

Why I'm Asleep

a poem by Tom Ross (VOM, September 2000)

For years I've had this problem, but lately it's much worse.
The doctors call it "apnea", a subtle sort of curse.
It doesn't paralyze you, and it won't rot out your eyes
(and if it did that kind of thing you folks might sympathize).
No, this condition shows itself in lonely dark of night;
its symptoms, although pitiful, are kept well out of sight.
When you lie down to sleep at night, if you have got apnea,
your throat clamps shut and you don't breathe --which ain't a good idea.
This blockage jolts you wide awake (I guess it's just as well),
but waking sixty times a night is my idea of hell.
This kind of episodic sleep is just as good as none,
so lately, though I'm 43, I look like 91.

Though this is bad for my career (which could be tanking soon),
I hardly thought that I'd stand out at Valley of the Moon!
A festival of sleeplessness that doctors seldom glimpse,
where zombiehood is commonplace and sleeping is for wimps!
Each day at nine the walking dead all staggered to their places,
and tried to keep themselves upright and not fall on their faces.
They propped their eyelids open wide to smile and chat and play --
and yet I was the worst among them every goddam day.
Those telltale signs of drowsiness the others all concealed,
in my case were less subtle and were publicly revealed.
My teachers had the daunting task of patiently ignoring
a student who kept drooping, drooling, falling down, and snoring.
So, all in all, this year I couldn't claim to be effective;
I did, however, bring to camp my own unique perspective.

For now I see things you don't see, I pick up new vibrations.
My life is twice as rich now that it's all hallucinations.
The rest of you saw routine things that made your interest flag...
while I alone among you witnessed Martin Hayes in drag.
It's things like that make me sorry all of you can't see
the visions that my frazzled brain this week bestowed on me.
And so, my strange experience of camp I'd like to share
(I'm confident your fact-based anecdotes cannot compare).

The first night Dave Surette announced that he meant to explore
both tuning and "some things beyond that" -- I thought, "tell me more!".
I did not understand what things "beyond tuning" might be.
Then Rodney taught some reels, and I at last began to see.

Guitarist Steve discovered a new tuning, which he said
comes straight from Ireland's County Dork (located in his head).
This so-called "Dorkney Tuning" goes B, B, E, D, F, C;
to memorize that sequence, just repeat this after me:
Baughman's Bogus Explanation Didn't Fool the Class.
[chorus] Baughman's Bogus Explanation Didn't Fool the Class.

Now at a ball last night as I was entering the room,
I spotted Peter Kasin, who was dancing with a broom.
He made his partner look good, as the dancers like to say,
but did so more by contrast than by elegant display.
They say that wrestling takes its toll on even the most pretty,
and Peter's not the fresh-faced lad that went off to the city.
If it's any consolation, Peter, you've got more true class
than that haughty highland upstart who last Wednesday whipped your ass.

Miss Cassel's gift for mimicry I always have admired;
her camp impersonations are consistently inspired.

But Hanneke should be aware, next time she gets the itch,
that, in both senses, Martin's payback truly is a bitch.

When Alasdair suggested Rodney borrow my own kilt,
his reasoning, I guess, was that we're similarly built.
On him it seemed a miniskirt, but Rodney's not complaining.
(he's writing two more thank-you waltzes in the time remaining).

Then Alasdair decided it was time to surf the trunk,
he leaped on top; the crowd fell in and dropped him with a clunk.
I wouldn't want to question how that man is getting his kicks,
but I would like to know how he acquired degrees in physics.

Then Tzdenek taught a language-class with worldwide application.
He taught us handy phrases for each land and situation.
Including "I have lost my wallet", "my new shirt is white",
and "I would like to get you pregnant, hope you're free tonight".

Duncan taught a workshop that took place inside the shower;
we stood in dirty water for a long frustrating hour,
and practiced stepping into pairs of clean dry underpants
while trying not to do the VOM camp-shower dance.

In closing I should say that though this year was very strange,
in some ways I enjoyed the growth of my perceptive range.
And if, next year, I'm more prepared to take in some fresh air,
I think I'll miss my gift for seeing things that aren't there.

The Importance of Looking Stupid

a poem by Tom Ross (VOM, September 1998)

However much we wish that life were calm and safe and pleasant,
In every day we spend on earth some risk is always present.
As we grow up, we learn a certain rule before too long:
Avoid all opportunities for something to go wrong.
Just play it safe! Do not seek out occasions to be brave,
and take no needless risks while you're this side of the grave.
Some risks are unavoidable no matter what you do,
but try your level best to hold it down to just a few.

And so, the world is full of those whose only aim in life
Is staying far away from any failure, pain, or strife.
Their notion of the perfect life is one through which you pass
Not knowing what it might be like to fall flat on your ass.
They'll take a chance on certain things (say, marriage, for example),
But if they take one risk per year, they think that's more than ample.

And that, I think, is where we differ, here at VOM.
In fact, it's what has saved us from becoming just like them.
Make no mistake: we rush right in where others fear to tread.
The type of risk we take is just the one most people dread:
While other people take their risks with Wall Street or with Cupid,
At VOM we take the risk of looking really stupid.

The many things we do at camp all share a common basis:
In every case we know that they may blow up in our faces.
We try a lot of tricky things, not knowing if they'll work,
With every chance that we will end up looking like a jerk.
If I try to do this step dance, will I dislocate my pelvis?
If I try to sing Loch Lomond, will they think I'm doing Elvis?
If I play this tune in public will my fingers flop about?
Unfortunately, there is only one way to find out.

Surprisingly, the risk is just about the same for all
Because, the higher up you are, the farther you can fall.
Beginners may be fearful of a debut heart attack,
But teachers know damned well this crowd won't cut them any slack.
You make one tiny error, and they may get up and leave
(You break a string, you drop your bow, your socks are in your sleeve)...

Imagine that you're hired to teach at Valley of the Moon:
It's August 12th, so teacher hirings need to take place soon,
And Alasdair has called to say he needs you in a hurry.
You say you don't know Scottish music; he says "Bruce, don't worry!
We know your style of music from a TV show that we saw.
I don't recall the name of it, I think they called it Hee Haw."
What kind of masochist accepts that challenge without fear?
Would you take on a gig like that? Of course you would! You're here!
You folks will take a major risk of public failure any day.
It isn't that you're not afraid; you simply do it anyway.

"You say you want me dancing wildly in a long white dress,
In darkness, on uneven ground, with torches near me? Yes!"
"You're asking me to write the first tune that I can call mine,
and play it in the fast class, after Ryan plays his? Fine!"
"You want me slamming at the wall while hopping on a cot
in order to express my Hang? For goodness' sake, why not!"
Most folks are scared to sing in public; our crowd doesn't mind it.
(The challenge of the singing class this year was where to find it.)
Most teen-aged kids are petrified of looking like a fool
Because someone might think that what they're into isn't cool.

Our kids, if challenged on their taste in music, dance, and such,
say "We decide what's cool around here, thank you very much!"

Despite the punishment we take, each year we keep returning.
We face the risks because we know that that's the price of learning.
We've learned that patience can wear thin when temperatures are climbing,
So those who fart at dress rehearsals need to hone their timing.
We've learned that public sleepiness can make you look a fool
(Unless you like to wake up face-down in a lake of drool).
And speaking of guitarists... we had never seen before
A class that keeps the same hours as a chain convenience store.
Well, anyway, let's drink a toast to life lived on the edge,
And while we're at it, let us take a very solemn pledge:
Whatever day-job you may have, whatever town you're from,
Let's all come back to camp next year, and make ourselves look dumb.

Tom Ross