Ahab's Book Shop

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Leszek Koczanowicz

have to learn to take into account the real interests of their supporters. It may sound trivial but I am afraid that it will take some time until one starts to do politics in this way. Also, I think that the development of democracy will not be an automatic process: on the contrary, I predict failures, blind alleys and perils in its course. But I believe that the already created framework of democratic institutions should survive and become the basis for further development.

Ahab's Bookshop

By Joseph Zornado
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Late one afternoon
as the sun died in the west
a bookshop proprietor
heard the books on his shelves
die. His yellowed
fingertips stopped moving from one
worn spine to the next;
he had been feeling for
a story that might explain
his suffering.
Instead, he was struck still
by the whispering spines—
a thousand threads
loosening in their bindings—
decomposing, decomposing.
"Damn," he mutters,
"I think it's closing."

I said "shelves" a moment ago,
but "shelves" is not exactly right.
He hears the rotting like cockroaches
trotting, even when he lays in bed.
He knows a doctor's findings will explain it all and attribute it to some post-modern, gerontological blight.

Still, the quiet sound of death provides an inkling
of just how fast his shop is sinking
(as a memento mori should).
I think you ought to know
that aside from selling used books,
drinking bourbon, and killing rats,
this book shop proprietor maintains
four or five bowls of candy that stud his aisles
in sweet defiance of the rotting.
Tootsie rolls and butterscotch lifesavers spill over every brim of every bowl—
he thinks sweets might help
a child hunt his shop—

Disclosure: Fin de Siècle Democracy
He has only seen one there, though, this past month, and watched him greedily as the brown-eyed boy munched handfuls of tootsie rolls and dropped a trail of waxy leaves of wrapping paper. Like a squirrel doubting a too-straight trail of nuts, the boy moved slowly from bowl to bowl stepping further into the bookshop where the ceiling, pregnant with the outside world, hangs warped with age really—ready to burst in from above.

"Come 'ere," the proprietor croaked, reaching a withered hand—covered with age spots, like knots in oak—towards the child. His face—uninviting leather, bent to the floor from nigh a century under a sagging roof—reads "death," but the child, who does not yet read, grabs another handful, looks at the hand, and scampers to the front door in search of a father.

The proprietor mutters "bourbon" and slumps over like a rain-soaked pile of second-hand romances. Over his desk a small tattered card still glows from the yellow lamp that stays on day and night, its Pilot's wheel barely phosphorescent: "Jesus, Savior, Pilot me."

Only the books themselves hold his shop up. Though they stand, piled high, their arthritic, dessicated spines continue to stiffen and fray from the use of a hundred rude hands. Loose pages slip unseen to the floor like late November's leaves, falling, mixing with the waxy remnants of the tootsie rolls and lifesavers and patches of carpet. What's the use trying to save them? the bourbon bottle mutters from a corner of his desk. What's the use? What is the use?

"Stay together!" the proprietor barks and shoots a blood-shot stare at a listing stack of coverless paperbacks.

He rises and slowly shakes his bottle half-filled with liquid butter-scotch. The splayed and fragmented books on his desk whisper again. The proprietor—in a fit now stands up and thrusts his shirt tails in and draws his hand across his hair and draws in a huge chest of air as if suddenly risen from the depths, but then just as quickly slumps down again at his desk.

He drinks, picks up a leather-bound Melville and leans into the yellow light to read again of Ahab's death as if it were his own.