



1970

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Recommended Citation

Dixon, Kent. "Hamlin Revisited." *The Iowa Review* 1.3 (1970): 48-53. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.1091>

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Hamlin Revisited

Kent Dixon

The boy lay in bed trying to remember nightmares; they were impossible to invent. The only recurrent one was the Dough one, and it was more interesting than scary: an entire desert of white hills that shifted, sliding out of and into themselves like waves. He did not know what the substance was, but its bone whiteness reminded him of dough. Sometimes certain of the hills had furrows, as if combed, and sometimes there was a tiny figure, appearing on a crest, disappearing. Himself? He did not know.

He rolled over on his side, his bottom arm stuffed out behind, and curled the hand in front of him up under his chin. The pillow was warm everywhere.

The lights of passing cars swept his room, like a lighthouse beacon. Like the lights of some search party, and he a skulking fugitive thing watching it pass. When the cars came from one direction, the shadows elongated slowly, then quickly shrunk, like thin men getting up and changing seats. Cars from the other road passed too quickly; the shadows popped up and lay down like a small page flipped. Once these shadows had frightened him, crouching as they do in all the uncanny corners of the room, but now even given this life from the headlights, they were all old friends, and pricked his imagination no more than a familiar face.

It's too light in here, that's why I can't sleep.

He closed his eyes, tightened them, shading the colors through purple to black, but the lids wouldn't stay closed of their own. Back over on his back.

Didn't brush my teeth. 'How can you stand that dirty feeling? I'm too uncomfortable unless I brush,' his mother. And his father one time actually made him go back in the house and brush them while everybody waited in the car.

He took a deep weary breath and stared ahead. The white ceiling, the grey corners, fuzzed to a murkiness. Put my hand through it, like a ring of Saturn. The space between him and the ceiling thickened, flocculent corpuscles, then a lowering blue alive with scintillation. His thought fluttered, broke up, dissolved.

And he slept, unbothered by dreams.

As it is possible to hear when asleep only after one has waked, when the conscious gropes and identifies almost by feel the elusive echoes, amorphous, somewhere, not yet of the memory, nor of the moment either, so it was with the boy, after comprehending that the scratches and muffled bumbings were rats in the walls (he had heard them before), he recognized they had been about as he was waking, and before that even, but too far from his sleeping center to make noise, and only now could he remember and realize, and *that*, his helplessness in the Before and not the present threat, is what frightened him.

"Unnh." Again, "Unnh nh. mom . . . ?" They didn't hear him. He sat up and yelled: "ANNR!" scaring himself. "Mom!?"

Noises from his parents' room, and the rats were gone. In came his mother, tying her robe.

"Don't knock over the soldiers," he warned. Too late, but it sounded as if just one fell.

She, "Hamlin, I've asked you not to put them in front of the door. They'll just have to get broken."

"It's the pass," he mumbled. Grease on her face, a net thing over her hair, sleepy.

"Well what's the matter?"

"I had a nightmare."

"You're big enough to have them on your own."

"I'm sorry, mom. The rats were scratching in the walls and they became part of my dream."

"Well, I hardly blame you." And more to herself, "I've been after him to put that poison around for weeks."

He knew the rats would soften her. She hated rats, and he could scare her with his stories. He delighted in it; he scared her all the time. Once he'd waited nearly half an hour in her closet, and then when she opened the door he fell out at her like a stiff dead man. Scared her so much it scared him. Awful the way she kept violently shaking her head as he fell, as if to break off the happening.

"The scratching was a big claw inside my head . . ." he extemporized, but she, "I don't want to hear about it," standing. "Would you like some cocoa?"

"Yeah." Then enthusiastic, "Yeah!"

"Yeah, Please," she said, and started for the door. He hurried out of bed after her, tugging her robe, then bravely thrusting his arm in front of her, whispered, "Mom, there's something on the stairs."

She stopped. A noise at the head of the stairs. It could only be his father, but she thought of rats.

—*tinkle*— like ice in a glass.

"Worth?" she asked, and his father marched in, whistling, mostly air, on an invisible fife, ice in his glass tinkling.

"What's this I hear of rats? quoth the Pied Piper."

His mother left, mumbling, "Pie-eyed, if you ask me. Do *you* want some cocoa?"

