



ERIC BASSO

TRINITY  
REELS

Poems  
2009

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 Sabbattier Effect*

ESSAYS  
*Decompositions*

DREAMS  
*Revagations*

ERIC BASSO

Trimaldus



Reefs

Poems

2009



OBUSCURE PUBLICATIONS 2010

Copyright © 2010 by Eric Basso

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher, except for brief quotes in reviews.

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.

O B S C U R E P U B L I C A T I O N S  
307 RIVER STREET, APT. 18  
BLACK RIVER FALLS, WI 54615

 Contents

## TRIMALDUS

|                  |    |
|------------------|----|
| The Meeting      | 3  |
| Night Purchase   | 4  |
| Paintings        | 5  |
| The Masks        | 6  |
| A Condor's Sleep | 8  |
| The Spindle      | 9  |
| Barrier          | 11 |
| Windows          | 13 |
| Interregnum      | 15 |
| Catacombs I      | 16 |
| Catacombs II     | 18 |
| Catacombs III    | 20 |
| Catacombs IV     | 21 |
| Catacombs V      | 23 |
| Catacombs VI     | 25 |
| Catacombs VII    | 27 |
| Catacombs VIII   | 29 |
| Catacombs IX     | 31 |
| Catacombs X      | 33 |
| Ghosts           | 34 |

## REEFS

|                      |    |
|----------------------|----|
| The Inverted Pyramid | 39 |
| Fish Ivory           | 41 |
| The Likewise Image   | 43 |
| Secular Superstition | 45 |
| Sagittarius          | 47 |
| Swine Wallow         | 48 |
| Remember to Forget   | 51 |

✿ 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 deeps 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

February 7, 2009

## 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

## Barrier

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 thickets  
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

## Interregnum

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

## 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

April 20, 2009



## 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

## 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

## Catacombs V

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

## Catacombs VI

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

## Catacombs VIII

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  
toppled 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

August 4, 2009



## 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



 REEFS



## The Inverted Pyramid

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 statue  
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 unwilling  
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

they 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

## 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



ERIC BASSO was born in Baltimore in 1947. *Barbarous Radiates* is his eighth collection of poems. His work has appeared in *Bakunin*, the *Chicago Review*, *Central Park*, *Collages & Bricolages*, *Fiction International*, *Exquisite Corpse*, and many other publications. His novel, *Bartholomew Fair*, is available from Asylum Arts. He is the author of twenty-one plays. His critically-acclaimed drama trilogy, *The Golem Triptych*; the complete short plays, *Enigmas*; his play, *The Sabbattier Effect*; a book of short fiction, *The Beak Doctor*; and six collections of poetry, *Accidental Monsters*, *Umbra*, *The Catwalk Watch*, *The Smoking Mirror*, *Catafalques* and *Ghost Light*, are available from Asylum Arts, along with *Decompositions: Essays on Art & Literature 1973–1989* and *Revagations: 1966–1974*, the first volume of his book of dreams.

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

THIS EDITION IS LIMITED TO  
60 COPIES

THIS IS NUMBER 6

*Eric Bross*



OBSCURE  
PUBLICATIONS