Role Play

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Brian Miskowich

Midday sun percolating through the dust
in the air let us look into the sunbeams
like into a dessert tray; fine yellow gelatin,
the astral field of air bubbles encased forever,
only these move, catch the eye in their
stumbled, slant form, miniature white actors
drifting in and off stage.

Waiting for that sunbeam to shift,
realizing that we had paid it no heed,
hadn’t really cared, because, in the end,
the day, bright and gay and separated
so cleanly by a pallid wood window frame
was some sort of antithesis, as if we
just couldn’t think so dark in such light.

Aspiring to be something other than the slack
lace of a shoe, or the unease of a belt too tight
to sit comfortably, we tried to conjure out
something hidden hard inside us, a bit of
longing, or anger perhaps, or a wonder
that we lived in such luxury, that all we were
was a bunch of uncomfortable kids.

We wanted to be in pain, and in peril, and hopeless.
So we hunched ourselves over the floor and rolled.
Little resin knucklebones, the purple ones
were lucky; they rolled twenties, every time, guaranteed.
We didn’t know what we would become, but we knew
what we wanted to be: not even heroes, or big,
just worth something.

So we were there, deep in the dungeon, and altars of black
cemented char, bones, we might think, growing morbid
with the thrill of it, with the grinning skull above, which
spoke to us, and told us things about life and the universe and about how maybe this world of ours was paper thin, and had boundaries and maybe we ought to get a hole punch, and start exploring - the desk? Maybe the analogy wasn’t so hot, but we’d run with it, and laugh.

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And we’d start to do silly things, things we couldn’t call anything but silly things, because we didn’t want to give them more weight, and make them our things, they were just cast-offs, getting the slack out, getting into character, we’d order pancreas steaks at the tavern, watch Andy, the DM, our little god, shake his head and say “The barkeep looks at you like you’re crazy.”

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We knew that that would be the response, we didn’t care, because we were young, and we did those things, and you had to accept that we were young. But then we would begin, we’d fly into it like we were hot shit, and could act, and then suddenly we were, and we could, we rolled criticals, and did amazing things, with broadsword flashing and trumpet sound.

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Then we’d come to feel something deeper, at that altar again, like maybe we shouldn’t listen, but we did anyway, to some big voice telling us to punch holes in the world, this world we’d ventured forth into, to make a mark, so we did, and we came to a place somewhere distant, and also right at home, because it was clear: we were heroes, we were heroes again. Or was this the first time?

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And in the distance, some convoy would be making its way across a plain, somehow alien, maybe it was the colors, and they would say to us perhaps “you are chosen,” and we were so taken in we would just roll with that, we guessed. Only soon we got all that danger we’d hoped for, and demons swirled malignant around our people, our charges, and we found ourselves stymied.
We slashed and hacked, and dungeoneered, and cast our best spells. Only it didn’t work, and when we got right down to it, all our bluster and power amounted to not a whole lot in the face of something different, and maybe with a new world we ought to have been thinking in a new way? Only then it was too late, and the foes we had long sought danced like fire around us, until we were dizzied and dismayed.

But it wouldn’t end there, no no, our godling would tell us with a vicious smile, maybe a sneer, we weren’t sure by then, that all those people, those people we said we’d kind of promise to defend, were pretty much fucked. And there those demons went, a dark foggish cloud of hate and sorrow, and washed over those people, and we could naught but be witness to men with no hope, and women and children torn asunder, and mothers looking with sadness at their babes, all still.

We would feel the hurt of failure, and we’d try to say to each other, “well that sucked,” but sucked didn’t cover it, because we’d just been witness to a slaughter, and we realized that maybe sheep weren’t quite so hapless, maybe they killed shepherds in ways we hadn’t thought of. And then some kind of music would come on, spindling randomly in the player, and the violin would carve a line into us.

And with tears in our eyes, held like a laden sponge, for fear a drop might fall, and show our weakness, we’d realize that it was four in the morning, and maybe we ought to get something to eat, and go home, because we could also feel sleep mixed in those tears, and who could stomach any more death tonight anyway, even if it was monsters.