

Soliloquies of the Interior Zombies

by Gary Hardaway

First Soliloquy of the Interior Zombie

Beware proximity. The odor's not
my fault, but if you come too close, you'll think
of death and dog shit, mixed. Subtly, in
a stench I have to bear each day. My nostrils
haven't yet grown used to it. My outward
shape's as normal and pinkish as your own.
My inner shape must be a ruin of organs,
dead or dying. But do come close enough
for me to hear. I need to know your story.

I'm not an exterior zombie, like the ones
in books and video who shuffle along
in groupthink, moaning for brains that always seem
to be inside the pretty ones holed up
within a farmhouse decrepit as the hoard
approaching, dropping bits of body parts,
but never detected by the smell such rot
would surely generate. I guess the writers
have but sight and sound to horrify.

Decay like mine is all interior.
It's inaccessible as infection. First,
that's what I thought was wrong- infection in
the sinuses, or something festering
inside the lungs or bronchia.
The antibiotics didn't help. My stench persisted.
Now, I just accept the thing I am.

I feed its hunger for despair and sorrow,
bitter disappointment, rage, and panic.
Not the collective stuff of news-
it's individual dismay that keeps this shell
intact. Any idiot could feed
his outward shape were news the nutrient.
Interior zombies must be stealthy things
to get the beauty of it- human anguish- hot.

Second Soliloquy of the Interior Zombie

I search for human heartbreak everywhere.
In part, to feed my hunger and sustain
the look of health I need to work, but also
in the hope of noticing, by sight
or smell, another of my kind. Am I
to eat the sorrows of the world alone?

I haunt decrepit bars and pawnshops, cash
my checks at CashAmericas, borrow
against my old Corolla's title, then pay
it off, with brutal rates, at TitleMax.
I fake small medical emergencies
at CareNow and NextCare. Interns
at Parkland and Baylor wouldn't let me play
my game in their ERs. My shell grows strong.
My doctor probes and tests but other than
the smell- quite faint, he says- and bracelets
of small round spots, discovers no disease.
I don't describe the hunger. It's too strange
a symptom and I'm sure there's not a code
for it among the hundreds Aetna lists.

My day job helps me feed. As loan officer

at a small suburban Citi branch,
I hear at least one horrifying tale
each day: my car's transmission broke. I need
two thousand now or I will lose my job;
my interview went great today- I should
be starting work next week- don't take the house.
My organs writhe but will not die. I feel
their desperation as my own but I
can't help them. Citi has its policies.
The stories help my skin but not my search
for someone else who hovers, unobtrusive,
listening. Maybe I'm unique.
Perhaps I'll never find a friend or mentor,
protégé or partner. I'll keep watching,
though, my nose alert, for someone, something,
also vexed inside, aloof , polite,
and calm, solicitous of grief as I.

First Soliloquy of the Second Interior Zombie

I eat the sorrows and calamities
I find around me. Skin that once was tan
and envied pales with every meal
I take of pain the others cry and whimper.
Every story leaves a spot of brown.
My freckles multiply in perfect circles
evenly spaced across my body, each
new mark adjusting all the others in
a pattern. What have I become? A page
from someone's terrifying book?

The sour smell that marked my transformation
won't subside. My friends must wonder
why I keep my distance now. They call

less often. They're too polite to ask me why
I shun them, why I never lunch or club
with them these days. They leave me, one by one.
My parents don't know who or what I am.
My dad still calls me twice a week. My mom
just when some family matter forces her.

My own suffering leaves no marks. My skin
grows pale. So pale, it's almost luminescent
now. My hair, once wavy, chestnut brown,
hangs straight and darkens. It's become
a fine but lustrous anthracite. I'm Goth,
but clueless why. I never asked for this.
It's not a fashion choice. It's just what I've
become- this pale and spotted parchment.

Second Soliloquy of the Second Interior Zombie

Before the change, my tastes were safely mainstream-
Coldplay, Taylor Swift, Beyonce, songs
my parents played as I grew up- the Beatles,
Marvin Gay, Police, and Crosby, Stills
and Nash. Two generations worth of skilled,
melodic, pop and roll. The mixes in
my classroom ranged from Disney tunes through
happy Beatles, Sting, and Motown classics.
Suddenly, I found Baroque, romantics early,
middle and late, and moderns before they lost
both song and dance. My children were surprised
at first but soon hummed Bach cantatas and
requested favorites from Rachmaninoff
and Purcell. Learning improved. Behavior, too.
Even Justin, whose religious dad refused
the recommended Ritalin, would calm

when dinosaurs enacted Rite of Spring.

As parents watched my skin grow paler, hair go raven, and demeanor change from pert to smiling calm, they started to complain. The seasoned leader of the kindergarten team observed my work more often. She remarked " Puccini arias? For five year olds? An interesting choice. But not what our McKinney parents think is best." My principal arrived to watch the day we drew to Rimsky-Korsakov and Brahms. Scheherazade did not enchant. She jotted notes and smiled her faint professional smile. Next day, she asked me in to chat. She told me parents were concerned. I'd either joined a cult or coven, started drugs or worse. They'd talked to members of the board at church and in the supermarkets. Change was needed, now. My classroom should be "relevant." My contract wouldn't be renewed and could I please collect my things this afternoon? Paid leave of absence through the end of May.

I could but didn't want to fight. I'll miss the kids and how they grow each day. I am accustomed to estrangement. It's my closest friend. I'm frugal and resourceful, though, and I'll get by. I started working, nights and weekends, seven weeks ago. I saw the ad- I can't remember where, but wrote it down: Apprentice needed. Must apply in person. Call first, though- you'll need some clear direction. Resolution Bar and Grill. East Dallas. 214- 328- 2169.

