This Much I Can Tell You

poems
David Rigsbee
For Liz
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January

for Linda Gregg

Being a man, I was the least among the shades because of what I still carried. I asked the caryatid to extend her hand, but it was broken, which is the way with stone. There were several at the entrance, but they were ornamental, no longer load-bearing. The dead would not have it. The sun was sinking toward the rim, I remember. I remember too the poet said, it is more important to walk across a field now than to revisit the sorrows.
Let me begin by telling you how the oriole lit for a moment on the power line as I sat, in thought, on my balcony perch and fed myself with books, sentence after sentence, above the ground squirrels, above the dogwood’s reply to the fleur-de-lis, above the hop and blink that goes by unseen under the leaves.

I read word by word, syllable by syllable, letters like wooden Hessians on a calliope lost at sea, on their voyage from the Old World, expressionless and yet expressive, sinking in their stiff uniforms, bottle-straight, simple.

When I looked up, it was gone, the wire still rocking as if it had made a musical note on behalf of its player, a common bird who made his own song in another forest.
A Certain Person

It was Auden, I believe, who said that in a certain person’s presence he felt “incapable of doing anything base or unloving.” Walking past the flat on St. Mark’s Place, past the memorial plaque that, until this year, bore his name, I look ahead to the park where the homeless line up, as black squirrels hop down from the leafless trees to forage in the dry grass, the same grass where a tiny mouse, rescued from someone’s sink and carried in a clear, half-pint container, now roams, if mice can be said to roam.

And persons capable of doing both base and unloving things stroll across the bricks the way they do in pictures of promenades of foreign capitals between the wars. The homeless line holds steady all afternoon, and from a loudspeaker somewhere comes the clarinet I take to be Artie Shaw’s. From somewhere else Lil Wayne answers. Neither could be described as without difficulty. Shaw, for instance, was married eight times.
Where is the Auden plaque now?
It must be someplace, even if
it’s no place. And when Shaw recorded
“Green Eyes,” was there a mouse
in a sink somewhere wondering with his
tiny wit about the flatness and the whiteness
and the dark hole at the center?
I was looking at a picture. The Cure was playing in the background. It was one of those gravel roads that begins wide in the foreground—barbed fences in need of fixing on either side, cincture-like, all following a curve—until, only a small way up from the frame, topping a little hill, it quickly shrank from view, its vanishing point a ditch of prairie grass. More hills followed, rising where the road ended, though to say that they rose doesn’t alter the fact that if you squinted for just a moment, it was neither hill rising, nor hill sloping, but horizons superseding each other. A band of steel-colored mountains, mid-frame, appeared like a stratum from deep time, showing how some species likely succumbed. Above this, Constable clouds froze in place. The rest, the upper third, was wholly sky. To insert yourself in such a landscape is to feel like the silent “e” in Anne, to be there, and yet not at the same time. For something happened that the photo can only register as the yearning one brings to something gone, the full empty landscape
so without you. It is as if you are part of its perfection. You could remain for hours, a pilgrim before the last shrine, which was also the first, and though it was finally put by, a picture, lost, who would deny it was yours alone?
Max and the Promise

“I had a dream of purity
and I have lived in the desert ever since.”
—George Garrett

