

From *The Dogs...Barking*

I.

The sweat-stained blanket of night spreads mercilessly over the land. And in the distance, the dogs...barking.

The heat of day clings to every forlorn atom of the air. It blows a waterless whisper over old wooden windows that protest in a mournful rattle. In time, they crack and bleed from aching void of moisture. The wind rouses from a restless sleep the dust from gravel roads that claws its way into every pore.

For Jason, the implacable heat making sleep a fitful wish, the moments pass like hours.

The wind dies a halting death. The windows settle into mute stillness. Then faintly, from such a distance it echoes hollowly in the night-cowled viaduct, one solitary beast emits its plaintive call. Immediately, two others answer the cry of suspicion, complemented by a siren, perhaps. And then, after a breath of eternity, another. The ponderous iron thudding of a distant train, cars unconcerned by sleeping officials whizzing by, the ubiquitous cricket, all joining the mysterious white noise of the night.

But outside, there were ever the dogs...barking.

So still it was, so bereft of movement, of escape from the heat and the sweat and the senseless sounds that take possession of his soul.

He agonizes, Jason does, for the loneliness he senses in the dogs...barking. He know them; soul-mates they are. Close now, down the block, across the empty street, over the friendless viaduct that magnifies the sounds' shrewd sorrow. It twists the pike of despair in his viscera. He longs, he aches for...what? He prays, he begs God for...he cannot say. He has not the words.

But as he struggles to fathom the mystery posed by those feral companions, his anxious eyelids grow heavy. The taut muscles of misgiving lose their struggle to remain so. And, desperately though grudgingly, he drifts into the murky haze of life's balm, the little death...of sleep.

II.

The university of the sixties brought moments of the absurd that occasionally muted the forlorn wail of the dogs. College House, an off-campus collection of students, dropouts, Vietnam vets, acidheads, street people, moochers, pseudo-intellectuals, and others, was one inviting theater.

A clinking of dinnerware collected, tables wiped with cards shuffled and dealt is accompanied by a badly played Clementi sonatina on a mercilessly out-of-tune piano. Rob, the dropout who reads five books a week, including Hegel, Marx, Dostoyevsky and St. Augustine, urges Hal, plastered to insentience, with "Hal-san, it's your bid."

A silence ensues as Hal makes the effort to make sense of the thirteen cards that stare back at him. Meanwhile, Marian, wife of Spencer, another player, demands,

“Spencer, I want to go home, my stomach’s feeling queasy.’ This prompts a distracted Spencer to reply, “Yeah, Mare. Just let me make my bid.”

Dante, one of the directionless rolling stones, sits nearby stroking a carving knife. He says with a gravelly, lecherous voice, “Women with queasy stomachs really turn me on.” His activity provokes an exclamation from Sandy, the house fish-out-of-water conservative: “Dante, why are you playing with that knife?”

Richard, the fourth player urges Hal on: “Hal, *it’s your bid!*”

Opaquely, Hal responds: “Oh, uh...one club. He’s silent a moment and then slurs out, “Can I have a review of the bidding?”

“Yours was the first bid,” Richard replies.

A drunken pause and then, “Oh, uh...wha’d I bid?”

Lauren, one of the hovering aircraft in search of a place to land, enters from the foyer to announce, “Y’all know there’s somebody in the parking lot screaming about seeing God?”

Crawford, a frequent visitor, responds, “Yeah, dat be my man, Brady. He on a heavy trip.”

Meanwhile Marian, her previous efforts to distract her husband being fruitless, ups her previous ante: “Spencer, I want to go home. I have a stomachache.” To which, Spencer gives his usual, “Yeah, yeah, Mare, right after this hand.” Then Dante chimes in with “Women with stomachaches really turn me on.”

Richard then repeats the news-flash to Hal, articulating very carefully: “Yours was the first bid!”

“Oh...wha’d I bid?” To which Rob replies, “Seven no-trump, doubled and re-doubled.”

“Oh! There is a lengthy pause, and then, “Wait. How...”

“You doubled and re-doubled yourself.”

“Oh. Uh...pass.”

Lauren then continues with her concerns: “You know it’s really hard to study with someone screaming about seeing God outside your window.” Interesting, since Lauren wasn’t even a student.

“What’s God doing outside your window?” Richard asks.

This causes Phil, the Marxist apostle to offer, “We all know that God is a capitalist fantasy concocted by the ruling elite to appease the masses.” No one turns to this rail-thin, shirtless, khaki-shorts wearing demagogue. But Rob, without looking up, answers, “So what good would he do outside Lauren’s window?”

Sandy continues her protests: “Richard, as house coordinator it’s up to you to keep knives in the kitchen.” Richard, raising his fist in the air, answers, “Let’s hear it for arms-control!”

“I’m opposed to arms-control, the black horn-rimmed Marxist asserts, prompting Lauren to demand, “Why?”

“Because I believe in armed resistance!”

“*Armed resistance?*” Rod incredulously responds, “I had to show you how to use a can-opener.”

At this point red-headed, well-endowed Jane walks in with a profound philosophical question: “Do you all know there’s someone asleep in the laundry room?”

As usual, Rod has the answer to this conundrum. “Yeah, that’s Silent Jack. He lives there.” Then, returning to the game he bids, “Two spades.”

Crawford, nursing his Couvoisier and Coke says, “No, I be de only spade here.”

“Marian, continuing her efforts, complains, “Spencer, I want to go home. I think I have an ulcer.” Spencer gives his usual sympathetic response and Dante, true to form, hisses out a cackling, “Women with ulcers really turn me on!”

Returning to the game, Richard bids, “Two no-trump. Then Spencer follows with “Three spades.” And after much time and prompting, Hal manages a foggy “Pass.”

Jane, who’s been waiting for someone to attend to her plight, tentatively insists, “I’d really like to do my laundry.”

Rob comes to the rescue with “Go ahead. Jack won’t mind.” This is followed by Dante: “Women who do laundry really turn me on!”

All is suddenly interrupted by the thunderous voice of Brady just outside the door: “*God! Good!!!*”

After a moment’s silence, Rob is the first to respond: “Yeah, I’ll be right with you.”

Then Hal finally remembers that he is in a bridge game, and out of his stupor asks, “Can I have a review of the bidding?”