaches  
 near the American Army's caserne  
                                           in La Rochelle;

the new-fangled kodachrome of nearly fifty years ago,  
                                           my first father's hobby  
 before White Star and Pathet Lao  
                                           and Montagnards  
 and all the full-color chemical pathos of war—

ah, when France grudgingly appreciated us!—  
                                           the alarming blues of her Atlantic sea and sky

where my mother lofts her daughter past full arm's-length  
                                           as if praising her own creation to the gods.

Deep into the image, sea and sky embrace;

and deep this way,

into the kitchen where we gather  
separate from the second father,

the magic lantern shoots from its feathered ring  
the carousel of faces  
shuttered one by one  
by the first father's parting touch:

*Click click click*

and he is gone,  
and we are done

with his *nostos*  
toward home we never had.

•

I cracked my skull once in West Germany,

swooned, pitched further into a room inside me  
where I'd never been before:

lime-green walls, spare furnishings,  
head-winged military nurses fluttering the perimeter  
revenant curtains sucked out the portals  
of my eyes.

From atop the mortal mast a glimpse of heaven, hell, or hospital;

a room for birth or death,  
perdition or perduration

branch and branch again  
 and the spaces of torment and bliss  
 and torment and bliss  
 entwine.

•

At Bragg, when I was five,  
 we practiced falling and dying in games of war;

died and rose again,  
 and died and rose again,

accusing each the other  
 of being shot and not assenting.

But there was a pleasure, too, in accepting the death,  
 in lying still as others ran and yelled;

death was the brace of air,  
 the press of voices through eyelids.

Then, when war had lost its point, its *pleasure*,  
 when almost everyone had gone  
 or simply refused to die again:

called to armistice by our mothers,  
 the living and the dead alike dispersed.

•

At sixteen  
 stoked on a siphoned whiskey  
 drunk but not so much  
 as I believed,

again my father's rage  
full in my heart,

rage in which the grammar  
was of order and brokenness as well:

spinning arms out  
like a child

falling and lying as far beneath the air  
as I could reach;

buried under closed eyes,  
quick to the headlong travels of the globe;

then opened my eyes to the green  
with snail-drag, the flat-topped blades;

looked to the shot sky towering above,  
burden of a single column of air upon me,

a tower miles high and all my own.

But in the whole air,  
the crossed vapor of jets  
protecting

as I knew nothing could

our American, our living daylights.

Was I anything but a vessel  
of the incomprehensible voices  
descending the endless spirals of sky?

And drawn down by my own silence,

a victim of blue,  
a sacrifice to the blue sky:

blue was everything,  
blue was the dissipate vision from the tower,

all that one might claim of a life, one's own or another's;

the blue when nothing's left  
to decay, the vapor gone,

the jet,  
and the thunder of jets gone with it.

**ROBERT LUNDAY** finished a Ph.D. in English at the University of Houston in 2002. He is currently working on a blog-based memoir based on his stepfather's letters home from Vietnam in 1969–70: <http://robertlunday.blogspot.com>.