

Tommy and the Guardians of Oblivion

poem · September 19, 2005

“There’s a bum digging through the garbage in the garage, “ my boss said.

“Go kick him out of there.”

I was a deli clerk in New York City.

I sliced meat and smoked fish for wealthy Jewish customers.

Most of the homeless in that neighborhood were my friends.

I knew many by name.

If I didn’t know their names, I gave them ones that I made up.

Moose, Frank, Dick, Chip, Rasta; and so on.

Some I named after characters of Faulkner’s Snopes trilogy;

Flem, Manfred and Mink were a few.

(They were) the guardians of oblivion.

In the garage

Headfirst in the dumpster

Was Tommy

He sold books on the sidewalk

People gave him old paperbacks and porn magazines.

It didn’t seem to be a very lucrative business.

The garbage room was full. It reeked as garbage does.

Ripe and rotten.

I tapped on the bottom of Tommy’s boot with a sawed-off broomstick they kept handy in the front of the store.

I could see his foot through it.

A quarter-size hole exposed the tar-stained pink of his heel.

He ignored me – but began to hurry it up.

I tapped again.

“Come on, get out of there now,” I said. “The boss is watching.”

The smell was getting to me.

“Anyway, “ I said, “you don’t want that.”

He rose up, greasy and smiling.

“Oh yes I do. This is good eatin.’

I couldn’t disagree with him.

He had picked clean the bones of a smoked whitefish.

Oily chunks of pale-grey fish meat filled a paper coffee cup.

My boss wouldn’t have been happy that particular fish ended up in the garbage.

Tommy wore a silver chain with a Star of David pendant.

He was not a wealthy Jew.

But he still ate like one.

At least, sometimes.