

This
Much
I Can
Tell
You

poems
David Rigsbee



Black
Lawrence
Press

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.

Oriole

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 noplacel. 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?

The Silent “E”

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,

ceremonial 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.

Oversize Load

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.

Ferguson

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."

This Much I Can Tell You

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,
spurting from the second story windows.
Shouldn't you be running up the lawn?
Shouldn't there be, in truth, more fires?