Blood Wallah: And Other Poems

Robert Borski

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A “wallah,” for those who do not know, is an individual associated with a specific service or work. For example, a barista is a coffee wallah, a chef is a kitchen wallah, and a vampire is a blood wallah—particularly if said vampire’s sanguinary knowledge resembles that of a sommelier’s (a wine wallah) for an encyclopedia of vintages.

Such is the speaker in the poem that begins—and titles—Robert Borski’s latest, unforgettable collection of speculative poetry, or poetry that explores themes, tropes, characters, and other essentials of genres like science fiction, fantasy, horror, and every permutation these three bastions have sired. Our titular wallah is a vampire with the charm and sophistication of Anne Rice’s Lestat, the predation of Count Dracula, and the piano wire-sharp senses of taste and smell of Hannibal Lecter (who was something of a vampire in his own right, really), and his (or perhaps her) cellar is groaning with an array of vintages—and bodies—of which our vault-keeper has nothing but praise.

While non-hemophiles may disagree,

it is easily the most complex beverage

there is in terms of taste and reward,

and for those with discriminating palates

and uncrazed by thirst

…

a wide variety of tonal flavors

can be enjoyed not only for their

vitality and restorative nature,

but savored for complexities of

aroma, character, and finish.

Take this beverage here.

Obviously youthful and fair, within days,

if left to ripen, it will begin to acquire

the first of what I call a lunar sparkle,

for just as the sea is duplicated

within the host species, so are certain

rhythms of the sun and moon.

Hence a beverage supped at dusk, on

the cusp of its egg-tipping luteal advent

(I speak here, of course, of \_vin femme\_,

the more variable of the two adult cultivars),

This is by far from being the cleverest, most striking, or beautiful poems in \_ Blood Wallah\_. However, it provides an excellent template to explain the rest of the collection without systematically breaking down every poem (which I am sorely tempted to do, despite restraints on time and space).

Speculative poetry is at its best when it endeavors to break apart the bones of familiar figures like vampires, werewolves, witches, spaceships, fae, and dragons and rearrange them as chimera that speak to us in even more breathless, urgent, and ephemeral tones than their ancestors. Boreski’s poetry does exactly this, using clever wordplay, eye-popping images (“the cusp of its egg-tipping luteal advent” is one I would just love to steal and bronze), and a lexicon that would have done Dr. Samuel Johnson proud. In “Blood Wallah,” the vampire is no longer the night-stalking figure of Slavic legend and Bram Stoker’s fevered imagination, nor is s/he the sexy sophisticated lover from many a paranormal romance. While s/he has elements of both, s/he is something new entirely: a collector, whose hoard includes (and do pardon the spoiler) an imprisoned (and presumably conscious) young Amish woman. And there \_is\_ something vampiric about collectors, no matter the object(s) of their desire. How many of us who collect anything have not become obsessive about our treasured possessions, or haughty about our knowledge of, say, Depression glass or \_Doctor Who\_ memorabilia? How many of us have said, not entirely certain if we were joking or not, “I would\_ just kill\_ to possess that?” Boreski’s observation about vampires simultaneously makes a comment about our own very human—and thus very disturbing—foibles while proving that vampires can still be (if you’ll pardon the pun) fresh and relevant after centuries of stories, films, and novels.

But I did say that “Blood Wallah” is not the best poem in the book. Indeed, the poems that follow this are even sharper in language and execution, and their revelations about our shadow selves even scarier. “All the Clocks of Hell” provides us a feast of nightmarish clocks that do not “tick and bray” in this timeless place of punishment—much to the very mortal terror of those who gaze upon them. “Gepetto” gives us a deeply feminist retelling of *Pinocchio* in which the woodcarver relies on the social mores that keep girls “more mindful of their parents” to keep his second marionette from rebelling. “NOIR” re-spins the classic crime genre as a Kafkaesque parable. Perhaps the most terrifying poem in the book, “Requiem for the Tooth Fairy” (here reproduced in full) turns a childhood fantasy inside out.

