

The Rockers Sang Softly

The rockers sang softly as we approached the Sun,
 Strumming their guitars like avatars,
 Confident and exposed, as only humans are,
 Their faces and voices like the movie
 Images of what they really are –
 Stuck in dying bodies, returning to elements
 Like slowly dying, exploding stars, which is
 What they are, what they are -
 Brief expressions of a dying star.

Subconsciously, I have invented a doppelganger --
 She sleeps with me, and is there when I wake.
 First thing I do, as I stir, is to be sure that She,
 Whoever it is, there with me in my bed,
 Is pleased, is glad to be there,
 As we win the gambit, achieve the goal,
 Of Love, together. Independent of race, or task,
 Or obligation, as we are, as we are.
 And then she's gone, the day ahead – I'm alone.

Another death today – sorrow seeps in
 Like an old leak – hardly knew the woman.
 Youth counts for something. Didn't like me for some reason,
 Or we didn't hit it off, as they used to say.
 Stuff happens, I see her fading now into an old mirror,
 Wasting away. "Sally" seemed inappropriate, so she
 Renamed herself "Alexandra."
 I should re-do myself as well,
 Call myself "Mo" in the stores, save a lot of confusion.

I got a book in the mail from two old friends.
 One, the poems, the other, the drawings.
 In the intro, some idiot ascribed to me a quote.
 A Wise Guy saying things.
 (I was so pleased to be mentioned.)
 But then I got angry. Finally read the poems. Same old good stuff.
 Now it's another loss for me, misquoted
 45 years ago and again.
 More losses, all the way back to Brooklyn College.

Where do I stand because of paranoia
 And Insecurity?
 Fragments of emotion in awkward places.
 "Maybe he didn't get the message.
 Maybe you never sent the message.
 Maybe he misunderstood the message.
 Stupid to send a message in the first place."
 There my father sits
 In a 1943 image -- cracked
 And slightly unhinged. I was four years old at the time.

People losing their memory, then their lives.
 Most of the time, I don't feel anything.
 My sister looked very like the dark Jewess when she died.
 Far away from her own land,
 Disappointed with the whole deal.
 I kept her company on foreign soil.
 Soon, her ashes scattered over Prospect Park.
 Babies will breathe her ashes.
 When I die, maybe you'll get a chance to see me —that moment.

You keep on going because you keep on going.
 So, Samuel Beckett.
 He had it right. Talent: like shackles of a gold chain.
 I still have hopes in the language.
 Something to keep on doing.
 Something with a little substance, like forgiveness from the universe.
 I had better hang in there and try for honest,
 A true warrior's death.
 My character, Matt, sitting in the sunrise.

You don't get a chance to go back, fix it up.
 When you're dead, you're dead.
 The sages were confounded: either they went somewhere or not.
 Is it totally up to you?
 Get your feet washed and clean.
 Do your children know right from wrong?
 How to think? Make the signs to an invisible world?
 And if you have a half a brain,
 write something down, say a poem, fall to your knees.

Looking ahead, straight into the wilderness, is not pleasant.
 You are running for your life,
 Your heart's not in it, back with the tribe, with the living, the young.
 It was a Catskill joke
 By Jack Benny, who didn't laugh.
 I think of my mother and "I love Lucy"
 As I run. The woman is dangerous
 And she 's got RED lipstick on her mouth.
 I've got to run and hide under the bed.

Wrong, I must have done something wrong.
 How could I be so caught?
 Because God himself had a personal hatred for my mother,
 And we were consigned to Hell for Eternity.
 We were and are of the pariah class.
 And not only that, but I was her only defence.
 Now you're gonna get it, she used to say,
 You scum of the lower classes,
 Abandoning your mother for your father.

Her own family had abandoned her
 And now she had to fend off debts
 And my father's never-ending sexual demands.
 "No, not tonight, Sol,
 And maybe never ha, ha, ha."
 "Did you pay the goddamned electricity?"
 He'd say, wanting to knock her head off.
 "Where's the money, Sol, to pay?"
 "It's up your ass," he'd say, "it's up your ass."

I have a picture of my father
 Which may not be him,
 He could be another uncle, but I think it's him,
 Good looking guy with the dog,
 In the cold, in the Catskills,
 I don't know why I think it's him –
 The good-natured, best-looking, smilingly
 Dumb teenager – I'll frame it
 And put it up next to my soccer photo.

I'm a senior in high school and the captain
 Sitting in the center with the ball,
 The best-looking guy on the team, smiling
 In my glory like my Dad,

The center of attention,
I was cadging my lunches with ease at the time,
You can't tell if the kid's anxious or not,
The captain of the soccer team,
And the darkest and handsomest by far.

All these mementoes are keeping me company.
That's all I got now –
I'm old and alone and less than handsome now.
C'est la vie, never mind,
soon be dead, 73 (soon 74).
Could never have known in those days what was coming
Though I knew there was plenty to worry about.
Odd, that, would you say?
I know I would. I think it' odd, man, odd.

How I've forgotten the vanity of good looks.
Totally gone from my life.
In those days it both surprised and encouraged me.
Having that beautiful face.
Keeping the queers away.
Politely. Like I didn't mean anything by it.
I didn't know what any of it meant.
I'm not sure I do know now.
All gone, anyway, the biological prime.

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