Trimaldus

Reefs
ALSO BY
ERIC BASSO
FROM
SIX GALLERY PRESS

POETRY
Earthworks

FROM
ASYLUM ARTS PRESS

FICTION
The Beak Doctor
Bartholomew Fair

POETRY
Accidental Monsters
Umbra
The Catwalk Watch
The Smoking Mirror
Catafalques
Ghost Light

DRAMA
Enigmas
The Golem Triptych
The Sabattier Effect

ESSAYS
Decompositions

DREAMS
Revagations
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Some of the poems first appeared in the following publications, to whose editors grateful acknowledgement is made: The Bicycle Review, Blackbird, Danse Macabre, Leaf Garden, Luciole Press, Manorborn, Outsider Writers Collective, Poets Wear Prada. The “Shoals,” “Petroglyphs” and “Bestiary” poems first appeared as limited-edition chapbooks from Obscure Publications.

Basso, Eric, 1947–

Ytimaldus / Reefs

Printed in The United States of America.

Cover montage by the author (2009).

H. C.

Obscure Publications
307 River Street, Apt. 18
Black River Falls, WI 54615
Reefs

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Trimaldus
The Meeting

that first day I saw him
just another face in the crowd

never cared for poets he said
they are slippery fish

told me he’d been in the war
but when I asked him about it
he could remember nothing

all memory was gone and had
taken fear and blood with it

poet my conscience is clear
but you have yet to
come out of your dream

January 1, 2009
Night Purchase

even on crowded streets he could
hear the whales' song juddering
through the depts of distant oceans

it echoed off his bedroom walls
kept him awake for hours floating
dark above the ancient wrecks
wide eyed but sightless of
all the sunken argosies

I told him it was a delusion
he looked at me with stranger's eyes
pointed out the window at a man
staggering and about to fall

in a corner no light could reach
something lurched and I knew
there were other things
things he could not say

January 7, 2009
Paintings

he told me paintings bothered him
not just the bird traps of Brueghel
those wood boxes propped by a plank

even a pink silk cuff by Watteau
the sewing needle that was
never painted in by Vermeer
a cloud above Constable's hay wain
became emblems of his torment

he came to my rooms one night
claimed there was an aberration
in every so-called masterpiece
with such conviction that
I had to believe him

I go to the galleries now
searching out his ghosts
but the fleck of one stray stroke
the oiled nuance remains invisible
even to the illusion it creates
The Masks

Oscar Wilde wrote
give a man a mask
and he'll tell you the truth
but what if a man has
a multitude of masks

I followed Trimaldus
to the cellar
he lifted a trap door
we went farther down

masks were arranged
on a long table covered
with blue baize

fourteen eyeless effigies
each waiting to cool
the agony of
some searing truth

I picked one up
and put it on
as my breath shallowed
Trimaldus whispered
now you can tell me
everything
A Condor’s Sleep

when I finished my confession
Trimaldus said our eyes become
the false part of each mask we wear

some of us dig our own graves
the rest have theirs dug for them
another mask and you would have
told me a different story altogether

every explorer ant must remember
the number of steps it’s taken
to find its way back to the colony

but ours is the colony of masks
to which there can be no returning
we stumble through a condor’s sleep
as it wings between two clouds

February 20, 2009
The Spindle

he aimed his penlight at
a crevice in the sidewalk

do you see that ant
what's it doing up so late

I followed Trimaldus into the Spindle
candled chandeliers flickered the tables
distant balconies through a cigarette haze
stained wood and a sawdust floor
reeking of crushed peanut shells
whores' perfume and soured beer

I'd really love this place he said
if it were not for the music

that ant outside could be the ancestor
to the next race of dinosaurs
or sink into oblivion like all
the conquerors and geniuses
whose luck ran foul

it was more than enough
for us to make a meal of
to drink ourselves into stupor
for me this was the first of nights
where sleep brought with it
a Darwinian acceptance that
Trimaldus and I would never be
among the fittest for survival

February 21, 2009
that scent of oiled rubber
the inside of a cab I knew it
even before my eyes opened

the last thing I remembered
Trimaldus' face a blur
floating toward the chandelier
his headless trunk slammed
the table and slid to the floor
dragging a mug of beer with it

I lay on the musty floorboard
squinting up at him after a bump
in the road punched me awake

