

15

SHOTS

t.o.c.

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The Mercenary

Vexed

not entirely by the scraped out hollow of his voice box.
Not entirely by the void red-stamped
on a similar cardboard box
that held his wisdom on his lap.
Not entirely by the wristwatch they potted into his hand,
its numbers uncomically made to spell out
“irrelevant” in Latin. Not entirely
by his man-handled hat,
fisted through the top
in their spiteful search for fact.
Not entirely by his missing shoe,
last hurled at him from the Exalted Bureau of Status
(the mark of its tread on the threads of his olive sweater).
Not entirely by the stern refusal for the renewal of his versatility,
and not entirely by the default of the security deposit on his soul.

Vexed, he supposed, a little,
but by the entire lack of his vexation
now that the doors of the Metro had shut:
the train – entirely vacant,
and no call for the next stop.

As he entered the tunnel,
he imagined
on his face
a grin.

2 .

The Silly Lady

There, her German eyes ossified,
stripped to the dry by the diesel and the revenge of Russia,
a smoke-swept horror that made the faculty of her sight excessive,
redundant to memory: the exacting machine of men dumb-clubbing her classmates to death,
raping her teenage teacher to the stitch, and crucifying her grand aunt
high on the barn door.

Now, at seventy-three, she sees in shapes that only hint the real,
and now that only nags her is the doors of the subway,
that've closed and separated her from her small bag of groceries.
Entertainment for the jaded,
now she stands on the platform against the door of the rush-hour train,
her face and the soft of one hand pressing the glass,
while her other tugs in vain at the twisted plastic ribbons of the bag,
suspended in low comedy for the suited passengers, who try their best to look dumbfounded.

From her single middle world, she has to put her immediate hope
in the diaphanous figure behind the glass
on the other side of the train,
while two sincere electric tones signal departure.

A Friendly Kurd

While the tones mean departure,
 a blue plastic bag of musketball fruits
 hang caught between the doors –
 the iron pears and plums clogging the narrow gap
 to the woman attached to it outside.
 Helpless, under the cheek-smearred glass of the metro,
 the lint of her face stippled by wet panic
 and her wrinkles crosshatched by overhead fluorescence,
 her bleached eyes fixed on the Kurdish boy lopping over his seat
 inside and opposite. Witness, he propped himself up, turned
 and quickly admitted the abject inadvertence of all the others,
 and as the car bumped and heeled to its design, the boy sprung
 and pried the doors open enough to reunite the bruised pears and plums and lady.

He returned to his seat,
 and all the others bumped and turned to the darkened windows
 to quietly annul the event or condescend their approval.

At Friar's Cross, he has three to five minutes to catch the bus home to Lambitt, a bus within a jog,
 but a jog that he never makes: he's told his blonde American girlfriend – her upheaval laugh perpetually his
 harmony – that Middle Easterners do not in airports or train tunnels ever run (*"a bomb! A bomb!"*). So
 he walks and he waits and he boards the 5:40, which this day bumped and cleaved open to become Story
 One for the six o'clock holocaust news.

The Ogling Genius

The thought occurred to him to match the dimensions of her body against the Galileic principles of proportions, but here no sextant's required: he could see her thighs, tattooed loaves baked contiguous, would overbalance the narrows of her back and light-duty arms in any culture – and this very much pleased him. Besides, he'd volunteer the full verve of his soul for all but the shyest black-haired coed, and this Miss lying in the quad in the sun, with her black hair wet and spilled in pointy locks down the crease of her back, could tow him in by his gaze if she rolled over twice.

No, there'll be no discoveries of worth today.

Behind him in his study, his revelations are hung tidily between his hoods and robes, while his epiphanies grow hair in chilled Tupperware. His pens are capped, his keyboard hangs by its leash, and on his desk curls a black olive and cheese omelette.

There'll be no discoveries from the genius today.

No speeches to wake the mollified masses, no decryption (or encryption) of religious codes, no plans to desalinate the landlocked seas, no distillation of a fine, powdery panacea. No plans. No cures. No lyrics. Nothing from the genius today.

On the other side of the office door,
the deadbolt of which has been ramrodded from the outside
and done absolutely unbeknown to him, stands a committee,
of the high, the noble, the dignified,
from the halls, vaults and armories of complex society –
it's to them we suppose our direction.

They know the genius that ogles the girls of the quad, and discomfited
by him

they pass under the door colorful series of lad mags, flicks of dangly pop stars, tabloids of the worst dressed and best fleshed, and promo reviews of all the recent cosmetic debuts; they pipe in a sweet, nocuous concoction of antidepressants and despair-blockers, and, as if from the quad, they play incrementally changing medleys of popular song.

