

Alcohol

Mark Cox

In this faded family photo—
Horton, Kansas, '36—
they are just two farmhands in overalls,
kept, by a bowed velvet cordon,
from some gala event. Except it's a rattlesnake
strung between them,
five, perhaps six feet in length
and thick as my young father's outstretched arms.
One might think his pride, that is,
anticipation of us,
would dictate looking at the camera,
but he seems to be eyeing
the slick, intricate patterns of risk
now relaxed in his hand.
Then again, given his uneasy, strained half-smile,
he could be checking my grandfather's grip,
the snake so freshly dead,
making sure any reflex is under control—
suspecting the undulant weight of it,
that he could never really let go.

No Picnic in the Afterlife

Mark Cox

When I'm feeling down about the human condition, that is, *my* human condition, I consider all the crappy jobs I could have had in another life. An executioner, say, or worse, the one to cart the bodies away—there are more difficult things than poetry, aren't there, I remind myself, what if I'd been a mummy maker, with a desiccation degree, that would be no cakewalk, mummification was an industry, thousands of ibises and sacred cats, bulls even—those whoppers took 40 days in the sun to dry and speaking of meat, sacred or no, the smell was awful (those long days under the blood-orange Egyptian sun, you never got used to it, when you went home your wife refused to make love with you), but it was an important job, this populating the afterlives of others, providing guard animals, and pets, not to mention massive quantities of foodstuffs, none of which could you sneak home, the guards always patting you down, Ra forbid your old lady should be grateful enough to give an inch or you should live even a little of the afterlife you made for others. No, it is your lot to cater that picnic in paradise, never to partake of it, you have to be committed, as I tell my students, it is a way of life. The priests, they did the people, they didn't really get it, what it entails to mummify a goddamn bull or 15-foot crocodile—they were fucking huge—and the baboons, you had to yank their canines, house-break them dentally, *before* putting them down. No, it is no small job to populate the afterlife, it takes a brutal tenderness, attention to life's cruel details, all that moisture in which we live, the very lubricant of our mobility, drawn out molecule by molecule, though we didn't think so micro then, and there you were lacing up your sandals, grabbing some rice cakes and dates for lunch, leaving for work, which, though worse than poetry, as fates go, could have been truly horrific—you could be quarrying stone for

temples (long hours on barges, mosquitoes big as dung beetles, no hazard pay)—No, you had your own role to slave over, supplying pharaohs and courtesans a kind of Noah’s ark of totems and sacrifices, right down to the royal cock fights, so who could blame you for amusing yourself with the occasional mummy joke—the kitten placed in the sarcophagus of a lion, an ibis in a crocodile, a fish inside the ibis, a scarab inside the fish. It got you through those long-ass days while the sweat was drawn out of you gram by gram or iota by iota or however by whatever they measured it, and for what? What was waiting at home? A woman who couldn’t bear the stink of death on you, who probably spent most of her day rubbing olive oil into some noble’s feet, and so you get home and heave yourself down on a grass mat and say there just has to be a better way than this, than this life I am living and your wife says quit your bitching, this once, I’ll get the oil, and here you are, back in your hut of baked mud and palm thatching, your staff and sandals propped by the front door and it is cooler here out of the sun, out of the way, a moment’s pause, an eddy in the Nile, and it doesn’t matter if your sweetheart has been anointing other men’s feet or polishing their silver till her hands blackened, or the *Papyrus Monthly* won’t publish your work—you are together now, in this life, in this moment and the sleeping baby has your nose and the over-pounded, unleavened, tooth-shattering bread is warm, so quit your whining, you could be humping pyramid blocks through sandstorms, you’ve got it good, you can’t even smell yourself anymore, you are golden, here, have a fig.