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## Mummy

*By Taylor Hagood*

I was in Bridgeport, Connecticut, so I did what you should do when you are in Bridgeport, Connecticut. I went to the P. T. Barnum Museum.

It's mostly a sad kind of place, really. Not near the come-on it should be with such a name. Of course your average citizen of Bridgeport, Connecticut, has never even heard of P. T. Barnum except as a name that floats around town the way names of civilization builders do on signs and buildings. He's nobody to the Hispanic men crowded on the steps of run-down row houses smoking pot at midmorning, or to the black women pushing the shopping carts, with their finely glistening wire traps, up the steep hills in their thick-soled shoes and brown stockings, or even the white middle-aged policeman who cruises the streets watching these others. Probably none of them have handed a crisp ten dollar bill to the college students who tend the museum entrance desk anymore than they have relinquished their Visa or Mastercard or, heaven forbid, American Express for the hope of future renovations of the town's homage to the great champion and exemplar of charlatans.

I can imagine someone saying there is something sad about the town's having forgotten its most famous son—a great aunt kind of person would say it. That's not what I mean by sad. I mean pathetic, ridiculous, unworthy. And I'm not talking about the town either. Why should anyone worry about the man? He never gave anyone living there now anything except maybe an annual parade held in his name, which might provide a chance for certain guys to take certain girls out or maybe get certain parties out of the house long enough to do something they (the parties out of the house) wouldn't approve of.

When I say the museum wasn't worthy, I'm not necessarily criticizing the way it assembles artifacts or tells Barnum's story or anything like that. Those who created the museum did a really professional job with it. None of these things were sad, ridiculous, etc. It's not even that P. T. Barnum was once so relevant and now is not. I guess you might say that the problem is that not even a museum can reconstruct the relevance of the *world* to which he was relevant. If anything the museum accentuates his irrelevance, stuck away as it is in the shadow of Interstate Highway 95 in an ornate red stone building that in any other town the size of Bridgeport, Connecticut, would have either been torn down or converted into a dingy-smelling antique mall.

I have a tendency toward vainglory. For a good number of the years I've been alive I've thought it would be a grand thing to be memorialized in a museum of some kind. I've always thought of myself as someone who would be remembered, and even though I know I should be embarrassed to say it, I've imagined a small museum in my hometown full of glass cases with pictures of me, with some of the toys I played with, a car I've owned. I've memorized the words I feel sure people would say about me—things like "Brinkley was different from the beginning somehow"; "We didn't realize George would become the icon he is."

"Growing up in a tiny hamlet in West Virginia," one of the plaques would say, "George Brinkley's life would have seemed to promise nothing whatsoever. Abandoned by his father at the age of three, he lived in poverty with his mother who made money the best ways she could—sometimes by driving a two hundred dollar used Ford Escort to neighboring counties to sell herself." In the museum would be the car

itself, rusted, tired. In a case would be displayed the police report of my mother's arrest for working in "a house of ill-repute," archaic phrasing she always got a kick out of.

"No one knew," the next plaque would say, after providing some more information about what life is like in the upper panhandle of West Virginia, "what an important thing it was for George's Uncle Eldon to give him a cheap guitar bought in a pawn shop for his fourteenth birthday. In just two years, he would be singing and playing in the Breath of the Holy Spirit congregation." Here you would press a button and a dim poor tape recording would play of me singing "I'll Fly Away" to the accompaniment of a briskly strummed guitar.

"It was not the music of his own day that moved him," another plaque would say, mounted on the wall beside not that actual guitar but one aged to look just like it. "Instead, he preferred the folk songs, not just the brilliant tunes of Bob Dylan and the protest anthems of Peter, Paul, and Mary and the Kingston Trio but the truly old songs."

The museum would tell of my playing the Elks Lodges, the Rotary Clubs, the American Legions, even heaven knows the nursing homes where an occasional morose and forgotten man with overlarge ears would clap off-beat to "Will You Go Lassie Go?" It would tell of playing the harder joints, the county line bars and even some of the places my mother had worked —places my grandmother would not have approved of. It would tell of the songs I have written that sound like *old* folk songs, songs I have recorded in small seedy studios in people's houses smelling of weed and whiskey or in back rooms of music stores in coal towns smelling of cigarette smoke or even, once, in downtown Wheeling itself.

Naturally I don't yet know what the end-point of the museum would be other than my death. Today would likely turn out to be one that makes a mark on the museum, but I can't really say I'm sure, when everything is settled, if a museum plaque would be able to explain it. I don't think a small plaque could really detail everything that led to this, and I guess that's one more reason why despite my unabashed attraction to the way museums package the world I am so deeply disturbed by them, especially this one.

As for the things that led to today, let me say that neither Bridgeport, Connecticut, nor its P. T. Barnum Museum were my destination two days ago when I set off down the road heading north and east. I'm not sure I actually had a destination.

There's a story to tell here, so I just need to get down to telling it. It starts this time last year at the high school in a little town across the river where I teach history. I mean the Ohio River, and a town in Ohio. It's a pretty good drive from where I live in the country east of one of West Virginia's biggest "cities," but it is a nice place to teach.

Anyway, into the teacher's lounge walks this brunette beauty named Maggie. When I say beauty I don't mean a painted up plaster-faced skinny supermodel. Those kind make me sick. No, this woman had a soft unshellacked look—the kind of beauty that demands the adornment of crimped white material long and ample to celebrate her own dissembling amplitude.

"You look like you need some coffee," I told her, scared to death. I don't know how I spoke to her so quickly, sounding so sure of myself. She cocked her right eye brow, and there was something about that.

