

Robert Murray Davis

Lines of Descent

The lines in front draw different:
your forehead etched by circumstance and sun
 three lines across,
 mine arrowed inward pushed by other strains;
your nose sloped downward to a broader swell,
 mine upward at the point
 carved out by other genes;
my teeth, thank God and Grandma Murray, grew
 from other roots than yours.

Looked at the other way, I am your son:
 legs built short to lever from the ground,
 weight of shoulder, torso's length,
 long spine stiff against the strain
 the world and we put on it.

Stump

The uncle I was named for lost an arm
before I ever knew him,
tied his own shoes, shifted cross-hand
a four-speed, double-axle truck,
and, without straining, lifted sacks of feed.

I never asked him if the elbow itched
or if his absent-minded body sent
an impulse to the void.

It must have done.
My tissues long have healed.
The heart, though nothing's at the other end,
twitches a message to a wall of scar.

An Ex-wife's Birthday, Twenty Years After

“...let us be as strange as if we had been married a great while; and as well bred as if we were not married at all.” *The Way of the World*

Once we could not speak
without an edge of pain.

You spoke the words that set us free
to be ourselves.

Now, separate as long as we were one,
regret and bitterness are gone.

Still, you sound a little wary,
cannot or will not say
phrases that formed our private language,
fearing, perhaps, a spell
that calls up what you thought I was--
or cannot call from what I have become.

Home Movie, 1963

Silent, the shadows move.
Some are really ghosts:
Mom and Dad younger than I am now,
Grandma already fading on the screen.

Who is that slim young wife?
That stranger with her?
Belly flat, skin taut, more and darker hair,
Moving on supple joints.

Dust Bath

Engels Square, Budapest

Really, the ornithologists would say,
that sparrow bathes to rid himself of mites.

Theologians think
God's eye is on the bird
that symbolizes noise and lechery.

Here in this asphalt Eden we are free
to think the sparrow plays
in dust it finds about the fruitless tree.

To Frank Chin, the Chinatown Cowboy

Son of a bitch! We're patriarchs!
Technically speaking--but that's bad enough.
Some little slip--we're grandfathers,
Walter fucking Brennan overnight.

Gross miscasting! Just last week
we hit the trail,
fastest Selectrics in the West,
masking the family faces to escape
and keep the bad guys guessing.

Signs we left the fathers couldn't read.
They tricked us, beat us to the pass,
played possum, got the drop,
and, falling, fenced us in with clan.

I know you say that life is war.
But this? It ain't Geneva or the code
the movies taught us.

Well, Keemosabe, now what?
(You can't use the line,
"What do you mean, we, white man?")
Pretend, like the Duke, we're still the Ringo Kid,
act like nobody put us on that horse?
Sit in a rocking chair, spit, scratch, and wheeze
out lies about how wild we were?

Or give up speed for stealth?
The little farts believe they've got us cold.
Lie still, count shells, and wait for dark.