

from Quarantine Dreams

By Nathaniel D. Perry

Elliott Professor of English

Who knows where we'll be when this finds its way into print? It is one of the funny time-machine sort of characteristics of writing—we can trim and primp just before publication, but, in the end, everyone in on the bargain—reader and writer and publisher—knows that what looks current (black marks on a page in the hand) often comes from the past. And in this particular past—my current present—I am stuck in my bedroom waiting to find out if I test positive for COVID-19. I have a mild fever and no other real symptoms, but the fever is growing and I have a family. So, like a teenager holing up in his adolescent cave (like my almost-teenager Rache), I'm stuck in my room, or maybe, like a younger kid facing the music for a daily indiscretion, I've been sent to my room.

And what will I do here other than tamp down small-time panic fires? I'll read certainly and talk to my wife through the door and look at my kids about twenty feet away downstairs and try to keep the dog out of the room. I'll attend to the privileged tediousness of work; I'll write. But it occurs to me that all of those things require really just one skill—the imagination. Now I'm not going to go all EPCOT on you here with that purple dragony thing I remember from my childhood (and Eric Idle spraying something at me in a ride?) or drag Wallace Stevens' private deity into this thing, but I want to think about how crucial our imaginations are for both survival and for art (and there's a way in which those two things aren't that different).

Right now I can hear my kids, after completing an hours-long bender on devices on this 100+ degree day (we're no parent-saints around here) gathering together a specific group of beloved stuffed animals to put on a play. These animals—known collectively as The Murphys—play an outsized role in our family life. Few situations arise in which some member of the Murphy crowd is not referenced, and few movies or shows are watched when we don't debate which Murphy would play which role, whether it be the leader, Murphy, the greedy nemesis Butt, the hapless cloned brothers Tootington and Twoington, the spoiled child Floom, the evil baby Shemeniah, the extra-innocent ex-Cabbage Patch doll José or any of the other vast array of characters who figure into what began as a game but has by now become a kind of diamond-cut imaginative framework for understanding the world.

It strikes me as I listen to this survival work going on below me, while quarantining in my own panicked bunker, just how crucial imagination is for us in understanding the world and in bringing that understanding across to others. You know now that I'm going to turn to poetry, of course, and I'm hoping that this example will not be giving us any kind of *specific* guidance in how to be, be ourselves or be parents, but sort of what the stakes are in our being creative in a hard world. To do this I want us to look at the west coast poet Belle Randall. Randall made an impressive debut in the early 1970s with her book *101 Different Ways of Playing Solitaire*, which may well be in the top ten of first books by American poets. After that book, she spent decades publishing only small chapbooks

(some in such small editions that I had to contact the bookmaker himself to find them) and published one other full length in the 2010s. An early poem, “A Child’s Garden of Gods,” has been anthologized, but otherwise her name and work seem significantly under-represented in the poetry landscape.

My readers won’t be surprised to discover that Randall is a master of form (she studied with Thom Gunn in her young days), but she combines this formal acumen with an utterly original noir-American aesthetic. She is sort of like Gjertrud Schnackenberg mixed with early Tom Waits. While one is liable to find in Randall’s work philosophical sonnets or rhymed quatrains on the spiritual life, those are likely to be shot through with cigarettes, Chinatowns, hood ornaments, liquor, chic shoes, and more. In short, as I read through her entire career, and she is one of those poets with whom one can spend a long afternoon completing the task, what I find is an imagination like few others I know in contemporary American poetry. Her poems are often in the third person, or are dramatic monologues from one-off characters, and they simply radiate with detail and precision. Here is an excellent, and bizarre, example from that first book:

Gentlemen, The Bicycles are Coming!

Gentlemen, the bicycles are coming!
In silver, slanting rows like rain
They ride the moonlit highways toward
The towns where we lie dreaming.

Beyond the icy windowpane
As if a tuning fork were striking stars
We hear a spray of tiny bells
Cold, metallic, ringing,

And pushing back the curtains see
Stainless-steel handlebars
Like skeletons of scavengers
Upon us in the darkness winging.

There is a shaft of freezing air;
A moment when their headlights shine
Into our eyes; the bedroom walls
Are white, electrified, and gleaming.

The bicycles come sweeping down
The asphalt slope in starlit columns,
Pass the house and dwindle to
A flash of faint italics leaning

Round a distant curve, and Gentlemen—
They're gone! The curtains close,
And darkness spills across the shelves
Whose books, like tombs, contain their meaning.

What a marvelous poem. First, we can marvel at its formal ingenuity—only the last line of each stanza rhymes, rhyming as much with their repeated extra syllable (-ing) as with the root word (one thinks of Robinsons' poem "Eros Turrans" perhaps), but the language is so musical throughout that the poem is still nearly songlike. There are one-off rhymes (the fork-struck 'stars' with the threatening 'handlebars') and moments of intense alliteration ('skeletons of scavengers') in addition to the recurring fourth line, and then there is the musical fealty to tetrameter (the meter of songs and nursery rhymes) which adds to the whimsical, and potentially not-so-whimsical, overall effect. But beyond these formal riches, the poem is a curious one. We never know who the eponymous 'Gentlemen' are, and as such we don't know, really, who *we* are in the poem. Much less the speaker. As in much of the best of dramatic verse, we are dropped into the middle of a scene and are meant to make of the scene what we can with what we have. And what we have is simply spectacularly imagined observation. The cyclists come at us like the horsemen of the apocalypse updated, in tight formation, in "silver, slanting rows like rain." So, in that first simile, we are to see their coming as something not altogether unexpected, but also perhaps as something not entirely desirable.

So this poem of ominous arrival, of the observer trapped in the dark house "pushing back the curtains" cannot help but put me in mind of our situation here in 2020, many of us in our houses for the *n*th consecutive month, trying to keep our children safe and happy, wondering what's coming and when. We can feel the fear in the speaker's voice, those 'skeletons,' the blinding headlights in the eye, the bedroom violated, and our imaginations similarly can run us to panic in this moment. As I sit here in my room awaiting my COVID test result, how can I keep from imagining the thing we don't want rushing at me down the hill, with a maddeningly curt bell announcing its arrival (that would be the phone ringing, I suppose...)? But perhaps Randall gives us a trick here—we can't avoid the things that will come for us, but we can watch them when they do and retain our power of imagination and observation over them. Perhaps these bicycle men in the poem are unshrouded in a way by the careful, though terrified, description. We can't imagine things away, but we can reimagine them.

And by the end of the poem, the cyclists simply sweep past the house. In a sudden rush they become typescript on the page of the dark night (that incredible metaphor of the riders as *italics*) and the speaker is left back in her darkness, at least semi-content. Is there maybe a slight wistfulness in that final stanza? That the speaker maybe was hoping something would be exposed? Maybe. Maybe that's how it is with all things that come to us through our imagination. Something arrives, we change it, it changes us, and when it leaves we are a little confused. I sense that here in the final line of the poem. Though frightening, the cyclists have represented a kind of terrifying truth that the speaker has tried her best to understand, but in the end could only guess at. And maybe that's the best we can do.

Of course, a few days after I was thinking on this poem, the bicycle bell, my phone, did ring for me, and I found out I had tested negative. A lucky break, but also somehow even more mysterious. I wouldn't want to have tested positive any more than the speaker of the poem wants those cycle lights in her house. But I certainly don't know much more than I did or feel safer. But maybe I feel a bit more comfortable, or at least comforted, when I imagine whatever danger we might be in.