Inside, from his window, he's fixed on the dark,
oily outline
left on the bamboo mat by the retiring black-haired, thigh-wide coed,
while outside in the hall, they hope their dimmest hope.

5 .

Harold (*by Lucas*)

Stupid, pretentious corpse, cadaver, “skeleton,” “discovery,” “find,” whatever.
“We’ll call him ‘Library Man, 07-02-05,’” said Jared, that novice, soft, tyro, greenhorn,
half-baked archeologist, stupid, pretentious, student of one click-for-the-next-slide
seminar. “Him,” I said, “we’ll dub him a nag, a nuisance, and vainglorious.”

It was – a nuisance, and we’ll call him Harold, and we found him,
a *little lean*, I’d say: skeletal; well, okay, a skeleton in the earthen cellar of our old public library – and he
was immediately adamant – as if he’d waited for us all his life – that we would not leave without him. “In
fact,” said Jared, slickly, “he’s waited all his death for us.”

Fine, but this is Jared’s own allotment of world-wide fame; his rationale, I suppose, for his easy
dispensation of all the echoic stints of education, grunt of scholarship, and grovel of academic
subordination – all the eye strain and carpal tunnel: and there he is, onto the headline discoveries! He
always has been confident of those honorary titles, impatient in the antechamber of his legacy.

“He’s got much to say,” said Jared after a week’s tour of suburban modernity, “about the Zoroastrian,
cabalistic, Masonic undertones of corporate logos.”

Well I’ll have none of it. It’s stupid;
I’m a trained and skilled hungry poet,
and there’s no credibility in sideshow verses,
while I work the phones for a long-dead phenom
bent on the talk show circus.

Tiffany (The Masochist)

Tiffany (the masochist)
 works as a receptionist
 in the bright marbled halls of the National Drugstore Lobby.
 Anemic and cherubic in the icy light,
 softer than statue
 and more prey than the library lion: and more morsel,
 a kind corporate offering to the business- and congressmen
 who try to prime her with awkward punch lines without jokes:

She'll laugh, always, she'll laugh when she chats
 in the highest registers, coy and nervous and in that strange
 and crumbly trill. They'll be off, strengthened and confident,
 and she'll turn to the phone rubbed in alcohol, and touch the staple-remover to test its attendance,
 and reorder the pens around their cup in equal radii. Then, in the bright empty hall she'll twist a half-turn
 in the ergonomic chair, and gently down her white stocking she'll test the depth of the staple fastened in
 the cord of her ankle, its metal points pushed unceremoniously into her tendon.

There, in the interruption of two earthen red dots,
 a viper bite as crude and vast,
 as rich, resolved and toxic
 as a postwar eden.

7 .

Mark (The Sadist)

A cotton man where his church and family first thinks to bank: he works long.
He dreams in lists and he maintains the spreadsheets of his parson, fast in dotage.
He surveys the symmetry of his sideburns to balance the barber's tip,
prefers his tube socks rolled tightly, one in the other, to retard the loosening of their stretch,
worries in June over the garage men he must eventually meet
to pool even more contraband Freon for his classic MG's raspy A.C.

He Kills Weeds Fast® on Sundays out of a colorful bottle, reviews the birthdates and hobbies of
his jeweler's children before Christmas and Mother's Day, ribs receptionists in good fun, flips coins to
beggars for his good pleasure, and tithes his dividends into the good fog of his investments to truss up his
children's future funds.

In between, and in the passing time, he hears and reads the news, and if pressed on paper, he's
conscious of all the equations:

All the roosts of forests for his glossy white steeples,
his urban slop to sag in the husk of earth and creep the bowels of river towns,
his burn to drift and shift to rain
and shift to swollen black tokens
on Indian ankles down monsoonal drains,
while Burma slaves tuck and fasten his cotton sleeves,
and hark, on page B17 of the Allegorical Times, he learns of all the limbs he buys, all those African
arms and legs scrubbed off by machetes forged in the Christmas exchange.

He knows, but there's only a colandar of guilt in his knowing,
for he finds absolution in the invisibility of other worlds,
and good fine pleasure in the plenty, minute sensations
of small tasks.



The Young Artist

A discarded clipping,
where he had read of an amputee,
who had to forfeit both his legs
below the knee,
but who could still feel the ghost of his toes
splayed every dawn beneath his bedsheets,
and then he knew why he could hear the whorling metal of his mother's pots for oatmeal, despite
having had his sister, brother, mother swiped clean by the Great Wave last Christmas holiday. He
wondered if his own erasure would for the commuters past his squat on King and Ocean produce the same
ghostly sensation, a sense of something absent still there, but he understood as a young artist would, that
for their care, he's never been as useful as toes.

