

The New Criterion

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“On the veranda”

by Robert Conquest

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“The girl-losing experience . . .”

His voice stirred up the soft silence

Where, sundowners in hand, the men’s

Attention—mutual, serene, content—

Was over the warm, quiescent

Sea, under a dark blue firmament,

With brush-stroke mistiness out westerly,

As the good sunglow resumed slowly

Into the waters. A touch of melancholy

Imbued the ambience like a dash

Of angostura. “A longish

Time since that sort of anguish

Hit me. She was my very first.

She left me for one older, more self-possessed,

Richer—sure!—better-dressed.

I was only a scruffy, last-term

Student. Much later she told me what scum,

What a swine, he’d been. Well, some

Consolation. Not enough to reverse

The long loss, the intolerable years

Of . . . I expect much the same as yours.”

“Mine perhaps worse, since all my own fault.
Divorced, I thought I’d play the field
With two girls, often three. I felt

Safe from the love-trap. Then one day
No. I switched to a fiancé.
Part of the deal, you’ll rightly say,

A miscalculation—I’ve learned better since.
The nights! I’d take four or five aspirins
With large shots of bourbon in half pints

Of milk, drunk quick to stop curdling, slept,
If at all, with my right big and second toes kept
(With no erotic feeling) round my left

Achilles tendon. I mention this
So that we wouldn’t perhaps miss
Any pointer to full diagnosis.”

“Sleep, yes. And drink. This smooth rum
Recalls how, when her bad letter came,
Stationed in Orkney, I couldn’t get warm.

Before, I’d not minded the scything cold,
But now four blankets—and rum—left me chilled.
Another symptom of getting ungirled?”

“Well, here’s a memory I’d quite long striven
To repress. We’d been married more than eleven
Years. All was dull—was depressing, even.

No adultery on either side.
Wanting more operas, cruises, she’d
Left from a boredom I thought I’d shared.

But in the event, the parting tore
As jagged, as barbed as any before,
When young. A wound that for long stayed raw . . .”

Turning now from the sea and sun,
A drier voice: “Well, my contribution
To, I suppose, this panel discussion:

Since I imagine that between you
You've covered every important issue . . ."
He paused for a sip, "Here's a minor clue:

I had made love to her just twice.
The bond hadn't clamped down like a vice.
Then she went back to her rather nice

Chap. At the wheel on the Brompton Road,
My tear-ducts all of a sudden flowed.
The traffic light was luckily red.

Yes, a close escape, which may illustrate
The problems posed." "What we still await
Is how, and why, can our psyches get

Gripped till almost as fused as steel?
There's surely no good biological
Reason?" "An unfavorable

Mutation?" . . .

"What have we exorcised?
In each mind-vault now perhaps a weaker ghost
Walled up, but not quite put to rest?"

A last strongish drink then, toasting the bronze
Sunset and the warm, gentle ocean's
Uneasy effacement of demons.

Robert Conquest's latest collection of poems, *Penultimata* was published in June by Waywiser Press.

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