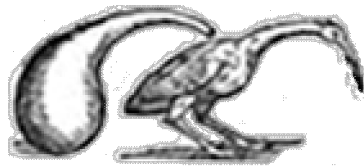


Segue

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The Biography of Toto the Wonder Dog

I'm in the Warehouse on a Tuesday night
 waiting for a fellow graduate student to come onstage
and read from her first book of poems, and Dr. Kirby shows up
 and stands next to me in front of the big heater
 in the back because it's a cold night, and I start telling him
about a poem I've been working on and that

 I'm trying to imitate his prosy, narrative style,
and he says, "Then you can be the next David Kirby!"
 And when I e-mail him the poem a few days later,
he e-mails me back and says, "Terrific!"
 Now can I be the next Leslie Whatley?"
 and I think, hmmm... what is this business we're up to?

One hates to feel that one is being mocked
 almost as much as one hates to be a brown-noser,
but it's true that David Kirby's first book,
 Sarah Bernhardt's Leg, was the first book of poems
I ever read all the way through, back in 1985,
when I was twelve years old and found it in a pile

 of books my dad was throwing out, and I think
it had a big influence on my writing, though, of course
 my biggest influence was my dad himself,
who never published a book, despite being *my* favorite poet,
 one of those minor figures who haunt us
 when we're young, who roam our thoughts

transparent and bitter at how stupid everyone must be
 not to see them at all. On the other hand,
I have to wonder if Dr. Kirby might not be thinking about ghosts too,
 or perhaps something more literary, like John Ashbery,
 who once defended himself against another poet
who was harassing him at a party

 by saying, *You can't argue with me. I don't exist!*
At any rate, it should be absolutely clear by now
 that I'm totally ripping off David Kirby,
among others, as well as, by extension,

all the poets *he* ripped off, etc.
The point is that you learn a lot from your teachers,

but at the same time you feel you'd like to take a swing
at them, in the same way you often wanted to give your dad
a good sock in the mouth, though, God knows,
the poor man suffered enough. Years ago
a few of his poems won a major award
and there was an article about it in the *Opelika-Auburn News*

which was picked up in the *Columbus Ledger*.
That weekend my parents had a party to celebrate the award,
and lots of their friends from the university drove out to our house
in the country to eat barbecue. My dad thought then
that this was the first of many prizes to come,
but, alas, my father never became a great poet,

and will never be famous, and so I have developed
an acute awareness of the fate of those ghostly fathers,
whose books never got published or have gone out of print,
yellowed with age on used-bookstore shelves,
if you can find them at all.
And with that in mind, it has long been my ambition

to seek satisfaction in the merely good, though it's hard
not to want to be famous and admired,
hard to want to be something less than the greatest.
(As a friend of mine once said,
*If you're not comparing yourself to Shakespeare,
man, then what the fuck are you a writer for?*)

Nietzsche once wrote that *Every talent must unfold itself
in fighting.... Even the artist hates the artist,*
by which he meant that we should take things
personally, nourish a consuming envy of the genius
of our teachers and our ambition to overthrow them,
to stand on top of the heap of poets and crow.

On the other hand, one ought to be wary
of all that claptrap romantic philosophy,
since it leads to the sort of ideas you find in *Conan The Barbarian*,
in which Arnold Schwarzenegger, who has been trained since childhood
to fight to the death with other savages in a pit,

is asked by his wizened master, *What is best in life?*

to which he responds, *To see your enemies
driven before you, and to hear the lamentations of their women.*
And I must admit that I've often repeated this line
to myself in the shower, a little pep talk as I lather up
my body, which ain't going to win any Mr. Universe contests,
in the same manner that I'll often look in the mirror

after my wife has cut my hair and say, *I am Spartacus!*
and, *No! I am Spartacus!* as if I contained
multitudes of rebellious gladiators.
What it comes down to is that you either believe
Carlyle's Great Man theory of history or you believe
the post-structural "death of the author" theory

—either the poet is a genius or else he's just some schmuck
with a typewriter in the right place at the right time.
There is a great deal of heartache in being constantly reminded
that you'll probably never be one of those Great Men,
and it has taken me all these years to figure out
what my father was trying to tell me when he said,

Writing ain't for pussies, son.
But that night of the party, when my dad could still imagine
a future of literary fame, when everyone was sitting in the backyard
in the twilight a little drunk, staring into the embers
of the barbecue pit, a station wagon came
crashing out of the woods and slashing through the low pines,

tires banging over rocks and downed limbs, headlights casting
apparitions against the tree trunks, and a man
got out and called my father's name and stood in the beams
of the station wagon's headlights holding a page
from the *Columbus Ledger* and compared the photo
of my father there to the man standing in front of him

and, satisfied he'd found who he was looking for,
said to my father, *I want you to write
the biography of Toto the Wonder Dog!*
You know, Toto the Wonder Dog! The Wizard of Oz!
The man was a dog trainer from Pheonix City, Alabama,
who specialized in terriers and supplied dogs for movies.

