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"SCENE IN SILVERPOINT": BORSON'S SCENE OF SHAMANIC INITIATION

THE SPRING 1978 ISSUE OF *THE DALHOUSIE REVIEW* featured a pair of poems by Roo Borson, the celebrated Canadian poet who would go on to win the Governor General's Award and the Griffin Poetry Prize for her collection *Short Journey Upriver Toward Oishida* (2004). One of them, "Three Women Bathing," belongs to her novitiate as a poet, but the other offering, "Scene in Silverpoint," was a major artistic breakthrough, introducing a number of tropes that she would explore over the following decade: the stirring of leaves, the enormity of the primordial night, the sudden appearance of a mysterious and possibly even magical moon, and the casual brutality of the wind. More unusually, it includes the figure of a "little girl"—a poet-to-be—lying in bed and vicariously experiencing it all.

Tropes like night, moonlight, and stirring leaves had played a central role in English-language poetry since the British Romantics, and Wallace Stevens had masterfully and intensively revised them for the Modernist era. With the publication of "Scene in Silverpoint," however, Borson announced herself as an aspiring, latter-day revisionist of this tradition—a project to which she assiduously applied herself over several collections. Borson's most overtly Romantic phase encompasses her third to fifth collections—namely, *Rain* (1980), *A Sad Device* (1981), and *The Whole Night, Coming Home* (1984)—but it began with "Scene in Silverpoint," her earliest poem in which these tropes are successfully combined. This poem is therefore the perfect starting point to consider her relationship to the tropology of the High Romantics. Not coincidentally, it is also a poem about Borson's discovery of her poetic vocation—the kind of poem Harold Bloom characterizes as the "Primal Scene of Instruction" in his book *A Map of Misreading* (1975). However, it is a rather idiosyncratic poem of this sort, revealing a strong and unexpected streak of shamanism, so it may be better to think of it as an

initiatory scene.

To fully untangle these matters, it is best to zoom in on the poem itself. At first glance, its opening stanza—the first of three—seems sparse and unassuming:

> In the smoky light of a room,
> the little girl waits between sheets
> at ten o'clock
> when the cat turns
> strangely adult and escapes.

Though no one has ever thought of Borson as a narrative poet (and rightly so), she does include a sizeable number of narrative elements in her poems, and this is one of the earliest examples. What we find here is the first movement of a three-act play in miniature—namely, the exposition and inciting incident. To paraphrase, a little girl—the presumed protagonist—is lying in bed, waiting for an unspecified something, when a "strangely" altered cat flees the room. Though this seems simple enough on the face of it, it presents the careful reader with a number of mysteries. Why is the light "smoky"? For what or whom is the girl waiting? How do we account for the "strange" alterity of the cat? To what ends does it escape the room?

Before attempting to answer these questions, it is necessary to consider the second stanza, as it is a concatenation of puzzles and delights:

> The man in his lawn chair smokes,
> his ears full of words,
> the silver tangle threading
> upwards from his fingers.
> In the grass the cat
> slips past in its curtain of flesh.
> Leaves stir sharply
> like small birds.

The largest surprise is that our presumptive protagonist, the little girl, has ostensibly disappeared. Furthermore, there has been a change of scenery, with events moving from the bedroom to the yard, a shift revealed by the words "lawn chair" and "grass." We may briefly wonder if the true pro-

tagonist is "the man in his lawn chair," but he is not only sedentary but also enmeshed in stale language and unhealthy habits. (Consider his word-crammed ears and the cloud of cigarette smoke that surrounds him.) This suggests that the man is the antithesis of the Romantic quester, serving as a counterpoint to the true hero of the poem. This brings us to the cat, who we may now surmise is a likelier candidate for the role of protagonist in the narrative. After all, it is the cat that has led us from the bedroom to the yard. Yet Borson warns us against this too-easy explanation, saying, "the cat / slips past in its curtain of flesh." Its *curtain* of flesh. Obviously, we should not take this metaphor literally, as a cat neither resembles a curtain nor acts as an effective screen. The meaning of "curtain" that Borson has in mind is therefore "anything that shuts off, covers, or conceals." But what could the cat's flesh possibly conceal?

The surprising answer is that the cat's flesh conceals its true nature as the shamanistic avatar of the little girl. In other words, it is not an actual cat but a symbol of the little girl, who is undergoing a profound transformation. Escaping the confines of her former identity, much as a shaman symbolically dies to her former self, the little girl escapes the house as a cat, claiming her place in the wide night of the Romantic imagination. Consider the trope that immediately follows the second mention of the cat: "leaves stir sharply / like small birds." The stirring of the leaves in the wind was a trope beloved of Romantic poets, yet it is evidently not a feline but a poet who travels through the yard and on into the trees. This is reinforced by the charming imagery of birdlike leaves and even more by the beautiful sibilance of these lines, which perfectly captures the susurration of the leaves. We have therefore arrived at the startling thesis that the cat is somehow part of the girl; indeed, it is her avatar on a journey of poetic and shamanistic initiation.

