
Pro Rege

Volume 44
Number 2 *Fine Arts Issue 2015*

Article 23

December 2015

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Howard Schaap
Dordt College, howard.schaap@dordt.edu

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Recommended Citation

Schaap, Howard (2015) "Tale of Entrails," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 44: No. 2, 36.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol44/iss2/23

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The Tale of Entrails

Howard Schaap

Caesar. What say the augurers?

Servant. They would not have you to stir forth to-day./Plucking the entrails of an offering forth,/They could not find a heart within the beast.

Compared to freshman year's *Romeo and Juliet*, I loved sophomore year's *Julius Caesar*. I loved all the weirdness, from the lioness whelping in the streets to the slave with the burning hand to dreams of bathing in blood. Then, all that oratory stirring up men to mad revenge—it was almost enough to make politics cool.

But it was the whelping lioness—love that word, whelping—and the stormy weather and the crazy birds that I really loved. The idea that all of nature was in tumult along with the ruling classes of Rome made nature and culture all of a piece, and I liked that idea.

Pivotal in this all-of-a-piece world were the augurers, or haruspex, priestly types that read nature via the entrails of animals in order to prophesy the future and test the will of the gods. It was a strange type of priesthood, so extremely earthy.

I began my own foray into entrails—so says the master haruspex to the apprentice—via the fish we caught when I was a kid. After filleting the larger game fish, Dad would slit the stomachs to find what else the fish had been eating, usually various sorts of smaller fish that were intact enough so

we could tell what they were, minnows or perch mainly.

Now, with my own kids, the stomach-check has become such a highlight that they request it even before I begin. It's maybe a little creepy, but over the years we've found a pretty interesting array in the stomachs of northern pike: the usual minnows or perch, but also crayfish and frogs—once five entire frogs—and another time something with fur. Now, we're even checking the stomachs of sunfish, where we have found snails and dragonfly larvae.

Of course, real fishermen do this sort of work to understand how to better catch fish: what are the fish in a given lake feeding on and how well? Then there's the larger story of the lake: how well is the food chain working? The larger story yet is that of the canary in the coalmine: what is disappearing from the food chain and what does that tell us about how sick we are?

Which brings me back to Caesar's augurers, those improbable butcher-priests, looking down to look up, who could not find a heart in an ox. Recently, as I filleted a pike, my son asked where the heart was; the meat was already slid off and in a pan; the stomach was checked, empty; I reached in and found the heart, held it out slightly to show them, a tiny little rubbery muscle slightly smaller than a marble.

It beat, throbbing between my fingers, startling me, sending a shiver down my spine.

If it was an omen, it was an omen of life, and it made me feel small, there in the twilight, the world all of a piece.