

Poems
from
Underground



*Francis
Blessington*

Books by Francis Blessington

Poetry

Lantskip

Wolf Howl

Novel

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Paradise Lost and the Classical Epic

Paradise Lost: Ideal and Tragic Epic

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Francisco Goya, *Witches' Sabbath (The Great He Goat)*, circa 1822.

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For Ann

“Alcatraz for Today”

(San Francisco dock sign)

Machinegun Kelly, Birdman Stroud,
Il Capone—the street fighters
have flown to film.

Once safely on board,
we pass honking sea lions
who nudge others off their rafts
on Pier Thirty-Nine, renewed.

The fog is endemic and tales of shark.
No one escaped—“and lived.”
No one mentions rape.
Water is choppy.

On the isle, a celebrity signs
his book. He wears a “Retired
Bank Robber” sweatshirt and says,
“It wasn’t *voluntary* simplicity, then.”

We know why we’re here:
to sit in the Solitary Boxes,
to hear the old audio memoirs,
to feel cage buried within cage
and the cough still in the air,

to see loom out of the fog stacks
into the yard a brown pelican
like a troop transport sent to quell
a disturbance of kitchen knives and
turnkeys shot, a bleeding cell.

We wanted to be in “No Escape”
to dream revenge in colossal sprees,
to swim with hypothermia.

We came to rehearse.

Refrain

(for my son)

In the shadowed sunset,
your snowboard rebels,
your head strikes ice
and cancels all.

Fish-eyed in knit hat
and sleek black vest,
you lose the track.
Snow turns pure forest.

You strike me with your fist,
like a dying camper
whose snowbag failed
—all fatal eye and raving lip.

Your arms stiffen
to a transfixed saint . . .
The helicopter lights snow
red with its klaxon.

Below you, I hear
the radio's strangled poetry,
as I drive the winding
byway to the hospital.

There you sit clear-eyed,
only memory of the fall gone,
the gossamer curtains barely
lifting, like snow—

In the shadowed sunset,
your snowboard rebels,
your head strikes ice. . .

Teaching

The ancient Zen master
screached like a gibbon
or taught the emperor
with his fist that the statue
was another non-thing and
Buddha was Absolute
inside the bowl
of the Self. *Things*
were signposts
from nirvana to *Nirvana*
on the continent of pilgrimage
from the darkness of Prehistory
to the Temple of Mastery
“where you can behold
the movement of your bowels.”

My Latin teacher
brought shivers
and insult: “Hubbub, hubbub,
boy, sit down,” His
Impatience would cry,
his mouth awry,
his hands gibbering,
hauling Penates,
Hearth Fires, Bundles of Twigs,
and Golden Boughs
to force march us through
Greenough and Kittredge,
conquering Gaul and
The Gardens of Old Age,
howling us through
finite grammars
of history and poetry
on to the death of conscious memory,
on to the dark and independent
Dragon of Soul.

The Swift River

In the sun-punctured stream
water dances to gold cups and vases,
dazzled over by mobbed mayflies,
the adult spinners living
only minutes, at best, days.

But I search for fish,
the unseen darknesses,
guarding themselves under the shelving,

resting from old competitions,
or bullying insults nosing the surface
beyond their zone. The flash
in air of a mermaid trout free
of the landing net. Furtive marches
perhaps too deep to identify,
shifting plates of the dead leaf bottom.

These whitecaps the rocks endure
will stream when I am not, I who
could stumble off this rock into
the Swift River and fall deeper than thought,
only the cork rod handle twisting
above this peaceful eddy.

No one near. Not the friend
who left me the fly box, nor the beloved
who bid me, "Great Birthday, *so* useless!"
The child waiting at home with the present.

Where the Swift River slides swifter, swifter,
I cast the water-heavy line,
gliding down at pools
and dams and eddies and oceans.
I reel for the leap of the strike.

Palimpsest

Steel cranes swing their curlicued slabs.
Little men, perched like blackbirds
on towers and cantilevered bridges, labor to
span the valley with concrete
bristling with reinforcing hairs.
Farmers make money on the shade loss.

But the seagulls see nothing new, no scar.
As good as another train or the first
line of yellow poled lights. Our shock
will re-resolve to flyover arches
and blacktop and accustomed noise.

A falling turbine of white truck dust powders
the workers' cars back to cattle standing in mist,
Caesar's dust, a gorge of bones, cooling gasses.

Mine Exhibit

“Black flies hold uranium, and the moon is Heaven,” we fancied, as I first descended this bituminous mine, compressed by water when dragonfly wings really spanned a yard and cockroaches swelled turtle-size.

Now the crowd has Disney proportions, ready for the soft black that returns crystallized sunlight. “Rock-paper-scissors-dynamite!” play the kids who wait. My mother, smiling then, is buried, and the cousin lost farther west.

But I re-ride the same rattling dark.
I still own that pickax and square shovel.
Here modern roof bolts stave off rubble a while,
and real “fire-in-the-hole” burns underground ninety years.

At Sybaris

The lovers recommence at noon
under the beach's deadly sun.
Gargantuan in their sweat, they
devour oval white bags of roasted chicken
and beer and beer, fried rings, fries, bundles
of cupcakes, tiny in their great, capable hands.

Four hundred pounds and up, each, they swell
circus proportions and overtop the iron
barrel with their tan and white and silver refuse.
Man and woman, back they roll and down,
earthquaking the protecting sand,
omnivorous, fallen, freed caryatids.

Into the heat-laced beach, their sleep bakes.
Sighing, after sinning in heaven's eye,
fairy giants who have devoured a village,
they happily burp in the beach-glass glare.
Dark curls and oiled, swart skin rise and snort
in the nothing-more-to-be-dreamt-of blue.

Cat's-paws stir and curve the sea water,
soothe the fired sand
to lap the tip of their blanket,
so well-placed that the fanned water retreats.
Later, an on-shore breeze
springs up to calm—and rouse—their lusts.