I'm not taking you home he said
there's a house outside the city
that needs to be seen now
by both of us if you're ever
to know me well at all

we came to a screeching halt
before a picket barrier
on a scrubland hill just as
the sun was rising at our back
I tumbled out of the cab dazed
he hoisted me up then pointed
to the only house for miles

fire shot into our eyes
from a windowpane

he told me that sheet of glass
the only one left unshattered
was too much like his dead wife

the reflection in a window
which blinds you from seeing
there's no one within

March 9, 2009
Windows

tripping through the thicket
I had no idea where Trimaldus
was taking me

it's not much farther he said
I wanted to show you a window
bathed in the Ganges but
you'll have to settle
for something less

how could I have known
it was far from less

jewels were flaring
colors in the dark
we'd been walking all day
the sun had set before
we reached our destination

I forgot my hunger and thirst
nothing for us now but
those floating jewels

are you brave enough to peer
through these lenses he asked
I put my eye to the sapphire
a window that opened on
an image I could not recognize

we looked into the bowels
of an abandoned shack
misted by ghosts of lives
that were not our own

Trimaldus caught his breath
I heard him falling into
the high weeds

through my window’s jewel
I saw a weasel crouched
at the foot of a birch

Trimaldus was gasping
he had seen something
far more terrible

he stammered
what sort of man
do you think I am who
would bring a friend
to a place like this

March 18, 2009
Interregnum

def the interregnum was a sleep
Trimaldus told me later
he carried a serrated knife in
his dreams and killed any man
who tried to rip the mask from
that world of illusions

this second life came to mean
more to him than any waking
back to an existence he never
claimed to have understood

dreams became a past
more real than his own
the struts of a bridge
tremoring under him as
he held the one woman
who would have given
life a meaning and felt
her melt away

April 13, 2009
Catacombs I

three days and nights in bed
but even after the crisis passed
he said strange things to me

asked who first claimed a horse
seen from above resembled a violin
insisted something in the beer we
had at Gertrude's stilted his memory
though I could not remember
our last drink there

I didn't believe it when he
told me the house we were in
strutted a maze of catacombs

Trimaldus smiled as he led me
down to that room where
the masks had been laid out
not a single mask remained
I didn't bother to ask
what became of them

a low door in a corner laced
with a curtain of cobwebs
no stairs but a narrow chute
he slid down first
his lantern dwindled
seemed to flicker out
Catacombs II

I shouted after him
my voice echoed back
from the empty dark
but a few seconds later
a faint slam reached me
from far below sounding
the base of a blind abyss

I knew Trimaldus was waiting
swung myself into the chute
and the swift descending

a left curve slowed me down
the chute banked and leveled till
a sudden dip took my breath away

I shut my eyes against
the rising wind until
a maze of banked curves
and a second leveling
rocked me to the bottom

it felt as if a month
had come and gone
Trimaldus' voice trickled up from the cavernous floor

lie still for a few minutes more
we are farther down than
you could possibly believe

May 13, 2009
Catacombs III

if flesh is the fabric of bone
this was a place stripped naked
corridors of yellowed nudity
peeled of their stench of rot
too many centuries ago

we stumbled through channels
walled by skulls that writhed to
the flicker of Trimaldus’ lantern

as he led me on I grabbed him
by the scruff of his collar
and walked with eyes shut
to the silenced multitude
that seemed to close us in

stay here too long Trimaldus said
you’ll begin to think you hear
our cold companions whispering
conspiring with one another
as if they knew some secret
we can never hope to know
the discovery no explorer ever
wants to make so keep moving

May 23, 2009
Catacombs IV

that meandering drone in the ear
oscillation of the whispers’ echo
without the whispers

the skulls’ foetal murmur
would soon reach articulation
just as Trimaldus had predicted

I hoped for no more turnings
that we were coming to the last
of those hideous bone walls

now his lantern burned blue
I feared it would be snuffed
by the thickening air
that we were left to
wander blind below earth
till hunger and death took us

a black space opened
suddenly the air warmed
the lamp burned brighter
but made no dent in the dark
we had passed the labyrinth of charnel corridors to arrive in a depthless limbo

I wanted to turn back regretting everything

there was no way back Trimaldus regretted nothing

May 29, 2009
ever seen a dead bird
or even the bones of one
where do they go to die
a woman came down here
looking for her imaginary lover
she vanished without a trace

I couldn’t understand what
Trimaldus was trying to tell me
thought the sudden change of air
must have made him giddy
then he pointed at his feet

faint scorings in the floor
resembled the ghosts of leopards
this glyphic caravan appeared
to point the way for us

it should be all right now
these markings are Neolithic
Trimaldus whispered asking
what animal they suggested
but I did not answer
to him the leopards I saw
looked like lions spotted only
because much of the paint that
shaped them had been worn away
by centuries of dark arrested time

don't stare for long he said
the lions might go blind
even in this dim light
and begin to dance