Looking for my parents' house, he'd gotten the wrong turnoff,
and the folks in the next house over said,
Wallace Whatley lives through them woods, and pointed
the way, so the dog trainer aimed his wagon
into the trees and set off. Now he led my father
around to the back of his wagon and opened the trunk,

full of old movie posters and scripts,
dog registration papers and dog show awards.

You got all you need for a book right here, he said.
All you got to do is write it down!

And this, too, may be how history is made:
the Man-Who-Comes-Out-Of-The-Woods theory of history.

In the end, however, my dad persuaded the dog trainer
that he would never, never write
the biography of Toto the Wonder Dog.

So the dog trainer got angry and cussed my dad
and all the gathered guests and got back in his car
and reversed smack into a tree and bottomed out in the ditch

and then hopped out again and started to push
and didn't say a word to my dad or the other members
of the English Department who helped him
push his car back into the road but peeled out,
in a cloud of gravel as everyone began to giggle.

At first I only wanted to be able to tell a story

as well as my father could, to holler
and do all the funny voices the way he used to,
to be the center of attention at parties, but now

I don't know. You read the great poets and think,
Who put the hot in Hottentot? What do they got
that I ain't got? But do you ever jump up from your desk

and shout, *Suck on that, Shakespeare!*
and your little dog too! One wants to be great
and famous, but one also wants to be happy.

One wants Harold Bloom to come out from behind
his curtain, like the great and powerful Oz, and announce
that it's the Era of Leslie! the Century of Whatley!

but one also wants merely to say something funny,
to get a book published and then another and, one day,
maybe, get tenure. Still, I wonder what kind of life
we all might have had if my dad had agreed
to write the biography of Toto the Wonder Dog.
I like to think it's the kind of job I'd immediately accept

and appear on the *Tonight Show* and sit next to the dog-trainer
while Johnny Carson made ironic remarks, thinking,
They can laugh at me now, but just wait until they read
The Life and Times of Toto—
So what if it *is* a dog's life?
It'll still be a goddamn masterpiece!

The Maculate Conception

1

I'm sitting in the sun on a polished granite bench
in front of Sandels Hall before going in to teach
my poetry class, reading "Leda and the Swan"

and "The Second Coming," which I'll be talking about with my students,
and idly watching girls walk to class in their tight shirts
and low-slung jeans, bellies exposed, tossing their hair,

bare skin as smooth and dark as freckled bread,
experiencing a "shudder in the loins" and
whatever "mastered by the brute blood" must refer to

—or maybe not, since I don't leap up to seize anyone
in my beak but think instead that soon one of these half-dressed girls
will be slumping in her desk, saying something morose

and indifferent. My students just don't get it, don't get that poetry,
if it's at all worthwhile, is about taking an intense interest
in the brief, bright work of being alive, that a really good poem

is a miracle, one of those small miracles that happen all the time,
like healthy babies and reconciliations but also like mere survival.
But I also know miracles like these are mysteries

that can have ugly initiations. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlowe says,
I have wrestled with death. It is the most unexciting contest
you can imagine. It takes place in an impalpable greyness,

with nothing underfoot, with nothing around, without spectators,
without clamor, without glory ... and without being too maudlin about it,
I think of my own misspent youth and my own encounters

with death. I think of D.B., who spread a plastic tarpaulin in his room
and then shot himself with his dad's shotgun, and Sean,
who drove into a tree on a highway outside Montgomery,

and Joe, who passed out on the railroad tracks, and myself
waking up in a literal straitjacket in the hospital, or
the small apartment where I crawled on my hands and knees,

from window to window, looking fearfully between the blinds,
hearing terrible voices and staring into the flames
of the gas heater all winter, brooding on ways to end it all,

and I wonder if my brain chemistry hasn't been permanently wrecked
since at least once a month, still, I'll lie in my bed awake
all night shivering with the compulsion to somehow do myself in

but knowing that in the morning I'll be okay again.
The point I'm trying to make is that one needs *reasons*
to live that can stand up to some pretty heavy scrutiny,

and, though it's not the most inspiring thing to hear
from a poet, much less one's English teacher,
I don't know if poetry is enough for me—I think I need god too,

a household god in the style of Abraham and Jesus,
a daddy to belong to, some god who will take the time to count
the hairs on my head in this nasty but beautiful world.

2

But when you decide to believe in something irrational
and beautiful, you have a whole new batch of problems
with just how far you're willing to go, what craziness

you're willing to believe to save your own skin, problems like
the immaculate conception: who could possibly believe a thing like that?
when it seems as ridiculous as the story of the alien

who got ordained by the Vatican I read recently
in the *Weekly World News* waiting in the checkout line.
But then I think of this story I heard in junior high:

a girl and boy were making out and he ejaculated in his pants,
and then—a real miracle of science—his sperm actually swam
through his jeans and through the girl's skirt

(there must have been a damp spot)
and impregnated her! I'd just turned thirteen when I heard that
and was taking sex-ed and had already spent

a few minutes in a closet with Melanie W.,
and it seemed so outrageous as to be almost believable.
Who'd make up a thing like that?