While I have yet to pick my weapon of

ultimate dispatch—

the looped string attached to the doorknob;

the pliers;

the canister of knockout gas

or anaesthetic syringe—

by the time my benefactor shows up

to claim her assortment of ivory

(you cannot see them now, but

Gleaming with blood and spittle,

the last three of my incisors

lie beneath my pillow like miniature

tusks—the human equivalent

of an elephant’s graveyard)

the only other thing I will have left

to decide is how I’m going to spend

the purse I intend to take from her.

See? In order to press my case,

I’ve already prepared

the restraints of floss, the fragrance

of which now permeates the air

like an abattoir of mint —

Even as, like a snake a-sniff,

my tongue probes the semi-empty

sepulcher of my jaw.

Seconds later, feigning sleep, I

hear a noise.

Cautiously, readying the garrote

of floss, I risk a peek; and just

as expected,

with coins held tight like unrung

bells, in, on gossamer feet,

tiptoes my mother.

Some of Borski’s pieces are quite playful. “Neighbors” and “The Integer Formerly Known as 667” are witty complaints from the Number of the Beast’s closest neighbors packed with mathematical and occult humor, and “CSI: Transylvania” is, well, a very funny parody of the popular crime drama involving the undead. However, “Requiem for the Tooth Fairy” uses this playfulness to draw the reader into a terrifying trap. At first, the fantasy sounds like one some of us may have harbored as children: if the tooth fairy carries so many quarters around with her, think of how robbing her would fill my piggy bank! But something is immediately off: even the most precocious of children typically does not make such methodical plans, or think in such violently poetic terms. Further, incisors are typically the first baby teeth to go, not the last to be yanked out (and hardly ever accompanied with gore when they do go). And while a few coins may not be that much money anymore, grown men and women have committed murder for pocket change.

The final line is the most shocking of all, because it unseats—again—any assumptions we have been making and leaves us wondering exactly what we have read. Who is the speaker? Is s/he a methodically sane person who wants to kill his/her mother out of boredom (the majority of his/her excitement, after all, is directed not at spending the purse, but at the methods of dispatch)? Is s/he a disturbed adolescent? An adult living with his/her mother who wants to kill her for reasons unrelated to this twisted vision of the tooth fairy? The uncertainty of this poem, and of many of Borski’s finest pieces, makes this collection not only difficult to put down, but truly haunting.

And sometimes, Borski’s poetry is just heart-stopping in its beauty and intelligence. Sadly, “Wormwood” (the best poem in the book) runs three pages and can’t be effectively reprinted here, or even fully analyzed given the complexity of its structure. Suffice it to say, then, that its meditations upon hallucinogenic substances, divine visions, and the apocalypse (both biblical and atomic) are some of the most profound poetry I have ever had the pleasure of reading and well worth the entire cover price. Speaking of biblical, “Gaia’s Children” explores a passage from Saint Augustine that I have always found troubling: the idea that disabled bodies will be restored to “the normal shape of a man” at the resurrection. Here, Borski makes this restoration not about the incompleteness of disability (an ableist concept if ever one existed), but about the privilege of those society designates as “normal.” As the last trumpet sounds, the dead who arise are the inhabitants of a Wunderkammer—those of “unorthodox limbs” who are either shunned as monsters because of birth, or altered to look more monstrous. Here, then, Heaven becomes not a paradise where all worry ceases, but a world where social injustice burns away along with those who perpetuate it.

Outside, the world burns in a new light,

but we ex-terata are oddly inured

to the flames, like saints in some

cathedral of snow.

As we proceed en masse from

the Hall of Curiosities — we once

and former cyclops, fused

twins, and clever fakes

(not a single one of our mermaids

was born fish-tailed or scaled)—

we’re afraid to look down

at our shadows,

but for the first times in our bleak lives

know hope.

As for the few who insist Heaven

is merely another sort

of gulag, with normalcy

for shackles,

these we dismember

and eat on the long trip up.

Robert Borski is, quite simply, one of the best speculative poets writing today, and fans of this genre (as well as non-fans who love strange, thoughtful, and haunting work) should definitely pick up this volume. His words are further complemented by the always appropriate and flawless work of artist Marge Simon, who has illustrated several speculative poetry collections over the past few decades.