

Our Man

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Correction (pt. i)

In our home town
the deer became unmanageable.
No new trees grew. Deer stripped
the bark from saplings.
We built fences and learned
just how high deer jump.
Atop each fence we strung
netting, plastic, fine mesh.
Four more feet to keep them out.

I brought my wife outside
to see: for the first time in weeks,
our persimmon tree budding
new leaves. I pointed gleefully
at each compact sheath
of green.

In the netting, we had tangled –
strangled – three types of bird.
Grackle, robin, cardinals,
fledglings and adults.

Our Man Is a Carpenter

who overdosed beside his wife,
and though he woke
to trace fingertips over her face gone cold,
wrought no further miracle.

The lamb turned water into wine.
Our man (allegedly)
cough syrup to meth.
He too displeased his state;
without conviction, he waits:
two years & still no trial.

Carpentry is the art
of making surfaces flat & plumb.
If you took him to a field
he could lay a grid
&, within each square,
make the earth even, balanced,
& fair.

Longer than He's Been Alive

Birth a man to a dying city
amidst leaden rivers & dying industry.
Arm his mind with 12 yrs. underfunded education
but build his body strong, & tall, & handsome.
So give him a kid –
two kids –
and malaise.

Shake his piss & take his job
when clouds mushroom through the vial.
Let him hear his daughters yell
till he aches to fill
their wants & needs. The burglary

was ugly as poverty.

He's shocked how tall his daughters are
when he holds them in his arms again.
A parent shouldn't realize
how much his kids have grown.
& a parent can't help but realize
how much more each kid deserves.

Another man is falling.
We reach out
& catch him with concrete.

Forlorn again in sunset orange
he turns down a ten year plea;
now the prosecutor's seeking thirty.
"Habitual offender."
The judge and PD nod.

Our man's babies will have babies of their own.

Vigilante

On the ground floor, carved into a hill,
there is a long-term cell,
a gray-walled concrete space
with bunks for twelve incarcerated men
a shower

toilet
two steel tables bolted to the floor
eleven un-broken plastic chairs
and a heavy metal door.

In that door there is a slot
through which the men receive their meals
and a wire-enforced glass pane
through which guards occasionally peer in
and the men inside watch out.

The central desk
& elevator
& exit door
are all the world they see.

For two weeks now
in vigil stands
a vigilant man
staring through that oil-streaked
slab of sand.

His wife is gone,
murdered while he was here.
Two men and a woman came
intending to move bulk H;
their day's first sale, short money,
proffered an AK;
their next stop, impromptu robbery –

something went awry.

The men were apprehended in a city to the north;
the woman, captured here. The guards placed her
in an interim cell
adjacent to our man's own,
inches of concrete between.

Then the men were brought here too,
all upstairs now, cleaved to
the rhythm of this place.
For legal consultations, questioning, & court dates
each is brought
– escorted –
down the elevator
& processed at the central desk.

Our man sees them
– escorted –
several times a day.

I watch him blink.
His body shakes.
But that first night
he pounded the wall
& shouted,
hoarsening as he cried,
to forgive the woman who took his life.

A Midwinter Day's Dream

Our hero's prospects look good:
letters, sobriety, education inside
& forgiveness from the victim.
We're sure he'll walk.

In a comic mix-up
the judge notices only his brown skin:
our man lands seven years
in a level-2 facility.

His daughters' mother,
pregnant
& distraught,
shoots up.

& our town's another testing ground:
how much fentanyl can be cut
to move H cheap
without too many profit-producing units
fading to blue.

The woman
& unborn child
are pronounced dead
at 4:56 p.m.
on a Wednesday afternoon.

At this tricky moment in our tale
old Billy Wagcock might introduce a ghost,
or potion, or puckish imp
to resolve the mess.
But modern magic's a fever dream;

our man wakes to fluorescent light.

