

Beneath the Light of an Exploding City

by Robert Kloss

Blessed are the cinders which fell from the house above you, the final house they built. A city of houses, black and charcoal, did they not wonder of the blaze when you crashed planes into their houses, dropped matches in their alleyways? Did they not wonder of the glow a million, million cinders make in the hoarse screams of night?

By then your women were long dead. Their boils burst and they choked on oily bile. They went mad and gnashing for yellow sores and lesions and such was the torment they would have rendered themselves, veins from flesh, had black fingers not crushed their hearts. Had their kidneys not exploded. A thousand years ago, your mother and wife and daughter dead and hauled by wheelbarrow to the tire pits and commended to the ash and fumes, the air curled and blue. Two days later, their womanish ghosts perched on your bed, slender and lovely and suited in ashes. They clawed their throats, burned and parched. You filled glasses from the tap and water poured through their ash jaws. You sent them out of the room whenever you fixed a glass of lemonade. You once prayed their ghosts would struggle free of the pyre and now you wished they had lost their way amidst the char and flames. They alone knew the fate that awaited. So they moaned and clawed from the shadows, tracked muddy dust along the hardwood, made frightened gestures in the pantry. But the gestures of ghosts are enigmatic and their motivations even less clear; when they told you to leave quickly you believed they meant you to remain.

Their glazed eyes and slumped brows, eyes that did not remember their old land, eyes that did not know their sons a thousand generations removed.

Before they constructed houses your dead fathers arrived in black ships. Crowding the harbor, black ships as if constructed with char. Cannon volleys and bursts of musket fire from the decks, and debris, remnants of ducks and gulls, blood and feather, dispersed in the water. These dead fathers made no effort to fish and consume the sodden remains. Instead they crowded on deck playing funeral dirges, violas and cellos shrieking as if they were being unwound and dismantled, pan flutes wailing as if no wind but the winds of prairie fires gusted through them. From the shore you knew the red sun glinting off their armor. Your city council enthused: "After all these years of silence they're actually communicating with us." Perhaps. The council prepared the welcoming committee, streamers, flutes, pies, sliced meat, while your dead wives alone understood the advantages of hiding in fresh dug holes or fleeing to the bottom of the rivers, where sediment could separate you from the dirges of dead men.

Is it not said a man's plague travels faster than his ship?

A parade followed, streamers and flutes, the erratic trudging of livestock and hay wagons along the boulevards, and you fed them cuts of lamb and pork and fresh eggs boiled and fresh eggs fried. They watched you eat and smiled dazedly to the hum of their machines, the clogged wheeze of their breathing. The next morning you found them piled on your daughter's bed, on her floor, armor layered on armor, and crowded into your mother's room, stacked and snoring, moaning and smelling of rusted metal and loneliness. You found them moved into your houses and all the houses resembling yours. They inspected the thatched ceilings and from the mouths slurred, "we used to live like this," and they listened to your phonographs as if they knew the songs, although when you left they played the records backward or with swords etching the grooves for these sounds alone reminded the strangers of their lands across the sea.

A city of shadows. Of men emaciated and dying on walkways while the florescent lights of super markets hum.

You long dreamed, upon the return of your dead fathers, you would learn of the land before you had been born. But now they stood before you in their armor and plumes and by the glaze of their eyes and the wheeze of their devices you knew the lands across the sea had extinguished all days prior to your birth. They reached their pale fingers toward you as you will gesture to a stranger and they slurred words as if they had been drinking turpentine those centuries along the seas. The dead man in the front, the one you remembered best, with the curling yellow beard and blue eyes, reached his twisted hand toward your cheek and called you a name you never heard before. "My own brother," he called. "Remember? We used to play stickball by the alleyway."

You developed codes to communicate with Dorothy and Diana and these you tapped against the pipes: How do you grow? for instance and: Do you sag and droop?

Your dogs bayed at the music your fathers made and your fathers shot them with musket fire and soon along your boulevards laid the musket scorched husks of collie dogs and basset hounds. These your fathers skinned with your Bowie knives and roasted on spits in your public square. At your outrage they gazed at their feet: "We thought you would enjoy a feast," your fathers said. From their days amongst you the fathers remembered the drip of meat and, you realized, these pale dead men distinguished no animal from another. So you gathered for a shared dinner, you brought the beans, the roast hog, the wine, but your guests had no taste for this feast. They knew best the bones and these they cracked and sucked and gnawed, best they could, the marrow smeared across their slumped lips. Their paralyzed mouths.