I am not, of course, suggesting that Borson is a shaman or that she can transform herself into an actual cat. Nevertheless, it is possible that Borson is what Joan B. Townsend terms a "neo-shaman," a person who feels "disenfranchised" from traditional religion (and possibly much of Western society), opting for the alternative path of a "personal quest for spirituality, meaning, and transcendence." Yet this remains conjectural. What stands on firmer ground is that "Scene in Silverpoint" compares Borson's discovery of her poetic vocation to a scene of shamanistic initiation. Just as a shaman has a spirit animal, who guides her through her initiation, Borson has an animal daemon—namely, the cat—who leads her younger self towards her

mature identity. This process reaches its climax in the third and final stanza, where the cat reaches the cosmic mountain, which is explicitly associated with the primordial night. Tellingly, this is Borson's (future) home territory as an emerging Romantic troper of the moon, stars, and darkness:

> Night is a mountain
> where the cat has gone.
> The tambourine moon
> shakes its silver into the dirt.
> The wind slides against the dark house,
> full of footfalls, whips.

In many shamanic traditions, the new initiate makes a journey to a cosmic mountain to speak with spirits and thereby acquire mystical knowledge. In his book *Shamanism* (1951), for example, the famous Romanian religious historian Mircea Eliade relates the tale of a Siberian shaman who was led "to a high, rounded mountain" by his two animal guides, "the ermine and the mouse." Similarly, the apotheosis of Borson's poem involves the ascension of the cosmic mountain, which is closely linked with night. In the context of this poem, night signifies both spiritual dangers and the period in which the Romantic imagination enjoys its widest latitude. By braving the night, the darkness that encompasses human existence, the poet-shaman seeks a sharpening of perceptual and imaginative powers. It is surely no coincidence that the accomplished trip to the cosmic mountain precedes the most dazzling image in "Scene in Silverpoint": "the tambourine moon shakes / its silver into the dirt."

This is the same brilliant orb that shines in the verse of William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats, though Borson's version reveals a synesthetic or percussive difference. In so doing, she begins her work as a modern revisionist of the Romantic tradition, trying to bridge the celestial and earthly realms. But then, for the poem's closing figure, she takes us back to the house, now darkened, its former "smoky light" extinguished. What are we to make of the changes that have affected the house? And why is the wind that slides against it "full of footfalls, whips"?

It should now be clear that the first stanza was a figurative deathbed scene. On first reading we may have mundanely concluded that the little girl "between sheets" was waiting for sleep, but having studied the whole

of the poem we can now offer a better interpretation: she was waiting for ego death so she could begin her shamanic initiation. As Eliade informs us, it is only through the death of the former self that the aspiring shaman can become "a technician of the sacred," as "the candidate remains like a dead man, scarcely breathing, in a solitary place." This corresponds to the first three lines of Borson's poem, when the girl is confined "between sheets," like someone bedridden due to a terminal illness. The ebbing of life is also represented by "the smoky light," a trope that obliquely recalls some of Emily Dickinson's deathbed scenes, as in "I've Seen a Dying Eye" (1862):

> I've seen a Dying Eye
> Run round and round a Room—
> In search of Something—as it seemed—
> Then Cloudier become—

Dickinson's trope of the "Dying Eye" becoming "Cloudier" is comparable to "the smoky light of a room" in Borson's poem. Although Dickinson is ultimately the more inward poet, as she places the cloudiness in the eye while Borson locates it externally in the light itself, the similarities between these poems are nevertheless significant, as they are both about altered states of vision that precede major transformations. That being so, why has the house, the scene of the little girl's initiation, become dark by the end of the poem? This is because "the smoky light" associated with the little girl's illness has been extinguished. Having now gone through ego death—that is, the dissolution of her former self—the girl's consciousness is illumined by the silver light of "the tambourine moon"—that is, the lunar glow of the Romantic imagination. Yet the girl is not *literally* dead and gone, as shown by the fact that the wind slides up to the house "full of footfalls, whips." Evidently, there is some sort of intelligence, albeit an altered one, that is there to notice the sound of the footfalls, presaging the arrival of visitors.

In shamanistic terms, these footfalls belong to the dead, with whom the initiated shaman can now converse. As Eliade explains, "All through the primitive and modern worlds we find individuals who profess to maintain relations with 'spirits,' whether they are 'possessed' by them or control them." Elsewhere he speaks of the "exceptional character of the medicine man [sic] within society," which consists of being the mouthpiece of the spirits. "Scene in Silverpoint" similarly ends with the initiated girl hear-

ing the arrival of spirits, marking the commencement of her career as an intermediary between worlds. That this vocation will involve considerable anguish is indicated by the addition of the word "whips." Yet how does this relate to Borson's sense of poetic vocation?

Once again, Bloom can serve as our tutelary spirit. Speaking of poetic origins, he writes, "obligation shines clear as a little death, premonitory of the greater fall down to the inanimate." Speaking in a more aphoristic vein, he also says that "poetic incarnation results from poetic influence." The footfalls approaching the darkened house could thus be the ghosts of poetic influence—Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, and many more—who will now speak through Borson, their latter-day revisionist.

While Borson's poetry has won plaudits for its rich imagery and innovative prosody, critics often ignore her Romantic influences and formidable powers of poetic transformation. At a time when most people thought that Romanticism was long since exhausted, she found pay dirt in Romantic tropes of night, moonlight, and stirring leaves. In "Scene in Silverpoint," she gave these tropes a shamanic revision that retains its lustre many years after its initial publication. The fact that it has now been out of print for four decades reveals the pressing need for a collected edition of her poems.