

BILLY BOY

Ken Stange

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“Christ! How old is that man?”

“Billy? Christ knows, I don’t”

.

I have a day or two to wastrel away in this waylaid place called Brent station: a minute-stop

on the rail, gauge to tie the mile on mile, thru Algonquin wilderness.

Brent : very (at best)

very little

more or less than a place

to put in for canoe trips

or to take trout (and pickerel) out.

What?

would any man live here for, eh?

Eh? Billy?

.

Billy, Billy,

(storekeeper for this speck of a place)

I’d write

a proper ode to you if only

I knew how. But how

immortalize

a man perhaps not mortal

perhaps but a ghost

perhaps but a tree

(disguised as a man)?

.

Old Billy has his store here,

a damp and dingy store

he’s had for more years

than blackflies in June.

.

Old Billy is a mystery

ancient as Delphi. “Christ!

How old is that man?”

.

His flesh and hair

urine yellow, sick

skin weathered

to consistency of mildewed newspapers.

His hand-rolled

cigarette, wet, short of tobacco, rarely lit,

dangles
 from his hint of lower lip.

•
 Billy stands amidst his humid products, his day-old (at very
 least)
 pies and bread; the canned meats, the fly-swatters, the past.
 When
 a boy walks in
 (so city clean)
 asks how to use the crank
 phone (public utility) out
 front.

•
 Billy replied, rooted in his dirty floor, "I don't know, nor care,
 had enough of that
 transportation
 and communication
 horseshit
 many ages ago."

•
 I believe it, but
 what were you Billy? Did you work for the railway? Were you
 dangerous?

•
 How did you come here, Billy?
 Did you wander out of the bush, eyes wild?
 Skin firm, tan?
 What is your past composed of, Billy?
 Martens, swamps, or perhaps city streets, maybe
 even a woman, skin firm, tan?
 What do you think of standing quiet behind your plywood
 counter?
 Do you turn the pages of your mind, see not photos, but faded
 daguerreotypes?
 Is there war or lust or grief back when, whenever, Billy?
 Have you ever fucked or killed (a woman or a man)?
 Were you always old in dirty undershirt?

•
 Billy, of Brent, this only town, access now by thirty miles
 of bush road (when the weather's dry as dust) or by thrice-
 a-week train (when it's wet).
 Billy, haunted? haunting, Billy, can
 can you forget about time out here?
 can a man ever forget about time?

•
 Billy, you offend me.

Death is so obscene.
Crawl into the ground, Billy, crawl into the ground.

•
I ask around, question natives of this town:
(most were summer cottagers, not a one I found
lives here the year around, but Billy, even those
railway men work in two week shifts all year now)
“Billy? O, I don’t know, been here as long as I can remember.”
“Wife? Not that I remember ever hearing of.”
“Age? Christ knows, I don’t.”

•
Perhaps as a younger man he did know Christ.
(Billy on the Sea of Galilee?)

•
He has become obsession, this man with his piss-coloured skin.
Was he ever, ever a younger man?
Did he ever wander through these billion trees, leaves in his hair?
Ever compose poems using words like sweet and
fair?
Ever dream of wealth or fame?
His hair, his hair, what colour once upon was his hair?

•
“Christ! How old is that man?
“Billy? Christ knows, I don’t.”

•
Can I just walk into his store?
Stand amidst cakes and paddles and mosquitoes
Stare this old and dirty creature in his bottomless eyes and ask,
“How old are you, Billy?”
Would it sound to him like,
“Are you going to die today?”

•
But perhaps
he is long since immune to thought of death.
A man his age must
have-been-expecting it
twenty-five years ago.
Perhaps
he figures God forgot
about him

way out here
and he won’t be picked
Up
till the seven horsemen ride
that thirty mile bush road
thru muck, spruce and northern

weather.

•

Still I can't be rude, walk right in and ask about a man's death.

His past must be so large,

his future so minute

and improbable,

I wonder how

he manages to move about at all.

•

No, Billy, I'll never ask a personal question of you,

for I'm but a stranger here; it would be rude. And I

haven't time right now to try to know you slow

for you see I'm just passing thru

passing thru

•

unlike you?

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