You should see our alligator streets. All darkness until I light fires—

In fits of life, when the survival urge lurched their loins, your dead fathers tried mating with your dead, attempted mount and impregnate the remains of the dead they found, the charcoal bones they gathered and grappled with, licked for the ear lobes of, those ghosts they spied along the stream, gazing and muddied, the ghost of your mother perhaps, the ghost of your wife, your lover, their ash bodies muddied at the streams where they failed quench their burning throats. These dead fathers strained into every dead thing in sight but nothing happened, no seed found purchase, for these dead fathers contained a different kind of death from every death you had ever known.

When they failed to impregnate your dead the dead fathers brought women from their ships' hold. Women they did not remember gathering from ports the globe round although they had done so with knives and guns and by barter. You found these women dusky and alluring even though emaciated and loosely clad in rags. All efforts of coupling between your fathers and these women failed against the wheeze and pulse of respirators. Now these women wandered your village while the ghosts of your wife and daughter observed from the shadows, making frantic gestures. You pitied these dusky women and you fed them, washed them in the ocean, cleaned their ribs and their foot bones and you came to love the wings of their shoulders and the juts and crevices of their necks, their hips, their mouths. A woman moved into your bed and she insisted upon no name but the name you gave her. *Dorothy*. You made love in the afternoons, on the bed and in the sheets upon which you once slept with a wife, and of these memories, even now, in the shadow of the city above you, in a world where all sun is forgotten, you remember making love to Dorothy, while the sun through the curtains blinded you both, and when you knew only the heat of her skin, of the sun, of her lips upon your chest.

Is that your voice, your screams, or is it the wail of steam through the pipes?

When your houses filled beyond the brimming your fathers built extensions. Their roofs were not thatched but shingled. Their walls were papered with paintings of brown daffodils rather than the walls of braided ferns and sticks you knew. With expanded houses you lived contentedly with your fathers and their machines and the wheezes the machines made your fathers wheeze and the women you named and the children they bore. All the world as you always dreamed until more ships arrived. Enough ships to choke the harbor, to fill the horizon. Ships filled with bodies. Soon there were so many bodies, bodies moving around, bodies dreaming, bodies shooting the skies with cannons and muskets, bodies dying and piling and gathering gulls who plucked and consumed, bodies gathering worms and lesions, so many bodies piled in alleyways, bodies eating other bodies, bodies eating the soot and stones of the alleyways, bodies piled unto bodies in houses until ceilings were broken through with hammers and crowbars, so soot and char fell unto the children, your children, there were so many bodies they needed more buildings, they needed taller houses, they needed houses atop of houses, they needed parking garages to park all the bodies.

Could you send down a dress of yours that I may wear and know you by? A comb full of your hair to smell?

These dead fathers would bring more from over the sea. "We have ships to gather and return for lifetimes," they said. "And we do not die. Not anymore." They had outgrown your city anyhow. Outgrown your thatched houses. "We scarcely have room for our respirators in your houses," they said. Outgrown how you did not answer to the names they called you. Did you not remember stickball and kick the can and the lips and fingers of Susie Lou behind the school house? Fortunately, there was room enough in the sky for all the men they

anticipated, your dead fathers proclaimed, and soon your city council signed over the deed to the heavens for a vat of rye from their ships' hold. To the song of respirators, they built a city over the top of you. Now you woke to the hammering together of scaffolding, of char and steel, pipes and glass. You woke to hammering and stapling and sheets of black tarpaulin draped over your city.

All their industries built upon the flammable. If you burn enough they will scatter back home, those wives and children.

As the city overhead grew and your fathers left for the world above, Dorothy's belly mounded and milk wept yellow from her nipples. Soon life fell from between her legs and there you held your daughter, your new daughter in place of the one who died of the plague in her throat. You and Dorothy and your daughter lived in the darkness of their city now, their city choking out the sky. In the flood and tremor of their city overhead. Through the rattle of their pipes you heard of the miracles they constructed. The meats they grew and the motorcars they rode. Dorothy heard also and she was known to sigh, "If only we had some store grown meat" and "I miss the fathers. The way they breathed. Their drooping eyelids." When Dorothy left she did so without a note and she took your daughter, Diana, also. You inspected the ground for clues and you suspected her heat trailed to the rope ladders dangling from the new city overhead. Now, each night, from the houses above you, from somewhere in the dense forests of houses towered onto houses, you heard them combing each others' hair, gossiping about boys, eating ice cream from the carton. They called each other names you never heard before, names you did not give them. "They were kidnapped," you insisted. "My wife and daughter live as hostages."

Under the darkness of their new city. The heave and moan of structures as they breathed and pulsed. Under the darkness of this city, under the hum of their florescent bulbs and the tumbling rattle

of motorcars, the wheeze of their machines and the clank of their canisters, your crops wilted to soot and your babies seemed transformed to hunks of charcoal. Everywhere in your town, now, these wailing hunks of charcoal, and everywhere these new wives, wives from the holds of ships, wives you fattened and loved, wives with faces and breasts smeared by soot and charcoal.

