

KEN WOLMAN

The Union of the Dead

Stuck underground, bored by the reruns, more than bored by the lousy food and awful smells, my father leads the cemetery dead to organize for better living conditions. Their first assembly looks like the final act of *Our Town* or like an AA meeting, a phantasmagoric circle of folding metal chairs, an oily coffee urn, and because it doesn't matter anymore, everyone chainsmoking unfiltered Camels, even the kids, unafraid at last of the conventional wisdom that tobacco will stunt their growth.

My father, albeit a 7th grade dropout, has learned the language. "*Non serviam*" he spits at the fluorescent lights in the low cork ceiling when he understands for the thousandth time that there is no one to grieve to, that screaming alone is redress.

He rules here: flings and topples folding chairs, kicks over the urn. But because this is Eternity, his rage is no more effectual here than on earth, in Time, and the urn remains filled, upright, and the coffee is forever undrinkable.

He is the perfect citizen, his death an emptied antique box of ashes, filled, emptied, filled again this repository of tarnished dreams and thwarted hopes.

Are we in Hell? a newcomer asks. No, says my father cries, harmlessly breaking his jaw, this is where the dead go. You've been had, we've all been had, whatever they promised you, flames or a rose garden, they lied, no suffering, no peace, no song, they all lied, and you are here.

My mother crouches silent by his metal chair, doodles random lines with a hobby knife across an image of my face on a picture in a locket, an image of me as I write this down. It is something she can keep.

Theatrum Mundi

When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools

--*King Lear*

Somewhere in remembrance,
where life is out of time,
there is a photograph, pitiless
in exposing a moment that freezes
and cries like a showoff child "Look at me!"
Appropriately, it is of children,
little more than babies,
round a long table, smiling, maybe singing.
It is of me, of course, as fascinated
as any narcissist by my prefigured reflection,
preoccupied with happiness,
not even staring back at me:
for I am two years old, in the house that was my house,
with cousins who were my cousins and may be yet:
and we are smiling because it is my birthday.

The image of this child destroys.

It is the smile: for how can a 2-year-old smile
but happily, without expectation
of the sneer or sadness that will learn its way across the face?

I want to reach through the frame,
seize me by the sailor suit suspenders,
shake and kiss me, hold me to me,
cry that *I have read the script, I know what's coming,*
get out of here and save yourself, now! now!
before you learn the lessons I will teach you
by taking my next step forward.

The room itself is a frame, a proscenium,
and the play in progress opens like a drawing room comedy,
with a party: but soon enough
the plates will be cleared, leftovers dumped,
and only this photo can start the drama anew—
endlessly, with every viewing.
Beyond this special theater, beyond
the glaring backlit world of the window,
there is the limitless dreamscape that holds all memory

unsorted, out of time, awaiting only us
to give it shape by going out into the light to meet it:
smiling easily, with ignorance, hardly guessing
at the pratfalls and the ass's heads,
at the loves and storms, at discovering
that we wait only for ourselves:
that by the time we arrive at where we are,
we are too heavy to hold, too old to be warned
that to step out of the moment is

to lose the frame forever.

Ken Wolman is a retired technical writer and college teacher who recently relocated to the Berkshires after years in New Jersey, the last six months in a homeless shelter. He has published in *The Paterson Literary Review*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Journal of New Jersey Poets*, *The Asheville Poetry Review*, among many others. He was awarded the 1995 New Jersey State Council on the Arts Poetry Fellowship.