

Remains

David Rome Prize for Best Lyric Essay
by Belle Cushing B'13

At four am, the trash collectors are in Via delle Muratte. They are picking up tourist maps and wrappers from sugar cones and spearing the newspapers four hours old on long skewers. Rats nibble about. A particularly fat one has found a hunk of bread and carries it between teeth to his nest, tucked among stones, where he may also have collected the pit of a peach, purple ribbons, and a ring. Rome is at peace.

The sky is still dark, but light from the Trevi fountain spills over its edges and the rat is aglow. A figure stands silhouetted in the basin. He calls himself d'Artagnan. He wades through the pool, potbelly protruding over an elastic waistband as he bends over to pick up the euro coins that won't stick to the long magnetic pole he carries like a lance. Centimes, quarters, hairpins all stick, but the advent of the euro has made his job difficult. As Abundance and Salubrity look on from marble alcoves, d'Artagnan steals away into the morning with €1,217 in change.

The rats and the trash collectors might have noticed, but to them, he was just another forager, for purposes pecuniary or sentimental. Visitors toss their careless alms with backs to the fountain, according to tradition, thinking of when they will return. They are not looking at the hippocamps, or the coins, or the gods while they do it. They don't see the food stamp supermarket financed by what they let drop, or the corpulent rogue who follows and picks up their wishes. He would bring his trove to the currency exchange and get inquiring looks and get cheated on rates. He never came on Sunday. On the day of rest, it was Caritas charity that collected the coins.

When he was finally found out, policemen lay in wait in these quiet collecting hours of dawn to swarm upon him in the fountain. They caught him heavy handed, pants weighed down by coins and sopping wet. He sloshed with the officers off to the station. But Roberto Cercelletta (for that is his real name) broke the ban and returned. It is said that he stood, back to the fountain, staring at a spot beyond the crowd of tourists and carabinieri and streetworkers and dogs. He took a knife and ran the blade across his belly, slicing shallow strips into its rounded flesh.

He mounted the rocks. The police followed. They had a scuffle, and he was eventually detained for resisting arrest.

They say that if you throw a coin into the Trevi Fountain, you are bound to return to Rome. They say that if you find a penny, pick it up, all day long you'll have good luck. They say that if you drop a coin on the ground it will release bad luck, and the misfortune will be transferred to the next concrete flâneur who picks it up for its head or to bring home to a jar. They, in this case, refers to the anonymous sages, beneficent guides who—blending into the crowd by the fountain, in line behind you at the bank—spin truths in silken rope and pull the cord tight. The scant acquaintance of everyone else, they are the deities of notions who cover eyes in such a way that all that can be seen is whether the penny on the sidewalk boasts the memorial or the man.

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Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

— Matthew 6:1

This time, I had them. The first row had risen; its occupants were shuffling toward the altar to receive a small, round wafer and a mouthful of wine, and the collection plate was making its way along my pew. Inside the front pocket of my pretty dress, I closed fist over one, two, three coins. In other weeks, somehow, to pass the offertory to the lady on my left, holding it with both hands because I had nothing to offer, was a condemnation. A disappointment. My mother would often give me her check to place it in the plate myself. But there was only one slip of paper and four girls to give it. This week, though, I would clink my own coins against tin. I dropped my three quarters into the offertory, amid glints of silver and gray-green and folded-up checks, to give my alms. The lady on my left smiled, appreciatively. Now I, too, would be with peace.

And also with you. In the classic white-clapboard tradition, the passing of the peace occurs after the collect (the stress, here, is on the first syllable, as in colic or colonization). *The Lord be with you.* Members of the congregation shake hands with other members in the surrounding rows. *And with thy spirit.* In the Gospel according to Matthew, it is a necessary step for worshippers to make peace with one another before the offering of gifts at the altar, an important facet of many religions. *Let us pray.*

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In rest stops and tourist spots fifty cents plus one buys an elongated relic. Insert here and the gears are in motion, teeth sliding in and out of the others' gaps. Down a chute falls the penny, onto the track to be crushed; the two quarters disappear into the machine for an anonymous someone to later collect. With the turn of a crank, the face of a president is erased, and out pops a pretty palimpsest.

I love you Niagara Falls
Proud to be an American

Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy
Names of places visited for a day, labeled and filed away for posterity. For a porcelain box that also holds beads and a shell. For remembrance. For proof that I was there, somewhere along the New Jersey Turnpike.

The pressure exerted by the solid block on coin must wipe out any fingerprints left by those who had picked up the souvenir in its previous lives, as token of fortune, of exchange. The fingerprints of my mother, for instance.

Somehow, though her face was perpetually oriented toward the sun, she was the one to spot them, those coins others let drop unnoticed. She collected them in old mayonnaise jars, and when the number of coins outstripped the jars to hold them, I would divide and pile coins of various sizes and wrap them in paper to exchange at the bank. After fanning fingers through dirty coins, my hands would smell for hours. Metallic, like the taste of blood.