June 15, 2009
the last gray leopard gave way to
a blood colored dot in the distance

we ran toward what looked like
a low window before sensing
the slight slope of the ground
had created an illusion

no window but a square hatchway
we stooped and entered a shrine

Trimaldus passed his lamp to me
he whispered set it down outside
no need for our light here

the ruddy glow seeped from
the corners of stippled walls
whose pinlike shadows
converged in engulfing gloom

we stumbled over pebbles
he held one in his hand
a smoothness tattooed
with indecipherable markings
then suddenly dropped it pointing to something we could find no word for

June 26, 2009
Catacombs VII

the rib cage of a long dead giant
floated a few feet from the floor
and the murk fell further away

it was all we could see for time itself
seemed as suspended as that rack
of curved blood tinted bones

Trimaldus broke the silence
this is a shrine he stammered
we're standing in an ancient shrine

still a little less of the dark
our eyes were peeling
shadows layer by layer

what we had taken for ribs were
seven sets of S-shaped horns
projecting from the sides of a bench

a gutter snaked from its foot
to a rectangular pit in
the heart of the shrine
Trimaldus struck a match
near one of the walls lighting
a skull in a niche from below

that bench and the rest of it
can only mean one thing
human sacrifice

he blew out the match
sniffing its ribbon of smoke
I looked at the bench again

it’s not long enough I answered
he shut his eyes and gasped
children

July 9, 2009
blue blisters sparkled in the floor
and made a night sky at our feet

we'd lost track of how long it had
taken us to run from the red shrine
to these flaring stars because
the vision of that horn caged altar
streamed with blood in our memory

Trimaldus and I pushed forward
more slowly now we watched
the blue stars spread and melt
into one another turning wet
as the floor sunk beneath them

dank water covered our shoes
hiding the long step down that
topped us into a racing current

just enough light from the lamp
Trimaldus was still clutching
as we were swept toward
the roaring precipice which
would be our certain doom
we fell in a rush of noise and foam
the last thing I saw before my death
was how the lamp arced slowly
toward its own intimate darkness

July 21, 2009
Catacombs IX

now there was only
a distant pin of purple
glimpsed from behind
a noiseless water curtain

so this is it I thought
lying there on my side
those falls are a shroud
for a dying star

why can’t we hear it
it was Trimaldus’ voice

are you there
yes I’m here
where
I don’t know
and you
I don’t know

bruised fingers burst
through the waterfall
I recognized his ring
I can’t feel the water
he cried as the water
sheeted his hand

I took it and was
pulled into a wall
of drenching silence

July 29, 2009
Catacombs X

the purple beam threw back
a blind space for groping
a patch of uneven ground
where we staggered toward
an unforgiving eternity that
could crack the blackest heaven

a few steps more and we saw
it was a lamp lighting the face
of a man in a tattered shroud

who are you
ask me who I was
who were you then

they tell me my name
was Orpheus
Ghosts

the one who called himself Orpheus
stared right through us as he spoke

you are figments of my imagination
mere players in the long parade
of dreams into which I fell
with no hope of a waking unless
it be to other deeper dreams
for we are standing in
the place that occults night
core of the darkest star imaginable
and this is what it truly means
to have given up the ghost

neither Trimaldus nor I believed
a word of this or that the stranger
with the purple lamp was
the man he claimed to be

the stranger asked how we would
account for the things we'd seen or
the impossible string of adventures
that had dragged us into
what he called his black orbit
for the first time he looked
directly into Trimaldus’ eyes

do you really think there was
a descending maze of catacombs
under your house or that you’ve
ever lived anywhere but in imagined
rooms or roamed streets which
whose corners once turned
did not instantly perish to oblivion

August 12, 2009
time was running backward
at first it went unnoticed that we
were all slowly growing younger

liver spots paled as veins receded
beneath smoother firmer flesh
the dulled passions sharpened
to cloud our judgment once again

the home computer disappeared
and with so many other things
we had long taken for granted
it became a thing of the past

but as newer things vanished
older things reappeared

one by one the dead returned
we repossessed a happiness
their loss had taken from us

fewer and fewer empty chairs
around the table as the hauntings
that had blighted our lives
slipped back behind the walls
and were gratefully forgotten
the standard of living became
greater in some respects
and worse in others

food and drink tasted
better than they had in ages
their aromas mingled with
other smells and savors that
recalled us to a time past
which was now our present

you'd have thought people would
be walking and talking backward
but that isn't how it goes
and no one knows or cares why

we'll soon come home to childhood
weighted by decades of experience
but no better wisdom than before