Wednesdays, then, or any day that a Wednesday could be,
but at varied times for a different assortment of people,
he'd snatch a diaper from his crate and bob down the street yelling, *a sniper on the roof! A sniper
on the roof!* – and just a frame before they could sense the horror of his claim he'd produce the white
plastic and sing, *a diaper on the loose! A diaper on the loose!* – with a villainous smile to assure them of
his rascalion sanity.

In their notice, in the bemusement of their watch,
and staring at his being, right there,
he too would have proof against his own madness.

The Gallery Guard

There's no genius in comfortable shoes,
no eloquence in a cut of trousers,
no controversy in white shirts,
no resonance in kits of cotton.

In her standing, there's endurance – but no advance;
there's an authority – but no emotive power;
she's present daily – but there's no presence;
she's memorial
as a broom.

But in the epoch vision of the sterling grim,
such as in Pablo's portrait by Irving Penn,
hung in the room where she is to stand,
there's immediacy in their stare,
an unmistakable jealousy
of her short-term future
that begins at gallery closing,
at half-past five on her punch-out clock.

Jules (The Water Giver)

Whatever the bomb opened and shut
 when it dropped and gorged our earth,
 it's finest vindication was in our dogged
 defamation of extravagance.

One day and a village past the atomic blast,
 Saint Ellows was beset with the nearly put,
 the radiated sick, the burning Fifty-Fifties – living,
 but with their guts turned to cook:
 They drifted as vapors inclined down the fiery drafts,
 and now four of the half-deads had cued up,
 cafeteria style, outside the glass of Ms. Steinhauser's First Grade.

Austere in her fright (gums and noses in drips to trail black behind the shaded windows), she
 stepped softly, deliberately to a side pane, and through its momentary gap whispered, *please, please leave;
 the children, you're frightening them.*

But, said a child, who seemed able to read the gestures of the nearly ghost, *they're thirsty.*

But water, said Teacher, forced to forfeit the conscience of her occupation to the authority that
 had been so insistently broadcast her, *water will only hurt them. Turn*, she said, *turn and leave them to
 their rest.* And with that,
 they all sat on the ringlet carpet,
 and watched together.

Save for one,
 save, of course, for Jules,
 the School Problem, a young Novitiate to Noncompliance,
 a Spitball Excelsior, his specialty in staples,
 who to their fright and awe marched from the side of the building with a lunchroom platter and
 four Dixie cups of equal fill, napkins, cups of cream, and salt and sugar, to serve them their last drink, each
 their own cup, to toast the lickety-split absurdity of the end.



Alicia (The Bartender)

Twice a week the backstaff at Oliver's would shampoo the heavy puff and fakery from the carpets.
But Gill's is no Oliver's.

Here, there's no pretense, and never a need to rub free all the self-absorption from the mirrors –
The mirrors at Gill's are so corroded with disuse
and so crenellated with self-reproach
they've turned to brick.

Alicia, unlike her patrons who've long voided themselves of the presumption of defying Newton,
Watson and Crick, and slid down the horn quite nicely to the consolation of their glutinous
booths, had been, it's said, *transitioned* there for the mislaid delicacy of her remarks, which flipped
between pithy and blather on the switch of a proof count.

It's just fine for her, though: she had grown raw to those red-faced mules at Oliver's, their
lopsided calculus, the random double-shots from the glaring shelf, and the clean folded fifties to fit
Amber, Crystal and Mercedes – simple deposits, she knew, to secure Monday's bids.

At Gill's, they tipped standard, a dollar a stab, only occasionally adjusted by a lowered reassessment
of their life span, or the modest generosity incurred more sincerely by the grim image of their
uselessness.

Here, what she understood, they had formed quite another dependence: lofty in the middle of her
usual invective, even the lowliest could hear himself in her insults; and more nobly, in her insults,
he could hear restored the lost, quintessential discreteness of his name.

1 2 .

The Phony Mathematician

Careful to groove the large format sketch paper in medium point black, and to score the margins with red notation, Boyer inscribed a parallelogram in two pairs of concentric spheres, assigned variables, wrote out seven lines of diminishing formulae, and noted, “a proof against the laws of Werner?!”

Bracketed with Spanish exclamation marks, he wrote out “Who of us can stop loving Deborah?” numbering each letter by its order in the alphabet and translating each into the Attic and Ionian systems, noting in red, “incomplete, but not impossible to imagine...”