There would inevitably be a pile leftover: sixteen cents that would not build a tower of adequate height. They were mine to keep, these specks of zinc with a bit of copper, copper with a bit of nickel, cupronickel. The collection grew. Soon I started to pick up my mother's downward inclinations, and coins jumped off the sidewalk and into my own rapidly filling jars. The sound of coin against coin is flatter than I had thought.

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Near the village of Hammerwich, near Lichfield, in Staffordshire, 8th or 9th century AD

There were hundreds of men, or there were only a few. Clad in armor, no doubt. A child's first gift was a shield and spear. Just south of the Ancient Roman Road, not far from the outpost of Letocetum, among the heaths and shires and woods and leahs, they struck metal into earth and built for their wealth, a grave. They had chosen the spot for the way it sank blandly into the gray, or else they left a cairn to proclaim the location. A tower since been scattered. Into the pit, they let fall:

Rings of gold and silver (13)
Gold horse's head (1)
Sword pommel (86)
Sword pyramid (10)
Sword scabbard loop (1)
Fragments (315)

and other military objects that give the impression of having been carefully selected. Among these, a golden cross, folded. Thus to be packed away for easy storage, or from having been scavenged from an unheeded shrine. It was a votive offering, or they were pagans. In despoiling a weapon, they were killing its potency before stashing it below ground. Dropped among the loot was a silver gilt strip, upon which is misspelled a Latin verse from Psalm 67:2, or from Numbers 10:35. The engraver's error still allows it to be read: *Surge domine et dissepentur inimici tui et fugent qui oderunt te a facie tua*. Or, "Rise up, Lord; may Your enemies be scattered and those who hate You be driven from Your face." By removing any gold trimmings from the swords, they stripped away the identity of the previous host. The blades would be reused.

It is assumed that the burial was made in a time of danger, with the intention of later recovery.

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I used to look for something to collect. I thought about stamps, but didn't know where to find them. I pick up coins, but only to save something abandoned, to wrap and then exchange. And collection needs a purpose that is personal: many objects to make a whole, fill a void. I finally settled on miniature shoes.

The first one I found was roughly three inches in length, with a powder blue poniard for a heel and three bulbous pearls across a sort of sea queen crown. It seemed one-of-a-kind, the kind of thing I would be proud to display. I amassed dozens, first carefully chosen, later gifted, that now sit dust-covered on specially bought shelves in my mother's guest room. The shelves boast compartments, each just big enough to hold one collectible, and branded on each sole: Just the Right Shoe.

My sister collects pigs. Cutting boards, bath mats, stationary, mugs. I'm not sure if she actually likes them, or if it's simply a matter of maintaining the childish glee on my mother's face when another box is unwrapped and another snouted kettle comes out, or a pig on tea

towels, or just a small sculpted swine, good for nothing but setting out on a shelf next to books unread and compact discs that don't get played anymore.

I have since told my mother to stop giving me stationary emblazoned with shoes.

*See a penny leave it there,
Bad luck comes—and so beware!*

O! animal of fortune. Bristly wisdom. Bring abundance and full bellies. Scour the earth and remove its refuse. Unclean body with black beads that peer out from wrinkled repositories, and the eyelashes are white. Eat what is given. Give to be eaten. On Christmas, we'll give tiny swine for good luck. Eat, and be satisfied. Marzipan thighs give in with ease to a scalpel and spoon.

A porcelain pig isn't harder to break, but the skin shatters rather than melts. An empty mayonnaise jar would be a fine substitute, a coffee can, perhaps, or a kitchen pot. Not the pot used for cooking, or for pogs that land face up, but the pot, the jar, made of pygg. Pygg, which in Middle English was used to mean a kind of clay used for jars used for saving money. The Y was later dropped, the spare G wandered away, I was picked up on some sidewalk, and P-I-G now teaches sounds of letters, and sounds of plink-clink, and how to be a thrifty child.

But of course, pygg only needed I to become what it is today.

Before the forgiving rubber plugs on the bellies of banks, the money inside could not be removed except by smashing the piggy. Like the pig-shaped piñata at my sister's party, that had us we squirming to fill feeble arms with its confectionary entrails while mother looked on, snapping pictures. Oh, to be the one who decimates the papier-mâché, who wields the bat just so to make the snout crumple in shame and the crêpe fall, dispiritedly. The fray clears. The children are playing hide-and-go-seek. The spoils are hidden, and forgotten. Several shiny bits still litter the ground below where the body hangs on its string.

Across the world, in the thalassocratic empire of Majapahit, around 1500 AD, in a curious instance of linguistic prescience, a piggy bank is used. It is called *celengan*—in Indonesian, the likeness of a wild boar.

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I am collecting what is left, the things no longer thought of by those who let them fall. These fragments dropped, misplaced stories chanced upon and filed away, or that I took while the teller wasn't looking, make up a collection of afterthoughts. There are layers to the groundwork, each one preserved by the weight of the others above.