September 16, 2009
Fish Ivory

the day the Colonel's statute
stepped down from its plinth
and walked off in the fog
my friend crouched at the curb
and touched something there
something I could not see

later we learned about how
the stone gods of Easter Island
suddenly shed the moss
that furred them for centuries
and became convinced there
was some connection between
this and the thing our friend
had snatched from the curb
and carried to his house

at first the object had no name
he kept the thing in his attic
and would bring it down
once a year to show us
how much it changed

a change so drastic we'd have
believed our friend was
palming off something different on us each year if it weren’t for the fact that the object vaguely retained a vestige of the last form it had taken this all happened so long ago I am now among a very few survivors of the yearly ritual in which we viewed what came to be called the Fish Ivory for a reason no one remembers

September 29, 2009
The Likewise Image

a face powdered with white chalk
follows me in mirrors wherever I go

a body that isn't mine is wearing
my clothes beneath the neck
of the face in the mirror
shirts vests jackets trousers
which are a perfect fit
but far too large for me

the image pursues me from below
shivering in ponds and puddles
shrouded by the tinted murk
of polished cabinets and tables
stretched or squinched beyond
all endurance behind stained
concavities and convexities

my plan now is to avoid it
to focus only on the dullest
or roughest surfaces
hoping the likewise image will
eventually give up the ghost
and set my real reflection free
from the trap or cell or trunk
which has been its prison
for so many years within
that vaster prison we call
the Other Side

November 11, 2009
Secular Superstition

shortly before embarking on
what was intended to be an
exploration of the Dark Continent
I decided to move in with a family
of middle aged brothers and sisters

I boldly knocked on their door
they had never seen me before
or heard anything of my exploits
but made no effort to prevent me
from entering the gabled house
settling in to become the brother
who’d returned after years abroad
with a trunk of exotic souvenirs
and a string of tales to match

like my acquired siblings I soon
mastered the art of forgetting
abandoned all idea of continental
exploration in order to explore
the infinite mysteries of this house

so many books here in languages
we can never hope to understand
though months have been spent
attempting to decipher a single page
in one of the bedrooms a closet door
opens on a flagstoned path to an alley
that vanished over a century ago

on autumn nights the wind rattles
the shutters and the Mad King’s
laughter drifts up from the cellar

October 26, 2009
Sagittarius

no one can say exactly when or where the ground began to shrink beneath us

we have put down traps everywhere braces to rein back the inevitable the wooden ones shattered in an hour those of bronze or steel hold out for a day before their shape yields to the seismic crush and this is how our town has come to be a vast abstract sculpture garden

at night when spit and dust fill the little houses a fog lies in the moorland hollows that carries the smell of a dying into the dull morning mist

November 28, 2009
Swine Wallow

an early snow fell melting
in the mud and weeds as I
passed by the swine wallow

beyond the hulk of a stubble hill
smoke from a hidden chimney
threaded the chill and faded
under the low gray sky

the hogs huddled for warmth
in a corner of the pen
the trough was empty
their oozing snouts rooted
at the slime from hunger

as I walked away the squeals
and the grunts subsided to
an unearthly hum and
a hoarse mumbling that
sounded like a human voice

I turned and looked back
no one stood there to match
the voice unless someone was
lying in muck behind the pigs
calling after me too weakly for
his words to be understood

nearing that stench again
I saw the swine break huddle
around their palest companion
and stand transfixed by
the deep buzz of moaning
they sustained as he told
a tale too sad to bear alone

long ago these pigs were men
sailing for home in a ship
glutted with spoils from
the Dardanian War

low on food and provisions
they dropped anchor on an isle
and there met everlasting doom

philosophers say it's hard
for love to last long
as all love comes unwilled
and with will restored
is easily set aside

imagine then the curse that
cooked the hopeless will to love
into the food these men were
served to appease hunger
with starvation for their
former lives and bodies

ey call her Poison Queen
she fed them bitter acorns
and all their strength of mind
was bred out as love grew
condemned to the wallow forever

long after Circe was erased
by the god that usurped
the old gods’ place
they loved her
and love her still

Odysseus never found Ithaca again
never returned to chaste Penelope

Circe’s spell still feeds
on this despairing love
peering through its blind window
as the wet snow falls
till time sweeps history away

December 5, 2009
Remember to Forget

remember to forget
forget to remember
it comes to the same thing

for the one who never wants
to see her face again even
in the cloudiest mirror
remember to forget

for the mouldings in
that old dark room
and the one who came back
without knowing who or what
he came back for
remember to forget

remember to forget
the frozen hands
the failed dig to unearth
the color no one has seen

remember to forget
you can no longer
believe in anything
forget to remember the dead
who have forgotten everything

the gibbous moon wanes
there will never be another
remember to forget

October 12, 2009

Basso's seventh collection of poems, Earthworks, was published by Six Gallery Press in 2008.
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