

Two Byrds

from the diary of William Byrd II

APRIL 7, 1709 :

I rose before 6 o'clock
and read two chapters
in Hebrew and 250 verses
in Homer's *Odyssey*
and made an end of it.
I said my prayers devoutly.
I ate milk for breakfast.
I danced my dance.
The men began to work
this day to dig for brick.
I settled my accounts
and read Italian.
I reproached my wife

September 3, 1709:

I ate roast chicken for dinner.
In the afternoon I beat Jenny
for throwing water on the couch.

October 6:

I rose at 6 o'clock and said my prayers
and ate milk for breakfast.
Then I proceeded to Williamsburg,
where I found all well.
I went to the capitol
where I sent for the wench to clean
my room and when I came I kissed her
and felt her, for which God forgive me. . . .
About 10 o'clock I went to my lodgings.
I had good health but wicked thoughts,
God forgive me.

December 1, 1709:

Eugene was whipped again
for pissing in bed and Jenny
for concealing it.

December 3, 1709:

Eugene pissed again
for which I made him
drink a pint of piss.

James Byrd Jr.

June 7, 1998

This is the only day
for which I will be remembered.

No one will recall what I ate
or if I read the newspaper,
but they will imagine
what I prayed for, to which God
I howled sanctuary in the night.

In all the 49 springs of my living
I did not betray the kindness
of strangers, even those who
wore the skin of my forbearer's
brutal masters. God forgive me.

Maybe I hoped after they beat me
and doused me with a pint of piss
that it would end there.

The blade's ragged teeth said otherwise.
I named it Jasper, the ugly ghost,
the white sheet with eye holes
to peer out at a shadow of myself.

They strung me to their pickup in the image
of the hanged man, ankles tied to the ank
hitch like a ritual sacrifice. As they dragged
me down the dust road, I became Osiris,
seven pieces of immortality:
The teeth flung from mouth.
Each leg which could not run.
Hands which would never work again.
Arms unable to cradle my children safe.
Proud chest troubling the cemetery gates.
Skull with my brain still whole.

When I slipped away, I was glad to part ways
with memory, to only have to live this dying
once.

A wicked thought.
God forgive me.