

The Infant Race (La Infana Raso)

By William Auld

Translation by Steven K. Smith

I.

Greetings to you, mason, to Ruben, my foresire
who in life climbed up and down the church's marble spires
to carve the forms of gargoyles and of angels!

And you, Ruben's descendant, who hoisted up the sails
on pirate ships that prowled the deadly waters,
and courted the tavern keeper's second daughter,
and left her there, with child, completely disappearing
into the ocean's bottom, yes, I salute you, cheering!
(And you as well, indeed, the tavern keeper's daughter
who nursed the baby that became my many times great-grandfather
whose school was in the gutters, and spent most of his time
in whoring, theft and murder, and other sorts of crime,
and sowed a dozen bastards, one of whom that went
off to the war with Poland, and frequently he spent
free time in fornication, all throughout the land
and made me a distant a cousin to every Polish man!)

To my hundred-thousand forebears, made to sweat beneath the lash,
from your great-great-great-grandson, I greet you now, at last.
Though you may find it strange that also I salute
as family those who yoked you, to grind beneath their boot.
It seems strange to you, indeed, that the castle's lordly heir
and your bovine peasant offspring, in ragged slave-boy fare,
by some caprice of fate, in equal shares combine
across the passing centuries to compose this blood of mine.

(In truth, you're not at all alone in your surprise.

Even more, the castle's heir gapes with widened eyes.)

And you as well, my savage, unwashed far-foresire
who fought Agricola's army with swords, and stones, and fire
and vanquished them at last, to drive them from your nation
I salute you: *Ave!*

Yes, this whole population
(or nearly) fathered me, per proof by calculation,
that the sum of my ancestors, who caused my life's creation
in that date already is greater by several times
than the total population within our border lines!

But also in the ranks of the attacking Roman army
there's more than just a single one who fathered me.

When Roman fought the savage in a battle to the death
sword to sword and hand to hand 'til only one drew breath.

Two men fought with each other to the grave whose seed combine
post centuries apart to form this blood of mine.

With a fearsome blow one of them brings forth the crimson flood
and so the donor of my blood, spills out my very blood...

Without enthusiasm I offer out a hand
to my puritan, frowning forebear, far across time and land.
A warm embrace for you, the actor, fond of drinking,
it is from you, in chief, I get the manner of my thinking.
A kiss for you, Maria, who picks flowers in the wild,
A hug for you, Leona, who just has borne a child
but as for the father's name you never were quite certain,
but you were always expert in both kitchen arts and flirting.
And you, my tailor-ancestor, I greet you with warm feeling
and you...

and you...

you as well...

but now, my mind is reeling
and refuses to consider, or to grasp all the connections
of this chain of our relations, pregnancies and conceptions
which resulted in my birth, and made me a relation
in some far distant way to every person in the nation,
to every whore and beggar, peer or learned barrister
from your land and mine, 'cross language and memory's barriers...

Greetings, friend, selling wares down one street to another
some ancient man's orgasm has caused us to be brothers!
You too, I greet, the solemn judge, striving to be just.
We both owe our existence to the very same pelvic thrust!
Come to my arms as brother, now black-skinned common man,
the split of an amoeba caused separation of our clans:
And you too, Jesus Christ, from where hot sun burns down;
you too are my brother, even though your skin was brown,
though your misguided followers might paint it pink and pale.
Not so very long ago our ancestors had tails!

The host of my ancestors without an end amass
doubling by generations, geometrically into the past
to form by their relations an unbroken chain of life,
a thin, but strong, enduring but fragile thread of human strife,
which started to disperse back when some atom joined with atom
by some wild cosmic accident, impossible to fathom
the first faint fluttering of life rippled throughout the sea.

That unknowable ancient happenstance is what created ME!

But if in some blind moment I think I'm at the top,
my ancestors whisper to me, "Time's not come up to a stop.
You aren't the culmination of the path we blindly wend,
we spiral ever outward, never coming to an end.
From our primordial amoeba, scarce a second now has passed,
our race has hardly started its journey down this path.
You only are the breath a baby takes when life begins:
you came, will go, a single link in a chain that never ends!"

Greetings, my ancestors, your era now is through,
Courage mankind, my brothers, with skin of every hue —
the time-mirage that foully had split us in the past
will finally rejoin us!

And as we blindly feel our path
we come, and go, links in a chain whose terminal expanse
we'll neither forge nor see. Courage, and persistence!