The Tale of the Troubadour

Dan Smith

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarexchange.furman.edu/echo

Part of the Creative Writing Commons, Fine Arts Commons, Illustration Commons, and the Photography Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarexchange.furman.edu/echo/vol2013/iss2013/12

This Fiction is made available online by Journals, part of the Furman University Scholar Exchange (FUSE). It has been accepted for inclusion in The Echo by an authorized FUSE administrator. For terms of use, please refer to the FUSE Institutional Repository Guidelines. For more information, please contact scholarexchange@furman.edu.
The Tale of the Troubadour

Dan Smith

Wayward trees seem but an afterthought along the dim-lit streets that lead to the screened porch where the old man swings. The peach grove at the mouth of the gravel drive plays his summer symphony, the cicadas clicking their reverberating tymbals in salutatory assent. The light flickers above his Holmesian pipe as he carefully cups his hand to ward off the light summer breeze. His worn eyelids threaten to close as he blissfully exhales the sweet billowing smoke, remembering the first time.

Indiscriminate conversations hovered around tendrils of smoke that enveloped his bowed head and shaking hands. Noah filled his lungs with the stagnant air in a vain attempt to relax before he downed his diluted drink and reverently picked up the battered leather case. Dexterously avoiding the landmines of warped floorboards and wooden chair legs, he made his way up to the stage he dreamt of in moments of wistful quiet. Not this particular stage, surely, but the stage—a blessing and a curse, a place of judgment exacted justly and unjustly, of a life’s work being laid out in carefully examined phrases and sounds and short bursts of clarity and a peek at the face behind the curtain, all to be taken in or thrown aside at the whimsy of a jaded jury whom we know—just know—will surely tear down the fallacious walls that guard our hopeful hearts—this was the stage he now found himself upon.

“Good evening, folks. My name’s Noah Pelfrey, and I’m here to play you a couple songs.” After a few locals begrudgingly applauded this meek entry, miffed that they’d been interrupted to appease the young man, Noah began to play. His fingers danced over strings that bent just so to his bidding; he became entranced by the small darkened orifice. It was the ordinate abyss from which his worn Martin made its contribution to the world—from which its voice came pouring out, an incandescent song ranging from a nearly inaudible murmur to a brimming crescendo. At least, this is how he had wanted to begin.

Yet Noah’s fingers felt stubby and unfit to the task. The strings he had tuned five times over in the half hour leading up to his “performance” (if he could even bring
himself to call it that, it's not as if the drunk masses that inhabited this small dive bar would even care to listen). He fearfully plucked the E string twice before he sat back in his chair and breathed in the dust and sorrow that surrounded his withering entity—or so he felt. It was at this juncture of hapless dissonance, when his soul seemed to break the final string between hope and despair; that an ethereal calm came over him.

Looking out on the crowd of people, of which only a few had even turned away from their drinks and conversations, Noah felt a surge of righteous anger from something he couldn't immediately grasp. It was beyond anything temperamental or even accessible to his mere self—it was the rise of an age that had been sequestered by mores and manners and people who were scared to hurt someone else's feelings or damage their sterling reputations. He didn't understand why or where it came from, but he couldn't help but to stand and address the crowd. He began haltingly at first, slowly becoming more stern and confident in the feelings and thoughts that came spewing from his suddenly erudite tongue.

"You know, none of this matters. You people sitting here, imbued and abrasive, perfunctorily complacent in your ignorance—I don't know why I even got nervous for this. Because whose going to listen anyway? Oh sure, you may feign to listen for the approval of your friends—even for my approval, so you can feel like you did your good deed for the day and made the wayward musician happy—but it's not real. Because none of you—and clearly nor I—know what's real anyway. We think we know what we know, and there's the first problem with complacent knowledge. And of course then we worry about what we don't know—yet we don't do anything about it—and then we allow that worry to overcome us and we say that it's all too much. There's simply no way we can learn it all, so what's the point? What's the point of discovering something when there is some greater, deeper discovery out there that we will never experience? That some one else has? And here is where envy and despair and greed and disdain is borne from, here is where we fall into a deep malaise about the meaningless specks of dust we really are, because it's not like we're famous or something. We're all so wrapped up in this shitstorm that we forget that none of it even matters." He paused to catch his breath, pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration. When he could breathe again, he began his final flourish.

30
“All that matters is your soul and what you do with it. Will you harden your heart so you don’t get hurt, making it brittle and easy to break? Will you hide your deep beliefs behind dumbed down, routine conversations so you don’t seem intellectually arrogant, avoiding any sort of meaningful debate? If you do, you’ll leave your spirit without the light that brings you peace. Or will you render your soul something greater than self-interest and unanswerable questions and ridiculous jargon, something beyond what you can immediately access and perceive? For your sake and mine, I hope you do. Anything less is a goddamn disservice to yourself, to whoever or whoever you believe in, and to those who passionately and unconditionally love you—for reasons I can’t understand.”

________

Everyone in the bar sat in rapt attention. None of them had stirred during this unforeseen outburst, their only movement being to turn and stare at this spectacle, mouths agape and eyes widening in surprise. One man timidly raised his hand, an offense to which Noah jumped on instantly. “And what the hell do you have to say?” The attention of the crowd shifted to the young man, whom, after staring at his shoes for almost a quarter of a minute, simply asked, “Would you care to play a song for us?”

________

Forty years later, as he lightly taps the burned leaves of tobacco over the side of the porch bannister, Noah remembers that night and smiles. Yet as the breeze blows away the worries of tomorrow and today, he’ll forget it all in an instant. Half the battle is in the relearning of what we think we already know. Even a simple troubadour knows that.