No skies then save the skies of the city above and the constant rain was the dripping of the condensation from the pipes. After you discovered the design of the pipes spelled out an unknown language you built rubbish fires on the streets to read by. There you lay through the night, reading and translating by the stink of the rubbish fires, if only to know why they left, to understand the derision all creation must feel for you.

“You may live in our city,” these dead fathers told you, their rope ladders dangling just within your reach, “but you must change your name to something more like—” and the dead fathers all said their names, “and you cannot look the way you look now, in fact, we insist you will have to look more like this,” and they held up photographs of men in red plumed hats and rusted armor.

Now always your dreams of cinders. Now the tightness of your breath as you dream aircraft into their houses. The crash of outboard motors into their coasts. Emaciated men lighting oily rags in the alleyways.

Through the pipes, hummed the language of all your wives and children gone. Above you cinder blocks and planks from your trees, planks from their ships. Above you the city thrived with the voices of the dead.

Through the pipes the sounds of shopping malls and florescent lights and motorcars and helicopters whirring and chasing criminals and the sounds of domestic disputes of the wives who were once

your wives, the wives who replaced the wives who died of plague, those wives of dust and shadow, who wander even now, dead, and prospering in the shadowed everything. Sounds of construction, of creation, of high rises and spires, of buttresses and balustrades. The city of houses on top of houses grows over your head, for as you layered your dead, they layered their living.

Are you frightened? Do you miss me as I miss you?

Now the slow fade. Houses and your remembrances of those who replaced your dead. Gone to shadows and gone to ash. Your houses lost in soot and dust and cobwebs. The skies everywhere consumed with the plumbing and floorboards and concrete and black tarpaulin of the city above your heads. The last of your livestock, the hogs, died and were eaten by mobs of beetles. Of your old world, only the alligators survived and after the death of your crops and industries, your sole occupations became the growth and development of alligators. These wandered your sooty streets hissing. Soon the dead fathers and their respirators descended by their rope ladders only when they desired your alligators for their parades, their circuses, their amusement parks. You offered them hunks of roasted hide on sticks but, "We have super markets already," the dead fathers wheezed and slurred. "You don't know what that is but let us say everything is grown there. Everything good is produced there under the humid lights. Whatever you could dream of grows within the walls of our supermarkets. The women who were once your women find these easeful and revelatory."

Soon after, if there remains a "soon" in worlds without light, your men disappeared. An old man or two, then many others, young men, and you tracked their footprints alongside the boot prints of your dead fathers. You trailed them to the ladders dangling from the city above. The men remaining explained what the pipes said: The dead fathers placed your countrymen in the top floor of a house they called the Museum of Once Living History and now charged twenty

dollars to view them, floating in a jar of formaldehyde. Select name plates read: "Man from a Forgotten World" and "Those Who Sold Us the Sky for a Pittance." You heard how, long ago, certain wives and children who fled up the ladders, now visited these museums and prayed to the bodies of these one-time neighbors and husbands, however, soon all went silent for those bloated effigies, gathering dust.

The blink of light when helicopters crashed and outboard motors exploded their oxygen canisters, their museums and houses. The orange clouds of napalm and the derision of their tarpaulin consumed into sheets of light.

What of these days now in the shadows, you ask yourself, with ear inclined to the pipes of the city overhead. Waiting for the voices of the wife and child who left you so long ago. Will you hear them grown old when you hear them again? Will you hear them with a new man, a pale dead man and the clink of his armor and the rot of his plume? The wheeze of his machine as he mounts and throbs. What of these days in the shadows now when you sense the presence of your first wife who died so long ago of the plague in her throat. Those ghosts you can no longer see in the darkness of everywhere. So often now you reach and grab the nothingness, you hold the open air of the dark, and in your mind it is the ghost and ash of your first wife, your first child, dead and burned on the tire pits long before this city ever bulged in your mind's eye.

For a hundred centuries you anticipated the return of these men, and here now they trudged much as you so long dreamed, although you had never known them to wear rotted plumes and rusted armor, to drag along oxygen tanks and respirators, to drool out paralyzed mouths.

As the city above burned and smoldered all the skies were lit as if the sun had burst through the layers. For the first in centuries your

streets and shops and thatched houses were visible by the glow of the fires above. By the explosions of oxygen tanks and rye whisky you see, finally, the full articulation of alligators wandering and swaying in the dust and soot, their red mouths. You see now the strange beauty of those reptiles slumbering in the ash like arctic vessels submerged beneath a blizzard. You see all beneath the glow of the light of an exploding city and, under the rain of soot and cinders and the seethe of the pipes, you await the return of those who left you long ago.

The light on the sheets. Your lips—