He spun off at *what he imagined* was a mysterious angle a *what he thought was an* accurate rendition of Problem 40 in the Rhind Papyrus, and after fleshing it with his own dialect of cuneiform, noted in red, “this only works in base-60.”

On still another page he taped a postcard of the Lyon airport, and on its face sketched small rectangles in triangles in large rectangles so that all the vertices nearly matched the outline of the structure, and beside a particularly aesthetic equation of integrals, imaginary numbers, exponents, roots, and nested polynomials, he noted, “Euclid, the old boy, would blush at such monstrosity.”

He then took all the pages and arranged them haphazardly on his makeshift desk in the sculpture hall of the Hirshorn Gallery, and as some bewildered Floridians plowed heavily past in their hapless count of the Expertly Chosen Misshapen Pieces of Metal, he thought he too would be an attraction.

13.

The Camerawoman

Assigned to shoot a hot day
for a local cable segment:

she thought Freedom Plaza
for the ducks that bathe on Pennsylvania Avenue,
where the colored water overruns its cubic caldera
and falls like foil contrails to a square municipal sea,
where the courtesy of trees apportion the sun to noon aperitifs,
and the pillowy squirrels sweep the rock tile clean in the half-habit of their stealth.

In shot one, she filmed seconds of a pair of blue-suited workers
in the lark of a summer picnic,
their expressions as regardless
as the Bohemians in Picksley's *County Fair*.

In shot two, she kindled in film a half-nude scholar,
inking his journal with plans to promote Goethe's Prometheus
for the digest of angels – this she could plainly see
through the unblemished totality of her cosmic glass.

In shot three, she framed— no, switch that — on the opposite side of the plaza she noticed two sun-dressed Russian excursionists flicking drops of the fountain like finches in a bath — and upping the tripod as tall as her childlike frame, and dragging it across the tile and up the steps in the immediacy of a Spanish dance — she missed the shot wholly and had to settle for this shot three: a carefully tressed Ponce de Leon making laps around a patriotic popsicle.

After the segment ran with three-point-five seconds of shot number three, the powdered anchorman paused, poised, and said that, “yes, it really was a hot one today.”

The Gesturing Pedestrian

The gesturing pedestrian regards crosswalks
as the mere coincidence of white stripes
where he alone decides to cross the blocks;

while the dichotomous gods of the blinking stick man
and the infernal red hand, he holds villainous
to his station and demands.

His shoes bear the counter-rotational rub
of the city that orbits him;
his heels the white rubber scuffs
of tourists that follow him.

Oh, and when in the middle of the block
a taxi proceeds to cross him
and sounds its horn in the half-beat
of inventoried protest,
how he snaps to opera, juts his middle finger to the record of time
and hinges back his torso to scatter loose the full wardrobe of his outrage.

The Impersonator

Something devastating about coming to see the world as everyone else does
 and humping its small demands up the same city highways,
 and dickering pieces of himself in the same fashion of idiom,
 gestures, conversational humdrum and expected hyperbole.
 Feeling the same emotional flushes,
 his embarrassment alongside strangers,
 his tribulations over compound interest,
 his blessed relief over a medical discharge stamped "normal,"
 his ten dollar joy at the theater,
 his savory self-pity in copyrighted song,
 his disappointment in old friends,
 his hope in a glass of indecipherable wine,
 his validity in a framed photograph,
 his frustrations over Management,
 his pride in discounted purchases,
 his new resolve at funerals,
 his passion to be passionate for something
 timeless, obvious, easily defensible,
 and public enough to matter.
 He's anyone on any day.

But when on a Florida balcony he sat balmng his sun-split forehead
 and pausing to watch the lightning harbinger in half the sky
 and the moon stage-light the other –
 he understood in a chromatic vision
 that his commonness distinguishes him as the ideal messenger
 to a person far removed of this world, lonely in supremacy –
 he realized, then, he was in his commonness
 a wax plate of the plain human experience,
 digestible by God.

And there's purpose in that.

But no stooge despite his commonness,
 he understood what is here asterisked or parenthetical:
 that in purpose so patent and high, he will have to leave out
 from his portfolio

the key vinegar of his kind: of doubt,
of doubt of purpose –
and that on the storm and stage-light of his epiphany
his job as God's emissary had been
right there
expired.

He returned to the city – and in everyway he returned
to his place – though in his return he had suddenly
the devastating perceptiveness to watch himself in hobstep with the others,
and in regular allotments between the pillars of the archives,
or sitting in a silent balance of heads on the local circle line,
or telling the sweaty it really is hot today.

In his recumbent doubt, he put all of his carefully metered hope
in the forgetting of his life's climax, that happened
in that infuriating
and little divine
intermission.