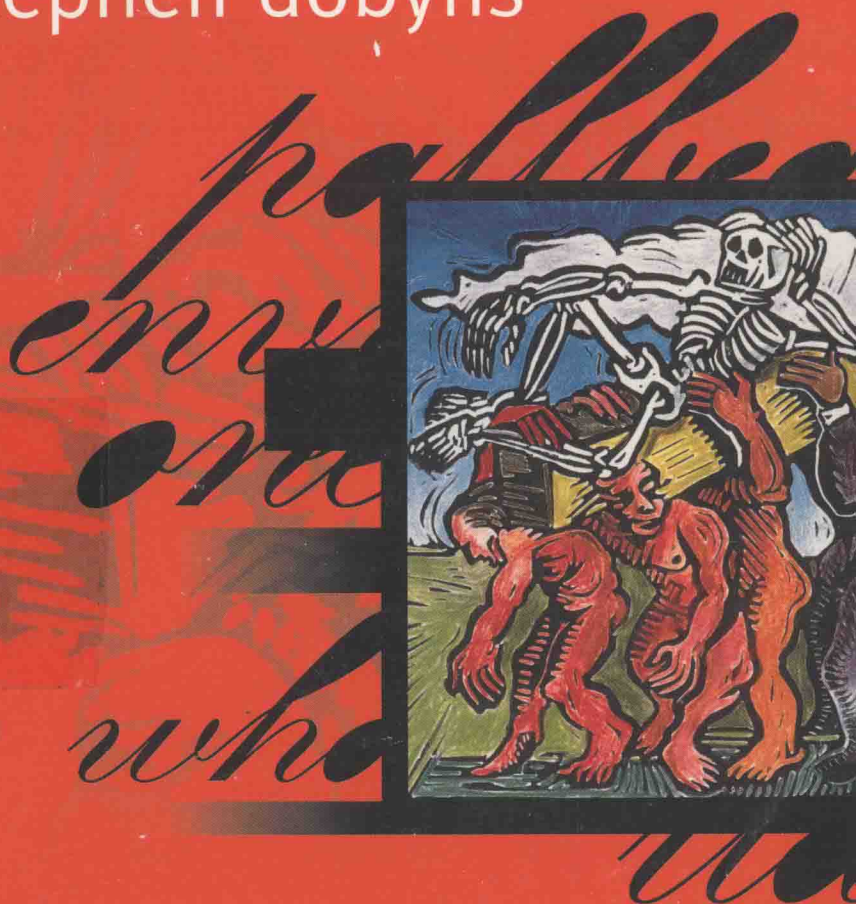


PALLBEARERS ENVYING THE ONE WHO RIDES

oems by
stephen dobyns



PALLBEARERS
ENVYING
THE ONE
WHO RIDES

STEPHEN DOBYNS

PENGUIN POETS

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For
Laure-Anne Bosselaar
and
Kurt Brown

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PART ONE

HEART I

—Sir Bones: is stuffed,
de world, wif feeding girls.

"Dream Song 4"—John Berryman

■ ■ ■

keep looking at your clown's face in the mirror . . .

beware of dryness of heart love the morning spring
the bird with an unknown name the winter oak

"The Envoy of Mr. Cogito"—Zbigniew Herbert

■ ■ ■

Palmström schwankt als wie ein Zweig im Wind . . .
Als ihn Korf befragt, warum er schwanke,
meint er: weil ein lieblicher Gedanke,
wie ein Vogel, zärtlich und geschwind,
auf ein kleines ihn belastet habe—
schwanke er als wie ein Zweig im Wind,
schwingend noch von der willkommen Gabe . . .

"Gleichnis"—Christian Morgenstern

■ ■ ■

All winter long, it seemed, a darkening
Began.

"Robinson at Home"—Weldon Kees

GOOD DEEDS

Heart sits on a stump in the backyard,
dog turds, crusted snow lie all around.
A window opens, a voice shouts: Come
on back, Heart! But Heart won't budge.
You see, there is a dark place in the sky
despite the noon sun and lack of clouds.
A spot above the oak branch on the right,
like a dark splatter of spilled black paint.
If you stretched out your arm, your hand
could almost cover it. Heart can't explain it.
It feels like sadness but why is there sadness?
Heart sleeps okay, eats okay, moves his bowels just right.
It feels like despair but why is there despair?
Heart has pals, no big bills, and the roof doesn't leak.
As far as Heart can tell, life is going well.
The spot shimmers a bit and Heart thinks:
It's showing me that it knows I am here.
He imagines the dark spot leaving its home
in the morning—can sadness be pre-existing?
Could it fix like a tick on its victim's neck?
But perhaps this is someone else's sadness
and off on another street a gloomy stranger,
who feels often suicidal, feels okay today,
feels even optimistic. The oppressive weight
has not come back and he skips a few steps.
His sadness got lost, a not uncommon mistake.
Heart's muscular good cheer reasserts itself.
Although I feel terrible, he thinks, I don't really

feel terrible. I feel it for a stranger who today
gets a breather to let him rebuild a scrap of vigor.
Right now he feels down, but soon he'll come 'round.
Heart jumps from his stump. The day has just
begun but already he has done his good deed.
He'll eat a big breakfast, then make some calls.
In the evening may come a chance for Romance.
The black spot begins to fade. Soon it will be only
a pimple on Heaven's blue sky. Wasn't this inevitable?
The singing of formerly unheard birds grows audible.

