

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

Partners

by Steve Brown

1. From Book 24

Night.

A flickering of campfires:
like stars laid out, to match the lidding sky
arched over the shadowing black ships.

If you have come so far, it is
on some god's wing: the violently skewed world
must sometimes be set right. Achilles's rage
beyond all measure must be set back –
a hard cold ruby, in a richly cushioned box.
You must enter – timid, all unfamiliar
for a king – this foreign tent,
and, pulling back the brocaded curtain,
kneel and kiss the murdering hands.

A tableau: stupefaction,
the uncanny amazement at seeing one
so lost, alone in the unfamiliar,
far from hot baths, beyond the reach
of family, the killer's face above,
long frozen to the rigidity of bronze.

And Achilles might have eaten raw
the liver of this man's son, might have skinned
the pliant flesh with his own nails.

Both pause within the picture:
what is there to say?
Within that hesitation – the split second
of reflection – there is all the grace
that can be allowed:
mirrors to all the sum of losses,
the blind additions that accrue
for each and everyone. Partners
for that brief time.

Priam will gather up his son;
both the king and murderer
will get their deaths, which even now
are gathering like piling winter clouds.
The stars are still there, and pitiless.
Around the campfires, sentries huddle,
keen, against the cold, for warmth and words.

2. In Arnhem zoo

The colony of chimpanzees, one night
- this is what the shifting politics
of alliance and betrayal can produce:
the three male contenders for supremacy
found, in morning light, laced
round with blood.

The third has been the target
of the other two. The litter of the cage:
some severed fingers, hanks of bloodied hair,
the abstract figurations of red smears,
and – a final touch – a scrotum ripped,
the testicles popped out.

In the morning light – after the night's wild party –
all three are found cuddled together,
will not give up their closeness.
They wake with wild wide eyes,
stretched in amazement, as innocent
as children from a fairy tale,
scared by their own dark wood,

where they have found themselves together.

3. Between gravity and grace

Stone and bronze: it sometimes seems
that's all there is. The one with its geometric laws,
where all is either inert or falling, or otherwise briefly racing,
pure momentum, a figured vector;
the other, a short, metallic dream
- of raging in a flickering of light, a crashing
lightning strike. We tramp
across the unseen fields of force, fighting
for everything, possessing nothing.
Violence obliterates anybody who feels
its touch; executioners and victim, both,
have necks bent down beneath an axe
of blind destiny. But then –
come moments of dumb pause, a gap
where thought might form, the spores
of grace, where each might find
their mirror, a culminating partnership.