Something so familiar, and immediately I had that feeling of closeness, that feeling like we had already sat in bed looking through each other's photo albums.

"You look like you know me well," she said.

It was a phrase she would repeat again and again. Talking was always easy for us. I always knew what to say. She always knew how to reply. The talks moved from the lounge to dinner to her apartment to my house. By then we had moved beyond the talking, but the talking did not end. That was what gave our moments the fine over-toned buzz of an expensive guitar string. As far as I know not many people have that—the continued talking, the freshness and openness it offers, the maps it perpetually nails to the otherwise opaque wall of the future.

And then we began to sing. Her voice was clear and plaintive, beautiful the way she was beautiful. I sang with her somewhere between the brush of my twelve-string and the glide of her thick soprano lead. Late into the night we played and sang and drank five-dollar red wine and laughed and made love and slept into the solemn gray shadow of morning. We were both homebodies, both lovers of the obsolete.

The way I'm telling this you probably already have an idea where the story is heading. You know that one of two or three things happened. So I'll not prolong it too much, but I do want to linger for a moment if only so I can relive it, and maybe you have had something like this in your life and so maybe you can relive it too.

You see, after coming through the winter and with summer upon us, we decided to take to the road as troubadours. We contacted the organizers of Renaissance and Early American festivals in West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, even Kentucky. We managed to convince the directors of these affairs to permit us to walk about playing old folk songs. Many of the songs we played would have been sung later than the historical time being depicted, but we were striving for effect. We sang "Camptown Races" and "Greensleeves" and "Down by the Banks of the Ohio." Our favorite was "When You and I Were Young, Maggie." For obvious reasons of course. We actually recorded several of them and sold the CDs at the shows. When the shows were far away we camped out too. Out in the open air with the person you love. That was the way of that summer. Perfect.

So then nearly two weeks ago she said she couldn't do it anymore. She cared about me deeply but could not live with knowing she was going to hurt me. She had had a great ride (what a thing to say) but her heart was telling her this was the right thing to do. Please do not create needless pain—she was hurting, she explained—by trying to contact her, talk her out of it. Some things just don't work out. It's nobody's fault.

I called, called again, and again. Left messages. Drove by her apartment at night. I couldn't see how there could be anybody else since we had spent every moment together. As far as I could see there was no one else.

I don't want to go on and on and on. You've been there before. One of those mystifying things where you find out one day that the situation you thought was so perfect had never been so perfect for the other person involved even though you have never been able to see any sign in that person's behavior to make you think anything was wrong. Then you wonder if you were just so caught up in yourself and what you were thinking and feeling that you just couldn't see those things. Or maybe

you are crazy. Or maybe the other person is crazy. It doesn't matter—as I say, all of this stuff is really unremarkable, but maybe it does tell you why I drove away and kept driving.

And why I had no destination, although I'm not sure if it explains why I stopped in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and drove around until I saw the P. T. Barnum Museum. I mean other than the fact that I went to the museum because that's what one should do when one is in this town.

I gave the young college student my crisp ten dollar bill and I began my tour of the first floor. You might want to go there some time, so I won't ruin it for you. Suffice to say that it includes many artifacts connected with Tom Thumb and a little bit on Joice Heth (the woman Barnum purchased as his first exhibit, claiming she was the one hundred-sixty year old slave nurse of George Washington. When she died, he ordered a public autopsy which revealed that she was not much more than eighty. He then blamed her for the hoax). There is also a reconstructed room from his house, and the second floor has interesting materials on Barnum's famous songbird Jenny Lind.

The third floor offers a miniature circus that a very patient man built, carving the animals, performers, audience, trainers, and every other sentient from wood and building the big top with cloth, strings, tiny poles. There are also cases of circus memorabilia.

Also on the third floor there is this sort of back room, and there is only one thing in it. A glass case with a mummy inside. Turns out Barnum had purchased this mummy and had had it unwrapped, writing up in a pithy article all about how this old fellow really was so old he could hide his own Easter eggs (it didn't say that exactly, but it said that kind of thing). Forensics has since shown, however, that the mummy was actually a woman.

There she lay—that she was a woman was obvious enough to anyone with eyes and a brain to think around advertising lies. Her hips were wider than her shoulders and there was a delicacy about her features. I could see the old-wall-papery flesh plastered around her teeth, her thin eyelids. The feet were long, and they were arranged together in a way that made me think of what a woman's legs look like when pressed together and swinging as her husband is carrying her over the threshold, as they say. It's a triumphant image but also one that provokes anxiety, maybe even some sadness. Even if the marriage doesn't end, that joyous moment, which happens so fast, never reappears with the same freshness somehow.

She had to be pretty, this woman, in the thin woman kind of way. Maybe she was even that painted supermodel type—I imagined her in what I think of as Egyptian garb, with straight black Egyptian hair. Clichéd yes, but not as offensive to me somehow. I envisioned the embalmers laying her on the table to be wrapped, the soft flesh of her long legs tight and quivering after rigor mortis had passed. I imagined them crossing her hands over the small chest, the face still, quiet, eyes closed and empty.

In there with her, the thin skin left on the bones might as well have been the dark flesh in my imagination. The blood was my own, not from the glass case itself I had smashed, but from the wall casement that held the fire extinguisher I used to break that larger glass tomb. I didn't really even hear the alarms or even the police because I was singing. My too-long account baffled the police, but I know there will be a plaque in my museum that will explain it all, beginning, "It was one of the stranger episodes in George Brinkley's life, but an understandable one, when he

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visited the P. T. Barnum Museum in Bridgeport, Connecticut."

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