I was prepared to believe, I suppose, any story that dramatized the danger
of sexual encounters, even *dry-fucking*, as I'd heard it called.
But as I was sitting there on the bench across from Sandels Hall

before going in to meet my sullen students bearing Yeats,
which is arguably just as ridiculous as the *Weekly World News*,
it occurred to me that a little bit of semen

would be almost invisible right here
against the polished white granite bench, and if it were fresh,
it might even seep through a pair of shorts,

the intrepid spermatazoa swimming like mad
through denim mesh in the venturesome dark, into the jungle of pubes,
tearing along like wild men raised by wolves!

and steal up into some freshman's uterus like the goddamn forty thieves!
Open Sesame! and find there the treasure of an egg, a pirate's chest of gold
waiting to be cracked open in those gentle blue Caribbean seas

just south of the fallopian tubes. I imagine that God
must feel a bit like this as he looks down on us
as I look over the desks of my students at the start of the semester

and notice at least one girl in each class with a spectacular pair
of breasts and an even sweeter smile and just can't stop
myself from thinking about her for the first few weeks

though I can't do anything about it, not only because I'm married
but also because it's against the rules, against university policy,
even against the law, occasionally. Well, it's just not done.

And I realize that I am a thoroughly absurd person who will always
be thinking these somewhat loathsome thoughts and, what's worse,
rather than acting on them in the privacy of motel rooms,

saying them out loud, even writing them down for people to read
so that they can develop a really poor opinion of me and despise me
and give me withering glares in the hallways of the English Dept.

and call me a pervert or worse when they sit discussing me
at parties to which I am not invited. I just can't help myself,
and so I write everything down and call it a poem,

“The Immaculate Conception,” and show it to my own poetry teacher,
Dr. K—, and he says, Well, sir, if you want to get a tenure track job
one of these days, you might just want to think twice

about trying to publish a thing like this, because you never know
when some administration cracker is going to get his hands on it
and think, “We can't have a guy like this in the classroom

with all those squeezable co-eds!” And I want to tell Dr. K—
that I'm really a good boy, that I've never once squeezed a co-ed.
No, no! he says, holding up his hands and shaking his head,

You don't have to explain a thing!
It makes no difference to me!
I'm just saying that you should be careful, Leslie.

And he gets up and thrusts the poem back in my hands and advances
toward his office door, nodding and smiling, so that I'm backing out,
trying to explain I've never, ever, squeezed a co-ed in my life....

3

But it makes me wonder: what might you write in a poem
that would actually prevent you from getting that tenure track job?
I think of Rimbaud's famous letter to Paul Demeny

in which he says, *Le Poète se fait voyant par un long, immense
et raisonné dérèglement de tous le sens*, or *The poet becomes
a seer through a great and systematic derangement*

of all the senses, which sounds very nice in French but which
is certainly not what I recommend to my students, having done it myself,
though who can prevent them from the inevitable derangements

of mere living? with all its hallucinations, overdoses, broken hearts
and psychotic episodes? I much prefer Rilke's notion that you must
gather sense and sweetness for a whole lifetime, and a long one

*if possible, and then, at the very end, you might perhaps be able
to write ten good lines.* But of course Rimbaud was right: the soul
will, in fact, be made monstrous, no matter what measures

one may take to the contrary, whether in the fashion of the *comprachicos*,
that is, those villains in Victor Hugo that Rimbaud is talking about,
who kidnap children and mutilate them in order to exhibit them

as freaks, or in the style of a more conventional desperation,
say, the generic monstrousness of life's *feathered glory*.
At any rate, *the ceremony of innocence is drowned*;

the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.
There's not much that's worse than mutilating kids or otherwise
having one's way with them, but now I'm imagining

how I'll pull this off: to jack off a load here on the bench
unnoticed in the middle of the day with all these students walking along
on their way to classes in their short shorts and tank tops

and then to make my getaway mere moments before some girl
sits down in the same place. And then, when one of my students
comes up to me after class and says, "I'm sorry, Mr. Whatley,

but I don't have my paper on Yeats today.
The strangest thing has happened. I am great with child,
but I don't know how. I'm a virgin, I've been so upset, etc., etc.,"

I'll have to say, "You kids and your excuses. I've heard it all before,"
but in my heart I'll just be dying with joy and fear and maybe even thinking,
Our Saviour is born! and wondering if he will have

my hair, my nose, my eyes.... I'll say, "That's the worst excuse
I've ever heard!" and I'll open my grade book and give her a zero,
but in my heart I'll be singing, *Praise God! I believe you!*

About the Author

Leslie Whatley is currently a candidate for the Ph.D. in Creative Writing (Fiction) at Florida State University and the graduate assistant to the director of the program. He has formerly been an assistant editor of the *Southeast Review*, and his poetry has previously appeared in *Hotel Amerika*, *Slant*, *Atlanta Review*, *Absinthe*, and elsewhere.

Leslie Whatley on the Web:

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