

Poems by Charles Rammelkamp

What Is Bleak House?

Face it, Carol, the woman on *Jeopardy*
with the dead-eyed stare,
as if she were gazing into the heart of nothingness,
just *had* to be a Scientologist,
though when Alex talked to the contestants
after the first commercial break,
he only asked about her snow globe collection.

She was the one you rooted for, though,
against Chuck, the humorless military guy -
All: *Yes, Sir, No, Sir, That's right, Sir* -
possibly a closet evangelical -
and the champ, Brent, a smiling young man
with "one-time winner" written all over him.

Indeed, Carol had an eight-thousand dollar lead
over Chuck, going into Final Jeopardy,
Brent still in the game
but so far behind his chances were next to none.

And then Carol blew it,
a fairly easy question in the English Literature category,
your major in college,
missing it along with Brent.

So Chuck the military man came out ahead,
having wagered just enough,
and all you could do was hope
another contestant would win tomorrow,
though Carol's having missed the question
about Charles Dickens was the greater blow.

The False Dichotomy

“It’s what philosophers call
a false dichotomy,” Richard pontificated
in the locker room.

“It’s like, ‘How can Mexicans
eat all that hot food?’

Well, they can’t.

Mexicans have more stomach ulcers
than any other people in the world.”

I wasn’t sure what he was talking about.

False dichotomy? As in,

other alternatives than just either-or?

We’d been talking about custody cases.

I’d mentioned going to the birthday party

of the four-year-old son of a friend

whose mother lived across the country.

Adam and his ex duked it out in court,

constant custody battles.

Who got to keep the boy, when and for how long?

My mind reeled at the expense.

Or was it the actual relationship

to which Richard was referring?

I’d outlined how the baby had come to be:

Adam having casual sex with Marisa,

“because she was chill,” as he’d put it,

before Marisa got pregnant and morphed into a martinet,

a demanding shrew intent on ruining Adam

because he refused to offer marriage.

Did Richard mean

there could be a middle ground

between “chill” and “churlish”?

But I didn’t have time

for Richard’s clarification –

if there was one.

“See you!” I sing-songed to him,

hoisting my gym bag,

heading for the door.

Either I'd wait all day
for Richard to make his point
or I'd spend the rest of my life
wondering what he was getting at.

If Your Mind Wanders

"If your mind wanders, that's okay,"
the yoga instructor assured us,
his voice soothing, otherworldly.
"Just bring it back,
again and again."

I thought of my sister-in-law
chasing after her dog
as if after a racehorse
broken out of its corral.
Percy flew across busy streets,
trampled through flowerbeds,
as if in pursuit of a squirrel,
and Melissa sprinted, frantic, after him,
a cellophane newspaper bag
full of Percy's warm shit,
clutched in her hand like a truncheon.
Eventually, out of breath,
she cornered him in a neighbor's driveway
as if she were a truant officer
and Percy a schoolboy cutting class.

Why would a person want a dog,
I wondered, remembering my cat,
curled up on the couch beside me,
as I read a book or watched TV.
If he needed to relieve himself,
he went to his litterbox.

When I looked up,
the others in the yoga class
were all stretched on their heels
like devout Muslims in prayer.

Still flat on my back,
I caught the instructor's eye.
Our little secret, I thought,
scrambling into the new position.