THE HIMALAYAS WITHIN HIM

Heart worries about the sound of his own heartbeat. If it must be percussive, why can't it be musical like a steel drum or kettle? Or if not orchestral, at least more aggressive like a dragon's bellow in a dark tunnel. No one has yet critiqued the sound of his heartbeat. Were they being polite? Did they discuss with one another the puny patter of his inferior ticker? In Heart's newfound chagrin, he wants to buy a megaphone so his heart can boom, or a synthesizer so it can sing like a Bach chorale. Timpanies, trumpets, tom-toms—shouldn't his heart blare like a quartet of trombones to declare his arrival? How lavish have been his loves—shouldn't his heartbeat reflect his ardent complexity? Instead it beats out a dull monotone: thump, thump. But perhaps, thinks Heart, I delude myself. Perhaps my passions are quite insignificant and my sensitivity no greater than another's. Heart chuckles at the folly of such a thought. Over the horizon lie the Himalayas and within him rise his emotions, while the disparity in elevation is slight. Heart decides that his sedate beat is only camouflage. If it bespoke his feelings exactly it would mean constant earthquake with people leaping from skyscraper windows and babies yowling all night. If it truly reflected the cataract within him, gladhanders would nag him for favors. He'd waste his passion on trifles. Once again Heart is struck by nature's immense cunning: the complexity of the butterfly's wing, the salamander's artful coloration, and his own heartbeat: constant and sly.

OLD WHAT'S-HIS-NAME

Heart writes a letter to the ones who are missing—
those who moved away or slipped through the cracks.
He wants them to know he misses them even yet.
Some go back to earliest childhood. What might
they look like? He realizes he must have passed
a few on the street without a flicker of recognition,
one with a cane, one with a beard, one with a red beret.
It's been a long time, he writes to the first.
Then he crosses it out. Many things have happened.
He crosses this out as well. How do you speak
to the disappeared? He remembers how some
made him laugh, some cry, some roll up his eyes.
He tries to recollect the smooth texture of their cheeks.
Those who died, how long have they lain in silence?
Those who live, do they stroll the streets even still?
His list contains several hundred names, other names
he can't recall. He sees their faces in the smoke.
He wishes he could clasp each one by the hand.
I wonder if you'll remember who I am, he writes.
Then he rubs it out. Recently I've thought of you.
He rubs this out, too. At last he hits on the right note,
which he prints on hundreds of cards. Some he inserts
in bottles he drops in the sea, some he ties to pigeons' legs,
most are swept up in the dry eye of a passing tornado.
Far away a bike messenger snatches a card from the air.
Still here, it says, followed by an indecipherable scrawl.
Old What's-His-Name, the fellow thinks: Up to his tricks.

LIKE A REVOLVING DOOR

Heart feels sad. He's tired of being a heart
and wants to be a lung. A lung never lacks
a sister or brother. He wants to be a finger.
A finger always has a family. Or a spleen
which only feels anger and is never sad.
Sometimes Heart feels joyous, beats with vigor.
But then the old stories resurface again:
hardship, cruelty, the Human Condition.
A kidney never faces these problems alone.
The eyes in unison devise a third dimension.
Not by being solo do the ears create stereo.
But Heart must turn outward for comradeship,
to seek another heart, a journey fraught
with uncertainty. Like a revolving door—
such is falling in and out of love. And
the betrayals! Heart needs only to consult
his book of broken hearts to feel pessimistic.
But soon he puts on a fresh shirt and heads out
to the highway. He hangs a red valentine heart
from a stick so people will guess his business.
No matter that the sun is sinking and storm-
clouds thicken. Approaching headlights glisten
on his newly pressed shirt and on his smile
which looks a trifle forced. Dust catches in his hair
and makes him cough. Why is Heart alone in the chest?

Because hope is an aspect of the single condition
and without hope, why move our feet? To see himself
as purely a fragment: such is Heart's obligation.
Let's quickly depart before we learn what happens.
Sometimes a car stops. Sometimes there is nothing.

FACING FAILURE

Heart lies on a board with his hands crossed
on his chest. He is neither resting, nor sick.
He's working very hard. His brow knots up
as he stares at the clock. Heart is investigating
the nature of boredom. I'm bored, I'm bored—
everyday he hears this said, both by people
he admires and by some he doesn't. Being a heart,
he has no chance for boredom. He is beating
every moment of the day and night. He pumps
blood and falls in love—these are his endeavors.
He thinks boredom is like being dead while still
having the benefits of life. You can eat a peach,
you can watch the sunset, you can walk the dog—
none of which will interfere with your suffering.
Boredom isn't like sleep since boredom isn't restful.
It isn't like meditation because the mind is blank
with a touch of complaint. Heart tries to lie very still.
Outside he hears a robin scolding his neighbor's cat.
He hears a buzz saw and the bouncing of a basketball.
Sunlight through the glass, the smell of cut grass—
Heart grows bored studying the nature of boredom.
I'm a total flop, he thinks. Surely, if he were smarter,
he could dig to the root of boredom and find a cure.
He imagines the glad cries of the afflicted. They would
lift him onto their backs and beg him to make a speech.
Wherever he went, he'd be pointed out as the person
who defeated boredom. Medals would coat his chest.

Heart slaps his forehead: again his mind has wandered.
He tries to face his failure. Like a sparrow I can't fly.
Like a monkey I can't swing from branch to branch.
Just getting through the day takes all his wits. He lacks
the knack to join the ranks of the ambulatory defunct.