"Just some ice." *tinkle*

"Lush."

"Succuba." Simple statements, devoid of malice. The boy resumed as his mother left.

"They're in the wall," he said.

His father, "Scare you, hunh?"

He nodded, and would not meet his father's stare. Silence. So he asked, "What's a piedpiper?"

"The Pied Piper of Hamelin? You don't know about the Pied Piper of Hamelin?"

The boy smiled, thinking he was teasing, but his father saw and corrected, "Not you, it's like your name only spelled differently. It's a town." He took a swallow from the glass and finished it with, "Well, come with me and I'll tell you about him," and they marched from his room toward his parents', but midway his father stopped.

"Wait here."

Instead he ran back to his room and put on his slippers, returning to meet his father in the hall. The tinkling glass was gone, and he carried a huge flashlight. To the balcony, he said, and led the way. He spoke over his shoulder, "Long ago, about thirteenth century, I think," as he fumbled with the door opening on to the balcony, "there was a little town in Westphalia, today that's in the northeastern part of Germany, called Hamelin. h, a, m, E," the door swung open, "-lin." Neither of them moved. The clean cold swept around them, and they both returned for warmer clothes. When back on the balcony, the boy still wore no socks, and immediately his ankles, his feet, were cold.

His father sat on the railing: "And so this little town Ham'lin," he said to the boy equivocally, "suddenly, quite suddenly, was overrun with rats." As he spoke he seemed to be looking for something across the street. The boy stayed back against the house, hugging himself.

"So one day appears this Pied Piper, and for a price he offers to clear the town of its rats. The town agrees, and he marches through playing on his pipes, and all the rats come out of hiding and follow him out of town." Then he whispered hastily, "Here, come over here, quick." The boy did so. "Watch now," said the father, flashlight poised . . . ON. The boy followed the beam to its object: on a telephone wire on their side of the street crept a large rat. Its shadow on the house across the street was so large as to be undefined, like a passing cloud. The rat turned to face the beam and caught the light full in its eyes—two orange-yellow reflectors. Then it was gone. It must have stepped off the wire. In his throat the boy felt a sympathetic sensation, as if at the top of a stair he'd stepped up one extra. Pity for the rat, silently creeping, dazed by the light, and disappearing: shamefully mocked in its element.

They heard a plop below, and the father spotted the light around. The boy reached for it, for the spot fell consistently off the beat of his wishes, and when his father finally handed him the light, grabbing for it back right away, "Try over there along the hedge," the rat was gone.

"They hunt around at night for food. That wire is their highway to our roof," he said looking up at it. The boy's glance followed. "I don't know where they get in, but when you hear them at night in the walls they're looking for food."

"Can they get in the house?" He knew well they could, because he'd had to empty the trap under the ice-box, his mother, broom in hand, across the kitchen.

His father speculated: "I suppose they might even come upstairs if you had food here. They've certainly gorged themselves on my manuscript." And then almost inaudible, "Don't know what it didn't kill 'em . . ." but the boy was thinking.

A train of them, like elephants holding tails, climbing up stair by stair . . . But there was no food upstairs.

"Ready for bed?"

"No."

"Afraid?"

The boy didn't answer for a time, then, "I used to be afraid to go into the garage. You told me there were crocodiles under the cars."

"Impossible! No crocodiles in this state. . . . Must have been alligators." Flashlight tucked underarm, he peeked at his son from over the business of lighting his pipe.

"Once you turned the light off when I was by the garage door, and I was afraid to pass the car to get back in the house."

His father covered his pipe with two fingers and puffed. Then from behind so much smoke that the boy felt alone he asked, "Something under the car, eh?" "Crocodiles!" the boy affirmed.

"Snapping at your ankles?"

"Unh huh."

"Same thing in bed, too, isn't it?" and he puffed. "I mean aren't there all sorts of things under the bed that will grab you under by the ankles?"

"Yes!" the boy almost gleeful.

His father looked at him seriously, asked, "Then what?"

"?"

"What do creatures like that do if they catch you?"

"Kill you," the boy proffered.

"How? Eat you?"

"Yeah, I guess."

