

TOM DISCH

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## The Sun's Diurnal Course

How high it can climb in no time at all.  
Already it touches the tiles in the hall,  
and soon it will check out the sequence of spines  
of the lower shelves' books, attentive  
as a page at the library engaged  
in keeping the foreign-language sections  
in good order. No more than if she were  
a teddy bear can she read any of them,  
nor would she even if she had the knack,  
but even so she takes pride in her work—  
unlike her boss, a cousin of the mayor  
who never ventures down here into the stacks.  
Look! Below the steel-grey lip of the lowest shelf  
where a multi-volume history of France  
is lodged, a glint of broken glass!  
No one in Maintenance has ever noticed.  
Now the shadow of the page  
renders it invisible, and then the shadow  
of the cart she pulls along behind her,  
and suddenly the sunlight's gone:  
the sun has climbed to where it can look  
down on all the denizens of the lands  
these books have come from—the beaches  
where Normans contended against Celts,  
Yanks against Krauts, where young Marcel  
beheld with languid benevolence  
the swimming costumes of vacationing  
demoiselles, heiresses all—until in due course  
it has reached its noontime zenith.  
And so have we. Let us lunch  
where we can escape the glare.

## A Pirate Crew

They are happy here at last—  
 dead it may be, and at the bottom of the sea,  
 living as ghosts in the ruins of their ship,  
*The Liberty*. It is rare for any ghost to feel  
 so little anxious, so disencumbered  
 of the fetters of the past, at ease on Ocean's bed  
 of soft white sand, mug in hand, singing  
 rounds and making merry, with brine for beer,  
 delicious, smooth, free-flowing, with a power  
 to awaken centuries of reminiscences,  
 as though they told the tales of their tattoos,  
 each a lie of erotic conquest that was  
 entirely true. Who'd be so cruel as to reproach  
 them now for all they did or didn't do?  
 Their lives are through, and those are seashells  
 in their bony claws, not glass. But they know that  
 and could care less. Their laughter still  
 is fresh and deep and loud as the roar of the sea.

## Ghost Ship

There must be many other such derelicts—  
 orphaned, abandoned, adrift for whatever reason—  
 but few have kept flying before the winds  
 of cyberspace so briskly as Drunk Driver  
 (the name of the site). Anonymous (the author)  
 signed his last entry years ago, and more years passed  
 before the Comments began to accrete  
 like barnacles on the hull of a ship  
 and then in ever-bifurcating chains  
 on each other. The old hulk became  
 the refuge of a certain shy sort  
 of visitor, like those trucks along the waterfront  
 haunted by lonely souls who could not bear  
 eyewitness encounters. They could leave

their missives in the crevices of this latter-day  
Wailing Wall, returning at intervals  
to see if someone had replied, clicking  
their way down from the original message

April 18. Another gray day. Can't find the energy  
to get the laundry down to the laundry room.  
The sciatica just won't go away.

through the meanders and branchings  
of the encrusted messages, the tenders  
of love for a beloved who would never know herself  
to have been desired, the cries of despair,  
the silly whimsies and failed jokes, to where  
the thread had last been snapped,  
only to discover that no, no one had answered  
the question posed. Because,  
no doubt, there was no answer.  
Is there an "answer" to the war  
wherever the latest war is going on?  
If one could get under the ship  
and see all those barnacles clinging  
to the keel, what a sight it would be.  
Talk about biodiversity! But on deck,  
so sad, always the same three skeletons,  
the playing card nailed to the mast,  
frayed and fluttering weakly, like some huge insect  
the gods will not allow to die.

## The Complete Songs

Eventually they all are lost,  
the loveliest along with the lunatic  
chanties of children chained to radiators.  
They leak into the ether and are left behind  
as the world careers on ahead attentive only  
to its own tempi of days and years.  
Other deities have other ditties: Apollo

suspends his hand over the strings.  
 Then, Whang! Time stops.  
 A needle drops into the groove. The second  
 hand begins to move again. It was all  
 an illusion and now it's over.  
 O Ewigkeit, you thund'ring word!  
 Adios, my dear, there wasn't time  
 to say everything I meant to,  
 but had there been

## In Memoriam: Thomas M. Disch (1940–2008)

**T**om Disch (who published fiction and criticism as Thomas M. Disch and poetry as Tom Disch) was not only a widely respected, even revered, writer of what he called speculative fiction, but also a first-rate poet and critic. Few writers in our time have managed as successfully as he did to combine being deeply, meaningfully, and darkly serious with being laugh-out-loud hilarious.

As a poet he was outrageously underappreciated, mainly because he swam against the poetic currents of the day. Like Swift and Pope, who aren't exactly role models for many poets today, he was a master of form and an acidly witty observer of humankind's flaws and foibles. And he made it all look effortless—which doubtless helps explain why his poetry is less well known than it should be.

As for his criticism, I've read certain reviews of his again and again just for the sheer pleasure of his prose. There are some individual lines that I savor. Only a few days ago (it may even have been the day he died), I was sitting in my apartment and my eyes fastened on the spine of David Laskin's *Partisans*, a history of the mid-century New York intellectuals. And I immediately recalled Tom's passing reference, in his review of it, to the last surviving member of that crowd as "tontine winner Elizabeth Hardwick."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Their Gang," *The Hudson Review*, Vol. LIII, No. 2 (Summer 2000), pp. 345–48.

Who else but Tom would have thought to call her that? His reviews were full of such inspired tidbits, which for him were just throwaway lines, but which made his prose a joy to read.

In person Tom was as witty as on paper, with a quick mind and a first-rate delivery. And he was a very sweet guy. A publicity picture for one of his novels, in which he glares demonically down into the camera—formidable, bald, muscular, his powerful arms crossed—makes him look like the scariest dude in the world: the bouncer from hell, the biker bully from Central Casting. In fact he was the bullies' enemy. His whole body of work is a cry against man's inhumanity to man, against tyrannical orthodoxies and deadening groupthink, against all those who seek to dehumanize or destroy their fellow human beings for the sake of power or a buck or an ego boost. He believed in the individual, and in the individual mind.

And he was a true original—a man who, no matter what he was writing about, and in what genre, invariably had fresh, unpredictable, provocative and perceptive things to say. He always spoke his mind fully, no matter whose feathers might get ruffled. And when you read his work or talked to him, you could tell that he positively exulted in the ability and opportunity to confront the world's tyrants and fools and clowns and deflate them with words. For all his cynicism about human nature, he had immense *joie de vivre* and a superabundance of creative energy; in fact, it wouldn't be too much of an exaggeration to say that he was a regular Auntie Mame, a veritable embodiment of the conviction that life is a banquet and most poor sons of bitches are starving to death—and that he could make you wonder whether you yourself, his fellow writer and critic, were embracing your own role in this absurd cosmos with a sufficient measure of glee. Indeed, when I was first introduced to Tom, his face lit up, quite gloriously, at the sound of my name, because I'd just published a review that he'd agreed with. Everybody who knew Tom knew that look. It was a frequent sight, and it was thoroughly authentic. My point here is that despite his dark literary vision, he was—right up until the last act, anyway—a merry soul. The best tribute any of us could pay to Tom's memory would be to go out and buy one or more of his books. A greater bargain cannot easily be had.

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