

Three Poems



The Questioner of the Sphinx by Elihu Vedder, 1863

by [Donald Wheelock](#) (February 2022)

Notes from Underground

How much it takes to make a go of things:
a quick scratch in your burrow, and a rock—
no hint of it till now—forces a retreat.
Detour defines the logbook of a life.

To work the topsoil tunnels like a vole,
the love of underground so freely yours
to sniff around in, day or night! So where
would pleasure stop? There's that rock again.

Unearthing My Fossil

...how I got to be so far away
is not for *me* to know; I died

at least a lonely thousand years ago,
where wind and water took their time, but that
was 2053. The oldest graves
are gone. The river dried up long ago—
but this is all conjecture—see how earth
forgets its kin...why they found fingers first
is not for *me* to say: these guys, I guess,
know best. *These* finger bones are here to stay.
It took *at least* a thousand years; don't think
I don't appreciate the manicure,
the way you clear the sand away—who knows
what sediments took over, clearing flesh
from bone—the way you fuss and fuss at knuckles,
one at a time. I can't recall just how
it felt to have the ancient desert streams—
so *rare* the desert streams—clear flesh from bone.
Another eon beckons me away.

~

How peaceful it has been, away from fear.
The sun cools down to nothing in the night.

Although to you this romance in the sun
is one long dropping-out of time; note, please,
the evidence longevity gives a skull,
my skull. What makes you want me so?
Leave the spine alone, a silent plea
I made in life as well. I thought in life:
There'll be a day, when to lie back in the sun,
will be the very last vestigial wish
a man might, as his rightful due, expect.
Who'd ever think of *this*? The evening breeze
makes overtures to lure me back to life,
but early though it is, it is too late.

~

The faith you have in learning from the dead!
Look me in the cavities that were my eyes,
but you won't find the sediments that washed
away, and washed away again...
How slow the human race is to move on!

~

You all keep reading so much into me—
easy does it! If only I could answer
the questions you keep asking one another.
What human rights have I a hope of—what's
the word?—"enjoying" hardly fits—when fingers
are packed away to leave the rest of me
to elementary eternity?

Why not take all of me?—why are you laughing?
Even here in the desert there were rumors;
how even the most careful burial
can never quite assure eternal rest—
and tell me, all you scientists in shorts,
where will you take me when you're through with this?

The vehicles have arrived, I see—if that
is what they are—How carefully you lift me,
my ribs and skull, I could be just a baby—
Easy does it! Is this an ambulance?

We had those once—so when did all those wheels
give up their function to the cushioned air?
The next phase now begins. Will other bones

now lure you all away? Will my top half
be laid out on display with all the rest?

~

Yes, set me down—I'm dizzy from the drive—
Not here! Bones are everywhere—one never knows
with whom I'll be expected to get along—
yes, here—if you could dim the light a little,
but not too dim; some clarity is welcome
after so many years.

From shifting sands back to cold burnished steel.

After all these years they still use drawers!

One always has nostalgia for the sand—

if friends could hear me now!

Or see me photogenically exposed.

If I were flesh, there'd surely be a law
against this ghoulishness.

"It's time for lunch,"

an old man says, pointing at his watch,
reviving hunger for an appetite

I haven't thought about in years. Light's out,

and away they go. Abandonment again...

~

People are so noisy after lunch—
have I slept that long?—Is that a whiff
of alcohol?—"It's time," one fellow says.
"Like packing eggs," another says; they laugh.
Now in the drawer. The steel, as I've just said,
is cold, so cold. Will any of them think
to say farewell? The shrinking rectangle
of fluorescent light diminishes to black;
I hear the lab door close; the silence gathers
around me once again, and so:
Good night.

More Word than Meaning

The immaterial essence when I die,
as if the smoke had not derived from fire,
the fire from some spontaneous desire,

urges me to prolong life with lies.

But *soul* would make me more than what I am,
more than poet, father, spouse, composer—
all of which together come much closer
than any verbal ghost or hologram

that ties me up into a wraithful role;
although I must admit that every time
I struggle for a noun to make all mine,
for “man” or “one,” I much prefer a “soul.”

[TABLE OF CONTENTS](#)

Donald Wheelock's poems have appeared in publications that welcome formal poetry, among them, Blue Unicorn, Ekphrasis, Equinox, Light, Snakeskin, The Lyric and Rue Scribe. His chapbook, *In the Sea of Dreams*, is available from Gallery of Readers Press.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)