The father puffed, the pipe stem going in one side of his mouth and the smoke coming out the other through a curled lip. He began: "You see, I have a theory. . . ." Now the boy knew what was coming, another theory. How many times at dinner, out-talking his mother, or in the middle of TV, but sometimes awfully good tales. ". . . I call it psychophagy, which roughly translates into 'soul-devouring.' It seems to me. . . ." talking now to the night in general, "that our fear of unknown creatures, and especially of the dead, zombies and ghosts and things, is that they will sap us of our life, will suck our souls right up out of us," and he turned to his son for comment.

"Dad?"

"Hmm?"

"Can we go inside? I'm cold."

"Yes, certainly," and he ushered the boy ahead of him, continuing: "Vampires drain us of our blood and transform us to vampires; zombies hold terrible conventions and ceremonies, and Lo! we are become a zombie. It is this reproduction of the creature that we fear, and of course, more immediately, its method."

In the hall, "Here's cocoa and cookies, now back to bed," his mother ascending the stairs. They stopped for her, and she led the way into the boy's room. His father spoke from behind, declaiming almost, "A ghost couldn't possibly harm our person, but our spirit! the ghost in us, our shade. . . ."

The word caught the boy's ear as he climbed into bed from two feet out.

Shade, like a shadow. His father meantime hadn't stopped: ". . . the very word nightmare, the hag of night; mare, to crush, suffocate. When the incubus covers the sleeper, weighting down with horrifying pressure on his breast, it is skulking there, ready to snap up our life's breath."

The boy was safe under the covers now, his mother making room on the night table by his head for her tray—cocoa, too hot to sip just yet, and cookies, and a glass of ice, pretty, making him sleepy to look at it. He asked, "What's an incubus?"

"A demon, of sorts. Only for you it would be an incubus. No matter."

The boy began to yawn, first the deep muffled straining of his jaws, then the open ineluctable fullness, air rushing down like a spigot turned on, then snapped shut.

"Worth . . ." said his mother.

"Coming, just one quick journey." His mother moved to the door, and his father looked at him and raised one questioning eyebrow, "to the castle of the Dead?"

Where the sheet wasn't flush against him he felt vulnerable, but his father's weight by his feet was reassuring. He yawned again and his eyes teared.

"East," said his father, "beyond the hiding place of the monster Aapep, who tries to swallow the solar disk each day, through the region infested with the hideous powers of evil, along the road of the Dead, and the Dead lie resting all about, always on their left side . . . a great palace there. The gate is like any you would imagine for an imperial palace, only larger, much larger. Dwarfs, in the motley of harlequins, gambol about—leap frog, somersaults, grotesque pyramids of their grotesque forms, but they are not dwarfs, they are giants, Brobdingnagians in all their cretin deformity.

"Then a tessellated mead, piebald marble. Glabrous statues teem, reaching swart arms for you. The streterious breathing exudes of henbane. And Menbane." He smiled, and puffed, and from the smoke a voice, and words, and smells of cocoa masked by his pipe tobacco, but steam and smoke: "They multiply. Soon a writhing plane of pinguid megatherians, the hebetude is stifling. Velleitous you sink. The grass is xiphoid, paper sharp, the umbonal blossoms butt at you; gehennic, alared rats swoop down, and you grovel, and everything you touch becomes a chitinous rincel radula—psychophagous lamprey."

Hot whisper from the door, "Worth! He'll never sleep."

Creak of bedspring as he rose, and whispered, "It's done." Tip-toed to his wife at the door.

She protested, "Why do you tell him those things, with his imagination!"

"My dear, with his imagination it's exactly what he craves." They moved into the hall; he continued, "He wanted a ghost story. He enjoys fear."

They entered their room, she irked: "I don't care what he enjoys. You just feed his bad dreams."

"Oh fuddydudddy. He didn't even have a bad dream. He told me. He just wanted someone to talk to." He picked up his glass and turned away from her.

"I left your ice in there on the tray." After him, "Don't wake him up." He

was hushing her with his hand, and as he opened the door she added, "And will you please put that rat poison around tomorrow."

"If they don't get me first," he mumbled, and walked back along the hall to his son's room, looked in. Quite asleep. He picked up the glass of melting ice, and the flashlight he'd left on the floor, and started out. Stopped at the door to look back: the boy asleep on his side, facing the night table, his pillow even part way on the tray. The father turned and left the room.

On the tray the cocoa steamed, and the cookies looked inviting.
