

JIM BARNES

Five Villanelles

*"...and, toward the end, it glimmered with enticing rumors
of tranquillity."*

—Anthony Lane, *The New Yorker*, 4 July 2005

There was one witness: his name was Robinson
or so he said. The day was gray and wet
and he had a crooked eye and a long coat on

That must have cost a good god-awful sum.
This Robinson's story made no sense. Yet
there was one witness: his name was Robinson,

a fictive lie for a bit of fame or fortune
is my guess and one thing for sure, no bet,
is he had a crooked eye and a long coat on

that was not his. Not long before he'd gone
on across the bridge, he bit his lip a bit.
There was one witness: his name was Robinson.

He'd told us he lived in Sausalito, none
the worse for him, but he lied about it
and he had a crooked eye and a long coat on.

He lit a cig and let the Zippo burn
and gave a description that exactly fit
our man. One witness: his name was Robinson,
but he had a crooked eye and a long coat on.

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Somewhere in a foreign city a phone is ringing
soft as a lover's murmur. It never stops:
the whole long night is but a beginning

or an end you've lost the middle of. Something
quite other than you imagined now throbs
somewhere in a foreign city. A phone is ringing

and it's for you, but you can never bring
yourself to pick it up. The pillow flops
the whole night long. If this is a beginning,

let there be more of light and less the thing
that brought you south and safe from wife or cops.
Somewhere in a foreign city a phone is ringing

you *will* pick up someday. Let's say it's spring,
guitar in the street, a full moon coming up,
the whole long night is *nada* but beginning

to make you want to dance, and you could sing
if you could swing your old soul round and stop
somewhere in this foreign city, phones all ringing
the whole night long and you with a new beginning.

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He said he saw him jump into the fog
rolling in with the tide and fishing boats,
and there was nothing else to do save jog

over and see him going down like a log.
Nothing human dropping that far would float,
he said. He saw him jump into the fog.

We didn't trust his looks: his hat was sog-
gy and ill-kept, not like his overcoat.
But there was nothing else to do but log

in the time and the place and the witness's smug
remarks. *Robinson's*, that is. That was what
he said: *He saw him jump into the fog.*

His names was Kees, the registration tag
on the Plymouth's steering column read. We thought
then there was nothing else to do but lug

our soaked selves back to the station and the jug.
We had Robinson's worthless cockeyed report:
he said he saw him jump into the fog.
So there was nothing left to do but shrug.

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He told Robinson his name was Robinson
after he parked the car and left the keys.
The case was cold before the heat was on

us cops to find the now missing Robinson,
not to mention the Robinson washed out to sea,
who told Robinson his name was Robinson.

But how to find the bad-eyed Robinson
who saw this Robinson we know as Kees?
The case was cold before the heat was on.

He had disappeared into the bay beyond
our reach by the time we had found the keys.
Why tell Robinson his name was Robinson?

We needed another statement from our man,
for the poet left nothing in the car but keys.
The case was cold before the heat was on,

and then it heated up: the press was down
our throats. There was no Robinson, no Kees.
He told Robinson his name was Robinson
and the case was cold before the heat was on.

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Meanwhile, somewhere down in Old Mexico,
at his usual spot in the shade of a mango tree,
an old man tries to recall three days ago,

fails, raises his hand to let the waiter know
he'll have another, though he had rather leave
for somewhere other. Down in Old Mexico,

he cannot remember, though he seems to know,
what person it was he once wanted to be.
An old man tries to recall three days ago

and fails: it's hard to summon back a flow
of words he once had mastery of. They lie,
meanwhile, somewhere down in Old Mexico.

He looks back on his Robinson, and, oh,
the lines he knew dissolve into the sea
an old man tried to recall three days ago.

His case is dropped again, and again. Though
persistent, it and he soon will cease to be.
Meanwhile, somewhere down in Old Mexico,
an old man tries to recall three days ago.