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## Davenport's Version (excerpt from poem)

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# DAVENPORT'S VERSION

by  
John Gery

*Thus variant scho was, quha list tak keip,  
With ane Eye lauch, and with the uther weip.  
-Robert Henryson*

(Note: *Book One* begins with an account of the First Battle of Bull Run, which Davenport originally learned from reading the *New York Herald* report of it three days after the fiasco. He then adds the following comment.)

I'm a casual reader, no historian  
so my memory for details falters.  
That's why I am writing this in straight lines,  
hoping they will help me to remember  
only what's important. What's important?  
Stories, music, getting up on time,  
details such as what we ate for breakfast  
after our first night together, the names.  
Poetry does best by making small things  
matter, unknown persons join the living,  
simple gestures, otherwise forgotten,  
dance like the sun on water, or it does nothing.  
Like Prometheus' entrails ripped by vultures  
or the limbs of Hector dragged by horses,  
tales of war are grand stuff in the telling  
more than in the history they come from.  
My tale has the telling only, nothing  
else, no hero, no triumphant nations,  
no immortal acts or famous speeches.  
They're recorded elsewhere, in the great books,  
epic poems, and military histories  
written by those men who understand war  
better than I do.

(Note: After reflecting on the outbreak of the Civil War, Davenport begins his account of the life of Charles LaRouche, a Creole doctor who abandons New Orleans and flees north with the coming of the war. Then he introduces the doctor's daughter.)

His daughter Bressie,  
though she wasn't without imperfections,  
perfectly embodied what's called "beauty."  
(I can say this. I was once her lover.)  
I should hold off and describe her later  
since she had that kind of complex beauty  
hidden in an adolescent's gesture  
like the awkward tucking in of stray hairs  
behind the ears, or the constant tugging  
at the bodice girls do when they're nervous,  
wondering how their breasts show, I imagine—  
(What, though, do I know of being fourteen  
and a girl?) I've seen a portrait of her  
by the artist Marie Adrien Persac,  
whom the doctor had commissioned. In it  
at the age of seventeen, already  
Bressie's hazel eyes glow with her whimsy  
joined by sad intelligence and ardor—  
feline eyes but lacking feline cunning.  
Funny that when I was sleeping with her  
I was sure her eyes were green. However,  
I have learned that Marie Adrien Persac  
disregarded nature in his portraits,

especially those of wealthier patrons.  
My desire is to be more realistic,  
to portray things as they really happen,  
so to say that Bressie's eyes were hazel  
or green could mislead you. They were neither  
but would change according to the daylight:  
hazel in the morning, green at dusk,  
nearly black at night. It didn't matter.  
In the portrait you can see her shoulders  
bared, with one of those white frilly blouses  
drawn around her upper arms and bosom.  
Mister Persac paints her skin bright yellow  
so you'll think she has tuberculosis  
and won't see her twenties. I remember  
how her skin would redden in the sunlight  
like a black man's. Not that hers was tough, though.  
And she wasn't chinless! Mister Persac,  
following the fashion, gives her no bones  
for her face. Yet though she was no savage,  
she inherited her mother's features,  
the distinctive jawline and the strong mouth,  
not the doctor's genteel Creole softness.  
He contributed the auburn color  
of her hair and eyebrows. And her fingers  
which were delicate. And her gentleness...  
I'll withhold the rest till she undresses.

(Note: Once she learns of her father's disappearance, Bressie sets out to discover whether or not she, too, should leave New Orleans, since her only living close relative will most assuredly be marked as a traitor to the South.)

What about this Bandeaux, Bressie's uncle?  
Why did she not go to him? He loved her  
surely, like a father would protect her.  
Bressie wasn't looking for protection  
or for words of idle reassurance.  
Have I made that evident? Her husband,  
though there's nothing much about him, wouldn't have  
known this when he lived with her. New Orleans  
had its own traditions, which he followed  
long before struck down by yellow fever.  
Bandeaux, on Dumaine Street, made for artists  
a salon, called Studio d'Artistes. Yes,  
Persac went there, as did G.D. Coulon,  
Poincy, Rudolph Lux, Achille Perelli  
(sculptor of dead animals), and others.  
Some here still remember him with fondness,  
how he welcomed them and decorated  
with their art his fourteen-foot high walls.  
One night Bressie went to Bandeaux's salon  
at his invitation. There Madeira  
flowed like blood from sacrificial lambs  
from the bottles gathered in each corner.  
Fruits were piled up high in baskets -- lemons,  
limes, figs, apples, oranges -- while walnuts,  
hazel nuts, pecans brought fresh from market,  
all indulged the whetted appetites there  
of artists, actors, writers, and musicians.  
Bressie didn't like these people, they were  
careless with their words, too. But their actions  
she might sympathize with: that actress breaking  
into Schubert's lieder like a Siren,  
suddenly her arch soprano searing  
just like Jenny Lind's along the edges,  
painters who threw orange peels at each other  
or at their own paintings, sending Bandeaux  
up his ladder after them, and that poet  
raising toasts to Holderlin, reciting  
choruses from Sophocles, then fainting.  
No one paid attention to the others

at that melange, except Bandoaux, who would snatch a bottle from his servant Crispus and refill his own and his guests' glasses, prop himself atop his stool, and watch them make fools of themselves, his fingers curled around his glass, his long nose sniffing the fragrance of the half-eaten fruit.