In a white clapboard church not far from my own, Bridget Bishop bent on knees to pray. She was a steadfast member, that Goody Bishop, until someone discovered her collection of poppets and pins. A witch in the kitchen brings good luck, but should a crude doll be found somewhere less prudent, or a birthmark be perceived as a teat with which to suckle the devil, then be warned, for the tree will be in harvest before long. And it will bear flesh that rots quickly. Too often a good luck charm is mistaken for a token of evil. In the flight from ritual, from old England to New, some things got confused. Objects endowed with onetime meaning found themselves powerful again. Little girls were forgotten and consequence was sought. Those born into rigidity may find themselves writhing in the middle of a courtroom.

It is a nice picture, the woman clad in red. She had three husbands and a lusty temperament. She drank ale with men and then appeared to them in their sleep. Her specter pressed onto slumbering bodies until they were choking to near asphyxiation.

And if it was all a miscommunication? A slip of a fork-tipped tongue that led to Bridget Bishop being taken for Sarah of the same surname, though the former lived in Salem Town, not Salem Village, and never owned a tavern. But that is how the coin fell, and now children can hear Bridget's testimony recited in educational reenactments, after they buy realistic looking poppets at Crow Haven Corner, near the Old Town Hall.

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Near the village of Hammerwich, near Lichfield, in Staffordshire, 5 July 2009 AD

It was gray, that day, on the heath, when Terry Herbert set out with his metal detector. He had been hunting a lot in those days. There wasn't much else to do, after having been laid off from the coffin factory a while back.

He had taken to repeating a sort of prayer before each hunt, a ditty he made up, or that was placed in his head by the gods. It went: "Spirits of yesteryear, take me where the coins appear."

The odd syllables sang a clumsy song in his head as he slunk out into the prelude to day and made his way to a stranger's farm. Green gray grasses stretched out into clouds around the small man looking for treasure.

He would later say of that morning, still and gray like any other, that in muttering the incantation, he unwittingly replaced *coins* with *gold*.

A short sharp chirp. Terry Herbert bent down, and brushed dirt off something hard that had once been shiny.

§§§

I am in the bank with my mother. She is giving me a loan so I can pay rent on my first apartment. We stand in line. I take a lollipop. The wait is long. We are finally at the counter and the blue-vested woman behind the glass asks for the account number, the routing number, the amount to be transferred. This was all information we knew we would have to give, but the numbers are lost on a scrap somewhere in my mother's purse. She is thumbing through papers. She just had it. It must be gone. It's not gone, mom. Where do you remember putting it. The blue-vested woman is watching the exchange. A man coughs from behind. I am looking around, shrinking into my shoulders. She is opening every pocket in every wallet and every side pouch. It's just not here. It's there, mom. It is. She is feeling her pockets and her voice is tightening. I've just got to do it, that's the only way I'll find it. No mom, please, not here, come on. And she turns and empties her purse onto the floor. Out tumble pens, notebooks, mints, mini motel shampoos, a cell phone, six or seven lipstick tubes, receipts, empty paper sample cups, stray credit cards, postcards, dust, and crumbs, and sheets of paper, crumpled. A worn looking clementine rolls away under a couch. The woman in the vest is staring. The man has abandoned his post. My mother is on hands and knees, wading through loose change when she reaches in her back pocket and pulls out a coupon, on the back of which is vaguely decipherable: routing number—and I am standing amid the wreckage, lollipop limply in hand.

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We do as we are told; keep in deep pockets mothers' mothers' superstitions worn thin from too much rubbing. Rats store goods in nests of refuse. Dragons sit on spoils, until they are slain and their treasure discovered by a man with a metal detector. Owls and vultures and bluebottle flies gather from discards and feed on the dead. But it is the collector who takes a few minutes to collect herself. I am picking up these pieces dropped along the way. For safekeeping. For superstition. "Superstition" comes from ignorance and fear or from religious exaltation. I am both standing by stilly in dread, and standing beyond, surviving.

The rope that wrung Bridget Bishop's neck, impeding the blood to her brain as her skin grew shiny and glowed, the trachea tightening by the weight of her own being, was most likely left hanging from the oak tree on Gallows Hill. In France, however, it would have been quickly cut off her shimmering corpse by enterprising lookers on. The rope is a *porte-bonheur*, a bringer of happiness, a good luck charm like the pig or the penny. It would have been kept and fingered, or perhaps sold, along with any body parts that might be salvaged in the early hours after death. They say that the fat of a hanged man is a potent balm that can heal all hurts.

And when the legend dies? How to put it to rest? Do we lade its eyes with silver coins so it can't wake up and come to find us? Place pennies on its tomb? The body falls, nothing left to pull it up or to support it from below.

These pennies are worth more in metal than in exchange. When the one-cent coin is no longer minted, filthy bits will continue to litter the earth, tokens of remembrance on soldiers' graves, until each one is forgotten or lost. When coins pull on my gaze downward and back, I—still looking at the ground for deliverance—keep going. To find a penny stamped with the year of a loved one's death is to happen upon a message dropped.