Emotions and the Drums

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Emotions and the Drums . . .

Because the drums live in the walls, thicker than thoughts the shaking theme of sounds not really sound grows through, stains the walls, mumbles up the rusty sink, and softly gathers in the corners with a whispered, steady breath. Because everytime I hear them thumping, they come and listen low for me; because everytime they play another day away, gone by, that one night's drumming takes within myself a quicker place, I search the street for cliff-deep ears to throw the drum beats down, but find they cling to silence underneath my tongue and let the thoughts already dead go tumbling in their stead. It was because of his insanity—the crazy love he had for drums. He drummed that craziness about like seeds; one caught in me to be a thriving weed that must be talked out by its roots before one night becomes my everyday, and everyday is dark. In my room above the hotel bar the jukebox drum muffles in my very bed, my hearing turns to thought again, then I jump up to pound across the throbbing, veined linoleum and pounce the closet doors apart; I look inside and see once more huddled around my peeling coat the sound of drums, the sound of drums.

Walking down the dust dried street my feet repeat the name Emotions that they called him by. You heard him hunched above his drums, his hands a winding blur of dancing mice, and you forgot the clumsy way he shifted anxious arms and stumbled off alone to hide. You thought you saw a pain fanned fire creep up into his eyes and lighten wide, you called him pure Emotions, and you forget or rather reconciled his talk that broke in jolts to nine parts straining stutter one part bomb of word. (You hear him and recall the boy before he earned a well used set of drums, the boy called square who couldn't talk or catch a ball, exploring the sound of wastebaskets with spinning spreading hands more feverish than good legs on a cripple, discovering a new language that brought with trace of fear a world you never knew you knew and twisted about your gut until his knuckles bled and close-nosed teacher bawled him out to
tears. Hearing him you see again Emotions playing after work and six o’clock each night on the empty stage, and the janitor finding him sometimes asleep between the sticks at dawn, and how he looked at you and me and saw something just a little more than only the two of us and said it on his drums.)

O Christ, I think so hard it almost hurts, that night it wasn’t really me.

That night. That night. The girl’s breasts turned slightly up at just the angle of her lightly tilted nose, and her walk was something underneath the thought you never really dared to think, and she was Ricki’s broad. The image then of Ricki appearing in distorted sections through the flaked glass window down the stairs of Packard’s Drugs. The sight of Ricki in now and dim in the thickening swirls of smoke (where we always met at eight to read the horny books and play the high-strung screeching juke and cover the ceiling up with dangling, wet end wrappers off the straws and joke about each other for a laugh), his changing face a platitude of wrath. An item in his voice beyond an honest bitterness, he roared above the castrate trumpet in the box; his broad had broke away, scared to bang so much I thought, and he recalled the tension thread of shocks she shivered underneath Emotion’s spell of drums, and how at times she touched her ear across his mouth.

Telling Ricki that Emotions only found with her the times when he could almost talk and she was never more than friend with him coaxed oaths that fell like empty heat when clouds are searched for rain. Sharp remarks that worried up my throat forsook their form, for they were words (my instinct might have known) that bred from feelings cut against my reign of disbelief, the run of life I thought I chose.

With change of tone I didn’t understand, my argument came to a close. Pensions to the code of unrestrained relief rushed up to fill the instant wedge of my spurred down dissent. I was gang again.

A plan not really thought by anyone of us, within the group grew high demanding active shape. Ricki’s fist hacked the air about until his own excitement turned him out, and the gang followed him, and I went with the gang.

(Remember that the gang meant more than friends, meant something noticed in the corner eye of those who stepped aside your path, meant your words were heard, meant something very close to life. Remember for the little good
it does, that you were young, that you
were young and didn't know.)

Before the auditorium's slab-like door we paused
to turn black collars of our jackets up and
fire the cigarettes. The etch dull coals
shone on the whistling tails of smoke like
heads on snakes, and in the squirming muscle
of my throat, raw whiskey gnawed its fang.
Ricki pushed the door aside, and we slid in,
not walking hard, but loping slow and all relaxed,
and blood flowed down to limp loose hands to give
the feel of loss of weight. Emotions centered underneath
the one moist cloth of light, worked in a softly
broken roll, his yellow shock of hair tasseling in a hidden
wind above his arch of brow. His eyes intent and colored
faraway against a weaving pattern of his mind, he never saw
us as we covered the aisle past row and row of closed-clam
seats and came up on the stage. He never saw us
until the shape of Ricki cast dark upon the table
of his drums, and then his stare still reached
the back of the dim hall, and the rhythmic
rolls softer now shushed shushed. Sprung
Ricki's knife blade side of hand down on the wrist.
The drums stopped. In a moment of quiet.
Eyes (blue ice, turning in an orbit out in space)
meeting up to Ricki's, fastening there. Scared.
Defiant. Ricki yelling about the girl, his
brittle echoes breaking about out deep in
the auditorium. And I seeing the silent seats
a watching, crouching crowd. Ricki demanding an answer.
Emotions keeping up his eyes. And I knowing
the talk he wanted couldn't come; his
only voice would be the sound of stutters.
And Ricki chopping vicious chips of words,
and Emotions holding still the eyes,
and Ricki halting short upon the balanced point
of violence, and the long menace of scrutiny,
and the long drag, and the long snarls of smoke from
the nose, and at last the quiet words spat through the lips:
I think maybe we better teach this boy a lesson.
Cigarettes flipped to the floor, were tapped by heels
like nervous hoofs. One went back to snap the light,
and for sharp seconds I stood among the couching
crooked shadows on the stage, seeing the reflected
bulb cradled in the curved mouths of all those empty
seats like so many teeth. The shadows rose.
A rush in sudden darkness knocked him off the chair.
One of us grabbed his arm, the other came to me:
we held them straight and wide apart. Ricki's
hand whipped back and forth across his face. I felt small movements in his muscles like flutters caused by birds. Much I couldn’t see, but I saw Ricki’s fist poised apple-like above his head, just about to fall. It fell and hard, he hit him hard hard hard. Ricki’s hands pranced in and out, and maddened by the steady silent stare, ripped into a grotesque rocking dance. Something either sweat or blood flecked to me its smell, and in the whirl of whacking sounds and belting fan of fists, I could not tell if specks were spots before my eyes or bits of blood from him. The stone hard knots rocked up and down and up and up again, and growing weary slowed, one more, the high gouged swing of under arc that caught him even there. He cried out once, his belly quirked into the stiffened lift that almost tore out from our grip. We let him drop, and limply he collapsed. We all fed flame to new-mouthed cigarets; We loped slow and loose down the stairs. We padded that easy way upon the long dark aisle past row and row of empty seats. We were almost half way to the door when we heard it. It started very low and soft as crisp leaves bobbing in a stream of air, but built up louder louder like the clap winged clatter of a pack of pigeons scattered. Emotions was playing his drums! In the dark we couldn’t see him, but we could hear that shudder swelling louder and faster singing faster and harder and pounding into steady driving thunder that roared and howled and burst about us like a shattered hell of flailing hail that followed us up the aisle and through the door and all the way down the hall and out into the street. And then I heard it still, and hearing it thought he had a crazy love for drums, and hearing it wished then that I could be so mad, and hearing it wish now that I could talk that night’s work out and down and rid my thoughts and sounds forever of the sound of drums.

... Douglas Hodgman