

The 83rd Meridian West

by Brian Michael Barbeito

The priest went into the place in those parts, the priest an old pear or grape gotten ripe and then moreso, but never actually expiring . He was hunched and it looked like he was broken at some integral part, but nobody could tell for sure where. One time, a bat flew in and about during services, landing near the altar. Nobody knew what to do right then, but what was more, nobody knew how to take it. Was it a strange omen, ominous and onerous and dangerously esoteric? Or, was it just a bat that flew in an open window and landed on the altar? Some rural soul just went on up there and plucked the bat up, a hand clasping each wing, and then took it on out. The priest went on and began the homily.

I didn't see the bat, he said before his exegesis, and only saw someone approaching the altar. I was worried that it was one of those odd people that were going to proclaim some kind of personal epiphany.

Around there were not large summits or rivers, but a sort of meandering series of waterways that brought in boats and the turtles waited on the sides or beneath. There were big rocks that stayed on either side of the entrance to the waterway, and people walked upon them or else fished from them, just sitting there like everything was okay, and talking about pike.

In the big desolation of the winter, when the witching hours came round one night, there was a cracking that shot off to the slumbering louder than a bomb or sonic boom. The ice that had formed along the roof and over the area of the cedar shingles like durable moss or a long and seemingly sure marriage broke and divorced itself from a part of itself. The folks in dreams and astral wanderings awoke to what they must have imagined was some kind of death or at the least an act-of-God-disaster-phenomenon. Far off on the solitary lake there was only an echo and if any thing or creature out there worried one way or the other it was not known.

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Deep under those winter waters, and into the earth, the world was connected- simply and physically connected, not like a Jungian collective unconscious, no, but as a geographic collective unconscious, or, simply, a thing. But if Gaia she was in actuality, like a smarty pants or mystic woman or man might claim, the Northern part of her was aloof, indifferent, holding court with icy hard eyes that said, I am all business. But what of that south? That south was where the woman, if the earth she be, showed a warmer side of her personality or was more womb-like. Maybe the earth was Cancerian or a Virgo if anything other than just a thing at all...

And as for her south...

...there was a great energy there, and the waves lapped against the shore but nobody could ever tell for sure whether they did it loudly or not. This was because the sky was so vast and the wind singing and a single room could become a world, and the world the cosmos itself,- grand, without echo or acoustics. There was a large area by a vacant lot where people dug for something but outsiders didn't know exactly what. Someone once said that there were special shells or metals there. A local superintendent and some residents had large lead pipes, and stood up the way, up a corridor by a building. They dropped firecrackers into the pipes and shot them up to the trees, watching the birds rustle and scatter against a fine pastel sky.

Sometimes in the afternoons the world became overcast. Birds found shelter, agile and alert as they were. The thick blades of grass felt large and somehow held deep humid raindrops. There were two piers, one to the north, and one to the south, both infested with sharks. The rain splattered on them and if you looked between moments you'd see the old fishermen, maybe with the odd silver tooth in mouth and dirty but good plaid shirt for cold mornings on back, gather their buckets and gear and go. It wasn't often that you got to look between moments...

Behind it all, about half a mile, were waterways. That is where the sheet of top liquid never got too perturbed, and turtles lived there, large ancient turtles, quiet and somehow foreboding. If you walked

the streets you'd be under the sun, blessed somehow by the sun then, and see old ravaged bookstores, full of salt smell and stagnant air, broken but always still standing stucco walls- the walls don't believe in God but God believes in them, and a bar next door. Teenagers, the ones with such deep tans, - the true natives, might drive past in jeeps, and they all seemed jaded or cruel somehow, but the sun glistening off the side of their vehicles was for anyone, for any curious maker of crafts selling wares or else passerby to observe. The newness of metal foiled or intermingled with what was in comparison an ancient star.

There is a lady on street drugs that hovers in the middle of the road giving the bird to this person or that. I tried to help her, not to be heroic, but simply because it was the right thing considering she was going to get blasted by a car or truck sooner or later, but the world is absolutely bent on being tough, tough, tough and this guy gets out of his truck, because he is an expert on the human experience and sphere, and instead of perhaps helping yells at me that,

This is not a game.

So I get the lady across to and into where she belonged the best I could and left.

There is a shooting range, where a blue snake-shot is on the floor, a bullet with a hundred small metal bbs under the blue covering at the top, .22 calibre- the idea was that you shoot it at a snake's head.

There is a Mexican American female, sitting at a motel chain smoking cigarettes on her porch by a white used Cadillac. Her father is a used-car salesman and he owns the Cadillac and either one of those two but especially the two together, well, you can't write that, but that is what it is. She is sad and secretive and ready already as it were to double up on tenses, to let the idea of dropping out of school gain more credence. The Catholic Church has services at 8:00 AM and 11:30 AM every Sunday. The priest's voice is monotone but the parishioners are happy. Trucks roll past, and there is a sun shower.

Beyond there, past the road and along a bit, the waves still lap against the shore on and on and on. Back inside the old priest recites his mantra, the Apostles' Creed, with his parishioners:

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth, I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.

And there is something, there is something, and both sets of turtles don't care, but not in a bad way, no not in a bad way, but instead because they just don't know, you know, about such things.