Direct, but enigmatic, too.
I started work the Saturday I called.
Despite succinct, impeccable directions,
A to B, I almost missed it. It's in
"A shadow place that time forgot", as Bob,
my master barkeep, aptly puts it. Time
and city services, too. A beautifully lost
and timeless place, the Resolution Bar.
And Grill. And random-find museum, loft,
piano stage and studio. Eclectic
only starts to cover it. A place
apart, outside, beyond, and back again.

Third Soliloquy of the Interior Zombie

In search of bars with bitter stories
in the neighborhoods surrounding Baylor
Dallas, I steered from street to darker street.
My panic grew with every turn until
a door appeared and light outlined a man.
I wasn't lost. The figure waved and lit
a cigarette. Its burning end was all
the light left after the door swung closed again.
Except my headlights. But the dark just ate
whatever they could throw. I parked against
the curb and walked towards the cigarette
to ask the smoker where I was.

"Hello,
I'm Bob. You're lost. You need a beer? Or are
you more a Scotch man? Poets start in fifteen
minutes. You've got time to get a drink
and find a seat."

"I'm lost, indeed. Is this

a bar or something else? I need to get my bearings. Scotch is good." He shook my hand. An architecture showed itself. The lintels, columns, bricks and glass emerged as if from hiding. Resolution Bar and Grill appeared above the door.

"I asked for Revolution.

They were out of V's, I guess.

The seventies were just a blur. I didn't see it 'til I'd paid and they were gone. I'm glad they screwed it up. The wrong name seems to fit this better. Single malt or blend?"

Inside, the bar was books from russet-toned terrazzo to the pressed tin ceiling sprayed a semi-gloss sky blue. The lighting kissed the books, all shapes and sizes, neat and clean.

I saw her tending bar. Her face was like the moon framed by blue-black sky.

"This man is lost, Elizabeth, and needs a scotch."

"Elizabeth's my middle name. My dad still calls me Jessica. I'm on the fence myself. I'll answer, either way. Glenmorangie or Dewers?"

"I'm really cheap. A no-name blend is fine."

"Two dollars, either way. I'll pour Glenmorangie. With ice or neat? We keep things simple here at Resolution Bar."

"With ice. I'm Michael, by the way, though Mom still calls me Mike. I fell off on the Michael side myself this year."

A slender man

in starched white chef's clothes swung the door
I guessed led to the grill and joined us.

“This
is Bill, the grill in Resolution Bar
and Grill.”

She set my scotch and napkin down.
Bill nodded, lifted the counter leaf and walked
toward the dozen patrons joining Bob
around a tiny stage. Stage Left, a grand
piano. Right, a podium and mic.
“It's time, Elizabeth. You read tonight.”
She frowned and grabbed a yellow pad
then followed Bill toward the stage. I left
a five and joined the rest with glass in hand.

“ Elizabeth, our brave apprentice, joins
the usuals tonight. Be kind, or drinks
will be six dollars tomorrow, retroactive
on the unpaid tabs I'm holding. Cheers.”
He bowed his head and then recited Yeats,
a poem I first heard read aloud
In senior English class at Jesuit,
To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Nothing,
with a faint, effective, Irish brogue.
Three poets followed with their newest work
which, after Yeats, fell flat as dead leaves.
Polite applause arose from tables set
with pens and pads. I did the math.
At three drinks each, two bucks a drink, I figured
bankruptcy at least ten years ago.
But then, Elizabeth (and Jessica),
amid expectant quiet, took the stage,
arranged her pad, and cleared her throat.
“ I never read a poem, not assigned,
before this year and certainly never tried

to write one. It has been an interesting year.
I'll read the only two I've ever written, now.
Remember, six buck drinks tomorrow if
you laugh or boo. I hope I will improve
before we read again. I've caught your bug,
and now I have no choice but write again."

The Unfamiliar

The cat has lost her white
long lustrous fur
and in its place she finds
a short straight charcoal coat.
She doesn't have a clue
why this has happened.
She didn't choose to change
but did.

Her brothers now regard her-
and her mother, too-
as something odd.
They will not groom
nor tumblechase her down the hall
in short dark hair
nor lie down near her for a nap.
They are not cruel
just estranged.

She hides among the shoes and boots
inside the master walk-in closet.
She comes out shyly
only when the hunger
or the litter box compel her.

Within a Middle Name

She was Ashley once
but now is Katherine.
Ashley was a lovely girl,
involved but not engaged
despite the sparkling ring.
Katherine is engaged
but not involved.
Her hands are bare
except for tiny brown tattoos
you'd miss without a practiced eye.
Ashley's bright tattoo
fluttered just below her shoulder.
Katherine has a moth.
Ashley's face was loved by sun
and bronzed with even, healthful tones.
Katherine's face loves moonlight.
Ashley was beloved by all.
Katherine is suspected.
Katherine never chose the change.
The change chose her.

A silence, first, and then I stood and clapped.
In ones and twos, the others rose as well.
She smiled at me as if to say "You know me."
Bob congratulated her, then shouted
"Open bar! Next Saturday's piano night.
Perhaps by then, Elizabeth will learn
to play so we can listen instead of stare,
awaiting magic fingers on the keys."
Elizabeth then led me on a tour
of Resolution Bar and Grill's Museum
of the Random Find, Piano Stage
and Studio, and pointed out the stairs

that lead to Grand Reception Mezzanine
and Lobby of the Resolution Lofts-
apartments occupied by Bob and Bill
and tenants yet unnamed, lost and needing home.
“I’ve heard that all of this was bought or built
to launder money from an accidental
drug deal back in 1970.
You’ll help me get the story out of Bob.
It’s bound to have a tragic twist at heart.”
She touched the ring of spots around my wrist.
“I’ll bet that these each have a story, too.”

