



## J.D. Schraffenberger

### **Brother Tom**

*"Stay and mourn at the monument of dead Kroisos,  
whom furious Ares destroyed in the front ranks."  
—inscription on the Kroisos Kouros*

O Brother Tom, you sometime Thomas, and in your crookedness  
Mean Tommy with a stink—baseball cap pulled low over the eyes,

meaning business in the way of thieves—you give to me  
that lost Archaic smile—flat, unnatural as your madness—

and speak as though your tongue has been fitted with irons.  
You are your own Apollo, your own kouros—adolescent yes,

but unshaven and fat from the meds—saying Stop and show  
pity beside me, dead, who once walked but now stands quiet.

Stop and show that you, too, are human, a creature in the know,  
with or without soul, but stop. Come touch my crackled lips.

To be the living marker of one's own death—to shuffle round  
the visiting room in your dirty scrubs and socks, belly peeking

out from your shirt—to declare again and again, I am dead,  
I am not dead, I am dead, I am not dead—is to be dreaming,

artless but crafty, sleepy but eager to say to any who'll listen: Here  
lies Brother Tom/Of two minds/Lost or won/Writ in the night.

## **Sleep and His Mad Brother Death**

*after John William Waterhouse's "Sleep and his Half-Brother Death"*

There was little at first but fear, when he took my arm,  
pulled me into his smoking room in the barn—red paint  
faded pink, and peeling—like his mind, pieces flecking  
away in great hardened swaths. There was little but fear  
when he said, There are people everywhere looking  
to take us down. There are people we used to know  
who want now to unzip us from our skins, make stew  
with our meat and bones, to fry our battered brains.

We restless brothers, we unlikely two, recline side by side  
upon his nappy smoking couch, the barn door opened  
to evening—the beginnings of a starshot sky fading in—  
not knowing which one we will be tonight, Him or Me,  
which will hang his head in heavy stupor upon the other's  
breast, whose hands will reach to pull the barn door closed.

## Syncope

It is not tunneled vision so much as the brazen anvil  
creeping in from this side, or that, as night enters, suddenly

centerstage, and day returns to greet his sister at the gate:  
a kiss, a wave: go earthwalker, go maker of darkling dew:

it is yet another inexorable exeunt we must lament: it is  
the cutting short of what had come so near contentment,

so near a votive, the beautiful and therefore loved—this  
my germless egg uncracked, laid like a turd in the grass.

## Unclear Midnight

This is the madding hour of the mind in transit,  
the deepest moment of dream, this the candid  
call of wilding wings & the natty nests of birds:  
this is Tom thinking himself onto the world's  
surfaces, its utter designs for him, teasing out  
the fibers of consequence, sinking into the couch,  
smoking schemes toward the rafters, the zippy eyes  
in his face counting one after the other five  
dark shadows laughing at the wall, singing blues  
& saying what songs on the radio tell him is true:  
this the freeflight into wordy wonder, the crash-  
landing of too little sleep, this the helpless catch  
of breath: and now fully forth emerging, he gazes  
pondering the night & sleep, the stars all blazes.

**Coloratura**

*in memoriam Beverly Sills*

Be the ravished castrato, Brother, trilling madly off-key.  
Be a Queen of the Night, Lady Macbeth, be an Electra  
craving death, but croon: unlock your lips to the moon.

Let loose the stuff that plagues your brain, and perhaps  
then you will exhaust the wildness inside you, the flurry  
of notes ready to lift in glissandi of light toward the sky.

Or else you will remain forever fretted, your aria too shy  
to defy the heaviness that threatens to bring us all down.  
So gargle the milk-honey tea, warm your voice beside me.

## **Mad Brother Born For Adversity**

I mourn my brother, born for adversity,  
who takes me by the arm, makes a face—  
like a secret prophecy come finally true—

and pulls me hush-hush into his room.  
Let us go and serve other gods, he says.  
Let us walk where the mighty have fallen.

I note neither the mote in my brother's  
unsquinting eye nor the beam glinting  
mean into my own dreaming ones.

For that, at last, I'll need repose, to know  
more plainly the snags he's untangling.  
I'll need to mourn his madness more carefully.

I've come to see the bum he's become  
(the crusting cracks of the waxen poor),  
to offer what I can: this, more or less.