

The New Criterion

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A noisy sleeper

by Brad Leithauser

i. 1958

The noisy sleeper
in the other room is my
Grandfather whose snores go up & down
up & down like a zipper. Deeper

deeper for the dark
his big breathing climbs
and slips away
like the moon like the day

like Cinny who I so
much wanted to stay
here with me in a bed too big
for me. But Cinny when I let her go

was gone
on her clicking toes
in blackness with the thin slits
open on her black nose

and not a shiver in her chest
for what out there just might
be waiting. She lies at ease I know
on a floor in the night

body curled completely
in the safety of a ring
in whose fur center

her head fits neatly.

In his desk for luck he keeps
an Indian head
penny with the date
he was born which is 1898.

He promised he will look
for one for luck for me
which is 1953.
Whatever

could be that's wrong
what is needed I know
is to be watchful to be strong
simply

though such breathing's far
too big for this house in which
he & I together are
sleeping and I do not sleep.

ii. 1983

Recalling now
From the subsiding brink
Of earliest memory
The night-sounds of that man,
My grandfather, is to see
How even at age five one can
Accept reassurances as though
They were believable while
Darkly continuing to think
Things over—to see how
Soon the mind learns to reconcile
Itself to a complex ignorance,
As one begins to know

One does not know.
Now whatever that unnamed
Crisis actually was that placed me
In that giant's bed that night
(Illness in the family?)

Some remote, unheard-of fight?
Or, likelier, a disaster lifted
From the blaze of a small boy's inflamed
Imagination . . .) it passed
Much as night passes into dawn,
Unobserved and at last,
Leaving no trace as it drifted
Wholly out of mind. Gone—

Like the existence
Of all others in that house. No doubt
My grandmother was there, too,
Sleeping or, like me, pretending
To sleep, but I don't recall
Her presence, or anyone who
Played with me that day, or what fell out
The next. No, in memory
It's simply two people all
Alone, my grandfather and me,
Bound across the distance
Of a night that rises
And falls and has no ending.

And yet for all
Memory's shortcomings, one still must
Marvel at its power to restore
The feel of that small boy's fears,
Or the way it can take an old man
Dead now some twenty years
And hold him up close enough
To overhear the rise and fall
Of his slow breathing, just
As though his were once more
The sort of sleep from which—broken
By ruminative snorts, gruff
Assentive gasps—he could be woken.

Brad Leithauser's most recent book is *The Oldest Word for Dawn: New and Selected Poems* (Knopf).

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