

KEVIN DUCEY

Dragonteeth

*My dream, O my sister, my dream,
this is the heart of my dream.
Rushes rise up all about me,
rushes sprout all about me. . . .*

—*The Death of Dumuzi*, Sumerian myth c. 2500 BCE

Dulce it's not: How many miles
underground do we tunnel? Into darkness,
the tunnel rat goes past black pits
and poison traps and once
he comes round an oblique corner into a
hospital with operating theater,
sweet air blown in,
beds still warm, the wounded fleeing
down the tunnel before him.

■

You know the story,
the king buries
dragonteeth into the sod
and they jump up—
soldiers to fight for the kingdom.

■

Once you've introduced the teeth,
the rest of the animal can't be far. Think
of a dictator pulled from a spiderhole, tell
your friends, tell them it's *dulce*. When
the soldier comes home from Iraq
he flees the house of his uncle
and disappears into the sand and palm trees
of southwest Florida.

The 'Nam vets go looking for him. Rumor
he'd been seen on a bus stop bench
dirty and unshaven sends the old men to the jungles,
dressed homeless to look for the young man
because Gilgamesh said to Enkidu

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on his descent into the underworld:

“Do not put on clean clothes,
lest the [dead] heroes come forth like enemies;
Do not anoint thyself with the good oil of the vessel,
lest at its smell they crowd about thee.”

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The tunnel rat goes to the last place
the kid has been seen; along the highway
embankment he finds a drainage pipe
“large enough for a man to crawl into,”
or something to crawl out of.

It’s not usually the old ones who go out
searching. Telemachus goes for his father,
and Oedipus finally finds his parents.
In Vietnam now they’ve opened
these tunnels to the tourist trade;
here’s Orpheus, the original tunnel rat,
and the shade of the young man flees before him.

The old man, gone into the ground,
sees again the briefing room desk,
the well-stocked hospital ward
(as if those things
could make them whole again).
The black echo
whispers now ahead of him, the oblique
turns twist away before,
and the white phosphorus burns
brightly above Dumuzi’s Euphrates.

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The smell is overwhelming. The
maggots had no trouble finding
Dumuzi in his dream. The shadow
face passing by, petal on a flower
we never saw bloom. The dead
follow us even as we leave

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