

Head Eloquence

by Dianne McKnight-Warren

You know I'm living in the past when I pretend a pool hall named Cooley's is a mead hall. Not some "Ye Olde" crap place with plastic armor and swords but an unpainted cinderblock mead hall sitting on a slab in the middle of a gravel lot. Inside there's a bar displaying gallon jars filled with eggs and pigs' feet. The glass magnifies and distorts the contents and in the reddish-brown liquid each egg looks different, too flat or too round, all of them irregular which is hard for eggs to look.

The pigs' feet float in stillness like they have never known movement, like parts in jars in biology labs. I imagine the smell of formaldehyde but I know the juice probably smells briny, Old English translation "bryne," used to preserve the dead and keep them from instantly becoming "wyrma meta," Modern English translation obvious.

I love Old English. It's weird, OE "wyrd" meaning "fate." And it's hard. Some of the damn letters are runes. Everybody's always saying, "Oh, Old English, like Chaucer." That's wrong. OE is like a thousand years before Chaucer. Or they'll say, "Oh, Old English, like Shakespeare." That's Early Modern, for Chrissakes.

Planks of barn board lay across sawhorses to make the bar. A couple of boards have been partially attached to the wall behind. The boards dangle, draped in cobwebs thick as burlap like somebody lost interest in the project a few hundred years ago and wandered off. I sit on a three-legged stool next to a high window the exact size of four missing cinderblocks. A sign in the middle of the window spells out "REEB DLOC," the letters flashing in the night like blue neon runes beckoning weary travelers backwards.

I keep my translations in a grey notebook the color of stone or bark, a good color I think for a language right next to prehistoric. "Book" comes from OE "bece" which also means "beech." Anglo-Saxons wrote on bark. They must have really wanted to write stuff down. I'm like that. But first I had to learn to sit still.

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Tomorrow's the last day of my OE tutorial. My professor has been courteous, if mystified, concerning my translations and this semester we've been working on the riddles. Some of them are obscene, a nice payoff after a gazillion homilies.

Tonight I'm sitting here writing in my notebook with the crazy eggs and dead feet for company and I'm thinking how this is preparing me for my future, OE "towardness," meaning "the time to come" when I'll write what I'm translating right now:

I through mouth speak many voices, I change frequently head eloquence.

For when I write for real.

