

A sampler of poems from

DAMNATIO MEMORIAE

winner of the *Brick Road Poetry Book Contest*

by

Michael Meyerhofer

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Damnatio Memoriae

How much cleaner was the sky
before the last laughing owl
turned up slap-stiff in New Zealand,
alongside words like *leestail*
which meant *to be in great demand*,
an irony lost on the last dinosaur
who tried in vain to drink
from a steaming lake, teeth
weeping into its own reflection.
If suffering breeds wisdom,
might we have found salvation
in a lost syllable of Kwadi,
the exhale of that last cry pansy,
the last Roman surgeon
to use a bone lever on a slave
who fell from a twine-wrapped ladder
that OSHA would never condone?
I want to believe we are all
just rough drafts of the same assignment,
a holy exercise in translation.
I want to believe in the grace
of the last person to use a cecograph—
which I just read was a device
to help blind people write,
rendered obsolete by what now
yields nothing but spam porn
when I search for images of *cecograph*,
its face lost like the dear papyrus
torn from the only copies of Sappho,
the Nag Hammadi scrolls
accidentally burned by farmers
who needed warmth, after all,
more than that 1787 Chateau Lafite
bottled by Thomas Jefferson
(spoiled when lamp-heat melted the cork)
or one's chances to saddle

eohippus, the dawn horse,
smaller than a wild dog.
Meaning we would have to be
smaller still than those Palau pygmies
who surrendered size for spears
as lack of food shrunk
their brains, the same way
hunger shrunk the gray muscles
of all those elephants who died
with tusks barely matching
the height of lions' teeth.
Going back to Rome, it's said
that the names of let-downs
could be struck from remembrance,
no busts or faces on coins,
not even a mention at family
reunions over bowls of figs and oil,
all they'd done simply
forgotten, like the use of *yelve*—
those dung-forks used for centuries
to facilitate regrowth,
dark waste yielding plants
with lungfuls of water and light.

Father Time and Baby New Year

There he goes, toddling off-stage
with that gnarled scythe resting
crosswise a sash in last year's fashion,
his dripstone beard, his great
nose like a pilgrim's plough-blade.

And here comes his successor—
a drooling infant dressed in a top hat
and star-spangled diaper,
blissfully unaware how he will age
three months each day in office.

Father Time could say something.
He could warn the poor toddler
of the need to arm himself,
to get a handle on more than his bowels
if he wants to hold this mess together.

But Baby New Year just grins
like a pacifist and the old man departs,
yielding at last his gothic hourglass
of sand made from the bones
of dinosaurs, sea cows, Babylonians—

all that expires under Time's watch.
Meanwhile, the Dutch launch fireworks,
the Greeks bake coins in cakes,
Japanese monks ring temple bells
and the Scots gift coal and shortbread.

But here, we Americans just kiss
and kiss while that old drama plays out
on confetti-fogged billboards,
the tips of noisemakers blaring up one
strangled, universal note to the sky.

Lament for the Pilgrims of Qin Shi Huang

In the inevitable twilight of his reign,
after burning books and Confucians
to further the vanity of his unified China,
while his artisans were busy
chiseling the terracotta warriors—
clay men dressed better than they were—
a rumor spread across the countryside
of mushroom-shaped islands
where immortals lived, brewing elixirs
to stave off their own recycling.

But of course, such things require
a sacrifice, so the emperor sent hundreds
of young people on ships
laden with supplies and treasure.
Imagine trying to keep a straight face
as you sail out of the harbor,
on your way to make a new life
well beyond the emperor's steely reach.
Or maybe you wept to leave
families you could never see again.

Legend says that Japan was founded
by these pilgrims who knew better
than to sail back to China empty-handed.
Isn't that always the way of it?
Some bloated fool in purple silk orders you
to fetch grace he has not earned.
But before you find it—if you ever do—
you have to cling pitifully to a vessel
packed with swords, heaving east
beneath the bone-white wheels of heaven.

The Birthdays of Ex-Lovers

How they pinball through the mind
like the combinations of outgrown lockers,
a mishmash of Virgos and Cancers

on whose soft favor we once depended—
useless now like the few syllables
bored in from foreign language classes,

the equations of elementary physics
they swore we must memorize
if we held any hope for future happiness.

But no—the world knuckles along
whether we remember or not,
hauling everyone for whom the heart once

flounced like a broadsided schooner,
for whom we raised mythologies
all sin-sweet, proud as a dead religion.

Muskoxen

Like wooly frigates they drift—
(great(horned)druids) of the Canadian Arctic.

When threatened

they form up:

an even greater circle
the calves inside
all the calves nuzzled safely in

while the bulls and cows
male and female
alike

stare out—placid as a lake
on fire—until danger
gives up

, slumps off. There is nothing

quite so lone-
some as hunger.