

In Defence of Science

After "Grief" by Matthew Dickman

When grief comes to you as Piltdown Man,
a 100-year-old scientific hoax,
a supposed "missing link" in the evolutionary chain,
his 500-year-old orangutan jaw is silent.
He has come to listen. I am used to his visits.
I put out the usual place setting for him
and we share a meal. Over a glass of
Strewn 2008 Select Late Harvest Cabernet,
I find myself talking about the loss of my father,
how I have dreamed that he is not dead,
that I've been talking to him in odd places,
at the magazine rack in the bookstore,
the checkout line, the donut shop,
under the painting of an Arizona desert at home,
and how every year on the anniversary of his death
I find it difficult. I find it hard to eat, sleep, go out.

And it is strange to be pouring out my feelings
to Piltdown Man, he never existed in any real sense.
And after all the years that we have been meeting
I finally get up the courage to tell him, you do not exist.

Then he wipes his chin with a napkin and says he does.
He and his twin brother Death have been here
in one form or another long before vacuum tubes
and vaudeville, unearthed tombs and first flight.

I believe my father is still alive, I continue.
I have narrowed down where he can be.
He is somewhere in a remote jungle or a mountain range

where there are no land lines or cell service.
Pitldown Man shakes his head, gives me
that aggravated look that imparts I have not been listening.
He says he was with Death when he visited my father,
and witnessed his brother claiming to be “an old friend
from the weather service” to get past the nurses.
He watched on as Death turned into a misshapen shadow,
then crawled up the wall as an elongated insect,
an afterthought from the Burgess Shale,
with a chitinous exoskeleton, clicking the wall
with keratin disdain, each click the sound of a fingernail
tapping a service desk, till he reached the ceiling tiles,
and then fell down on top of my father,
lying on him like an exhausted lover.

And Death sucked the last idea from my father,
if a breath is an idea,
and in that moment Pitldown man tells me
Death put my father inside the painting
that hangs over the mantelpiece at home,
by turning the hospital bed into the floor
of a vast canyon, a rocky mesa in Arizona,
and my father was joined by other scientific hoaxes:
the Tasaday Tribe, The Nacirema.
The Cardiff Giant was there as well,
wielding a large lasso, roping a Brontosaurus,
and my father and the rest of them rode on its back,
trying to outrun Death,
while Clever Hans, the horse that could do math,
counted out the seconds he had left.