

MATT KOESKE

Polka for the Recently Exhumed

We'd all come wearing our cursory overalls,
some to dress the dead, others,
with tatty-handled grave shovels—
jobless, destitute,
each with his own ambiguous
suspicion of the ancestors—
all victims of the seasons.

Turned away at the soup lines
we had no other method of knowing the dirt
but to act like trees and root down
and sway, nagging the wind
as lovers carved pierced hearts in our sides,
satchel-and-pail boys swung on our eyebrows.

I tried dropping all of my hair off
as if to say "out to lunch,"
but I couldn't escape the cutlery of the buffet crowd.
Names and vulgarities seized my flesh.
"I am not a book yet!" I shouted
over mouthfuls of green wood and sap.

. . .

Pubbegone,
my shovel has drooped with liquor
smattering its liquory breath over my shoulder
trying to sneak into some soil, ashamed,
envying the sobriety of pick axes and screwdrivers,
dragging its barbed chin home in the gravel
as it slurs its drunk shanty at the street's bared nerves.

It's a small village, so small it adheres with only one hallway.
Hallway—that's a word that can be reiterated indecently...

hallway slithering shut its peeping doors, hallway unmentioning.
I tell my dismal-eyed self—Hey, this was where you always
 wanted to be,
but it's preoccupied with its sugar pills
and whispers pederastically—sweet, so sweet.

All day long the grass rolls over everything.
The grass is a fucking juggernaut.
It calls me Daisy and slaps my ass
as it swaddles by—always being born.
Everything here is being born.
The dead have been sequestered into extinction.

. . .

Tonight is the night of the secret musics!
... frocked up and instituting that old ritual of exhumation.
Courtesans everywhere—maypoling the lampposts,
achieving diminuendo at the halloo of the lamplighter
who roves about, entirely aflame,
brickbatting the sleepers and catcalling,
igniting the lamp stamens osmotically.

We dance our agency of employment,
night-streaked, moon-sopped.
The shovels buck and dive, shuffling the land,
centipede feet creeping along Death's sleeve,
fresh heaps of dirt growing by the gravesides,
fresh corpses emerging, eager to be buried again.

I don't claim to understand the dead,
I simply bring them their hotcakes and praise their lumberjack
 sense of fashion.
They are like children who always want to hear the same tales
of Paul Bunyon and John Henry passing from the world,

their profane nocturnal humors beat
and creak like oars rowing inevitably out to sea.

Such jokes only make sense posthumously.
Those oars are really just the fog's dentures
trying in vain to chew up
the space the boat occupies
while it dredges for mudswallowed bodies
just folded beneath the next leaf of the family album.

. . .

Etched into the album's moccasin flesh
it says, *Welcome to the New World*.
I look up and down the pittering lamp light—
we are nothing but turkeys
shrewishly awaiting the advent of a new cataclysmic holiday.
Some native chanteuse mutters, "In death
we all become the white man."

And, as if by incantation, the long prows split the shore,
and lo and behold—
indigestible polka music like a damp ballast of blackbread
is served in quintessential silence all along
the promenade of the language barrier.

The dialects are mutually horrified,
but dinner persists on the gristly ohm of its hungers—
the eating, the sounds of chewing,
the pilgrims remarking on the many alien uses of corn
as the tribal elders exchange stoic looks of dread.