One day, Max Steele called me into his office ostensibly to discuss short fiction, but the news of Mishima’s seppuku had swept through the department earlier that morning. I was a student and as sensitive to literary rumors and gossip as any bumblebee riding the first spring breeze. Outside, the SDS taunted the Young Republicans, while frat boys in their Madras shorts talked trash to passing hippies. But in far-off Japan, after charging Mt. Fuji in Nutcracker uniforms, the Shield Society had drawn attention to the tiger’s paw. It was not enough to be a writer, even reaching the Nobel stratosphere. Only death would seal the deal, only death reverse the dishonor, heal the emasculation. So he prepared in his Victorian house for years: real death after role-playing,
cere
monic oblivion after deep hurt.
His last words before disembowelment
and beheading: “I don’t think
they heard me very well.” Max swung
around in his chair and said, “promise me
you’ll never kill yourself!” Startled as I was,
I did. I saw Max in Nixon a few years later,
when we learned how the President
had led Kissinger to the carpet and prayers
in the Oval Office. I forgave Nixon
when I realized he was human, and I made
the gentle Max loosen his grip
when I saw how he, unlike his name,
fit so snugly in his little patch
of ground, a plaque commemorating
what forgetfulness routinely undoes.
Even Jesus would have failed
Max’s oath: it’s no wonder
such promises hold but for five minutes,
no wonder self-destruction mirrors
self-creation: how could it not?
Max lay long wasting before he died.
My niece torched herself in a motel room
at 18, prepared and afraid, having made
no promise to a teacher, embracing
self-immolation as the cure for love.
And then there was my brother.
I have seen the end of my rope
lying in a coil, and you couldn’t tell
if it was a snake or a garden hose
or just a length of rope. Max and Mishima
are dust; the niece I never knew:
a picture. My brother, the silence
before and after the poem. All these
chapters feeding the effrontery and sorrow.
Empson admired a Buddha head
which was chiseled with a hooded cobra
risen in glory inches away and trained
to protect his double face.
Of course, they left the “d” off.
People don’t see the use
of the past participle anymore.
Perhaps they don’t understand it,
its simple descriptive power.
Perhaps they have no feel for suffixes,
as for a thing grown irrelevant over time.
After all, docking the past
can be a good idea, sometimes.
I was fleeing depression that day
and headed out to the interstate.
I will not bore you with details.
There I listened to Roy Orbison
assault eternity with his high notes,
followed by the “55 Essential Tracks”
of The Everly Brothers. It was a lot
of emotion to cover, and the highway
seemed as good a place as any, since
the feeling of flight did its faultless
parody of transport and blended
with the changing landscape,
the humble farms transmogrifying
into the tacky suburbs that replaced them.
Before I knew it, I was over the state line
into Virginia, which I am reminded
is “for lovers,” as the billboard used to say (only for lovers, you had to wonder?). The smaller truck, the one with the bad grammar, used flashing lights to keep creepers at a distance. No worries: no one was eager to pass, anyway. What I couldn’t yet process was that there was another up ahead: two pairs of trucks, each with a smaller, trailing pickup with revolving lights and that sign, and before it, a squat semi, where chained to each flatbed like Prometheus after he had irked Zeus was a tank—an Abrams tank. Twice I did a double-take because what I could finally make out, when I was pulling up closer, was the barrel of the cannon, lowered and trained squarely at me as I came on. To what battles these were being sent or returning—as is more likely—from, there was no hint, only brown dirt dried in the sprockets and tracks. I thought: this is what poetry is, although where my thought was leading I wasn’t exactly sure. At least it was a thought, not some random memory
hung with the taffy of association
or an image dredged up from an image bank,
the private person’s private store.
But the fact is, you grieve, and you
stare down the barrel of a cannon
at the same time, and you don’t know why
there should be a connection,
or how you got in range of such a thing.
And then it happens again, as if
to say, *sic semper* to chance.
Yet something yokes them both
in the mind and, as Wallace Stevens
would have said, the mind of the poem.
I have often noticed it, and I know
that you must have too. Let the poem
teach, let it point a finger and declaim
as the highway unrolls seemingly forever,
in the face of grief and the barrel’s mouth.
There was nowhere you could have arrived.
And the dark heart just sit there.
Protesters down Canal. Ferguson in flames. Chanting. I had taken the train from 59th St., after a dinner party with foundation trustees, monied people of the left and a playwright who wrote the double plight of assimilated Muslims, of which he was one. He spoke of what he had learned from Roth, Bellow, and Potok on the way to the Pulitzer. London staged him. Chicago, Lincoln Center, and Broadway.

I walked down the sidewalk next to the heavy stone entrances, the liveried doormen. I was thinking again of my beloved who never accepted my suit or acquitted the fabric of its tear. My daughter leapt up and flew down the steps in pajamas to join the crowd. I thought of Bogan’s lines: “I shall not see the face of my friend” and “the country whereto I go.”
Sometimes it feels as if the mind
will seal itself up and you can go
a great distance without ever seeing
those who ever spoke your name.
You hear everything from cacophony
to a symphony played on instruments,
provenance unknown, stored out of sight
long ago. It is a closed system
but vast, and time unfolds there too,
unrelenting, nothing in abeyance,
like animal eyes suddenly appearing
in the roadside weeds and fields,
through which the highway plunges,
and on it a car traveling, not speeding,
not hanging back either. This much
I can tell you: there is smoke
beyond the mind, to which the mind turns,
as to a burning house, flames raging,
sputtering from the second story windows.
Shouldn’t you be running up the lawn?
Shouldn’t there be, in truth, more fires?