Helen Claiborne,

Bressie's friend, a patron of the arts, had escorted her to Bandoaux's that night six months after Bressie's husband had died, but they never went again.

"Oh, Helen,"

she said to her friend the following morning as they ate their breakfast in her courtyard, "What are they afraid of, all these artists, that they must destroy themselves? For nothing."

"Beauty," Helen answered, rather dreamily gazing at the garden's bare mimosas bathed in yellow light, the late October morning sun, "Imagine the mimosas, how those very rains that nourish their blossoms in the spring may later ravish them, knocking each poor blossom to the ground so this autumn sun might warm us now -- no shade."

Bressie's answer: "I collect them, then I bind them, those white blossoms, a wreath for my hair."

I later watched her do that.

But there were no flowers in her hair when she went to Lovell, for permission, after LaRouche's departure, to stay in New Orleans. Lovell greeted Bressie kindly, noting her black dress, then gently offered her a chair along a side wall of his chamber. Pulling up another facing her, he set his elbows neatly on its armrests, leaning slightly forward toward her, shoulders erect, expression composed, as though he were being photographed. Bressie's impulse was to touch his buttons, brass ones, reach across and feel the heat there she was sure was emanating from them. Little fires, she thought. But then ignored them glancing at the paper in her hand summoning the words she thought were needed to persuade this man that she was faithful to his cause.

The words she spoke require no recounting here. What passed between them passes everyday between men and women, whether they are intimates or strangers. It's the commerce of desire -- I want this result, and I want you to want it, too, I'll know then that I've been accepted. But I understand the risk of wanting, how we die for it, and so I offer, in return, my vulnerability, secrets I can't start to share with you here but expressed in gestures -- yes, I trust you. Lovell's words were words of reassurance yet he didn't make her feel indebted to him. Maybe it was his eyes, turning downward. Maybe he knew Bressie's father couldn't soon return, not until the murder of the best of his ten thousand troops. Maybe fires were there in his buttons fueled by a passion hidden from his eyes.

As he spoke, intently, slowly, Bressie leaned toward him, lowered her own green eyes to the floor, her head tilting forward, strands of hair brushing cross her cheeks to hide them. Though he no doubt noticed her slight motion, felt her power, Lovell didn't withdraw, just his lips below his mustache, moving steadily, as a priest's in absolution.

"Sometimes we receive reports," said Lovell, "from those off on business in the north of activities they think concern us. I'll inquire as to where your father might be staying, should you not hear from him. I will gladly let you know what I know. Please come see me, if you need assistance or if anyone should give you trouble."

Bressie took his hand. She thanked the General for his time and kindness. He was taken by her, I am sure, but told her not to think of this as other than his duty. She went home. And it's true that certain of the more distinguished Creole ladies (gossips, mostly), learning of the doctor's prophecy, decided widow Bressie wasn't worth inviting to their teas anymore; her father was a traitor, she had sent her husband to his grave, and, they rumored, wasn't she that woman known to dine with her own slave, Alexander. "Massa Kin'" as Bressie's cook would call him. Bressie didn't miss their parties, too much, since she had her own friends, mostly Helen. And once word got out that Lovell knew her, who regarded her the "autumn flower" of New Orleans, an epithet he gave her when one night apparently his senses overtook his usual composure -- in the company of one of those ingenious women, who cannot be trusted but who somehow trap you so you'll trust them, who by their proximity and magic, by the showing of their necks in slanted light, or with their graceful smiles, seduce you into sharing with them your best secrets, which until then you had carefully kept guarded and which you soon after realize should have stayed that way, in journals or poems -- and they knew he knew her and admired her, no one, not so far as I can gather, talked of Bressie rudely or abused her, though they may have wished to.

And as for Lovell,

It is interesting to add that nowhere, not in public records, nor in letters, does he mention Bressie's visit. In truth, such ordeals as hers were commonplace at that time, were hardly worth reporting as official business. In his letters urgently requesting Richmond send him muskets, companies of trained militia, iron for the gunboats he was building and accounts of Federal troops embarking south, toward Pensacola or Ship Island, Lovell met his obligation, as he said he would, by trying to protect her and her city. Two years later, Bressie, having had two lovers, read of Lovell after his retreat to Brashear City. No one can control the future, Bressie, and no one, Davenport, can know the past.