Our Man Knows He Isn't Crazy

but asks whether I think he is
as he tells me how it happened.
A twenty minute epic: staff whittled from
thunderblackened wood; jeep he'd seen
previously in dreams,
don't tread on me ominous from the bumper,
human skulls filling the trunk,
gun rack in easy reach;
distant sirens wail & our man flees,
driving till his engine sputters empty;
he staggers through a barren field
air a-thrum with windmills;
days later, greeting his mother
hears her say *you found your land*.
Not to mention tangents –
before a bust he swallows coke,
runs blind through caliginous night
& awakens in a grave;
eidolic figures
pursue him through the woods;
he tells his wife *get out of the car*
& leaves her to hitch her way
some hundred miles from home;
wind whispers warning & he rolls from the tent
moments before the lightning struck;
& there's the way he looks into my eyes,
like this, you see?,
and, before I speak, says he can
hear what I am thinking.

I ask him what he hears, and he tells me,
you're thinking, 'This man found the spirit.'

I'm thinking about his childhood:
at fourteen, his parents burned his records
when they learned which music is of Satan.
That same year, his pastor took him to the mental hospital
– although he didn't know it at the time –
and told him, *see these people?*
– drooling, tilting, rocking back and forth,
voices slow & deep, or croaks –
they're like this because
THEY used DRUGS.

Pine-bent

In ancient Rome
a killer was condemned to carry the corpse
tied to his bare back
till festering flesh infect &
bring him low.
From those who stole,
was taken.
But our land's lost
this Thesean equivalence,
many men imprisoned for addiction.
How might we mirror
punishment to cause? What hell
resembles their crime?
We'd need no guards, no jails,
no outrageous cruelty;
to hurt these men enough
we'd leave them be.

Correction (pt. ii)

My wife's mother was murdered Saturday –
outside at four a.m., scattering birdseed,
smoking a cigarette, shucking schizophrenic
nothings into the unlistening air.

A passing man tossed off a punch,
knocking her to the ground,
then stomped her skull
till there was no more *her*
within that battered brain.

Doctors intubated the corpse &
kept it oxygenated by machine,
monitoring each blip of needless heart
for days

until my wife convinced
a charitable neurologist
to let the mindless body rest.

That same afternoon
I taught another class in jail
for men who hurt someone else's mother,
daughter, or son.

The man who murdered,
privacy-less New York inmate #14A4438
with black hair & brown eyes,
had been to prison twice,
in 2002 & 2014,
caught each time
with paltry grams of crack cocaine.
Our man received a massive dose
of state-sponsored therapy:
nine years of penitence.

Nearly a decade of *correction*.

Does Victor Frankenstein share the blame
for the murders of his creation,
the man he quicked but did not love?
Or can we walk into a maternity ward
and point:
that one, nursing now, will be a beast.
Are monsters born or made?

My mother-in-law is dead, & our man is inside again,
apprehended after “spontaneous utterances,”
covered in blood, photographed with
a bandage between his eyes.
And we, in our mercy,
will choose whether
our creation
deserves
to die.

Our Man Earns His GED

the week before he sees his brother
for the first time in a decade,
brought for a hearing in the county courthouse
to be held upstairs in a high-security cell
but processed cuffed on the ground floor.

When our man spots his brother
he pounds on the steel door
& shouts:
“They’re trying to give me
twenty to life,
twenty to *life*.”
I’m visiting to teach poetry;
his shouting totally disrupts our class.
Also, I start to cry.

He’s a bear-shaped, slow-talking man,
describes himself “a breeder,”
proud only of his eight kids.
He fills journals with his dream –
opening a shop to sell corn’ beef –
amidst laments that none of his babies’ moms
will bring those kids to jail
for him to see
on the six-inch visitation screen.

He’s here for dealing
but can’t afford nobody but the PD:
he was never much for math
and his family ate the profits.

Teaching Poetry in Jail on April 21st

We read Yeghishe Charents,
an Armenian who fought for revolution,
was horrified by the world his efforts wrought,
condemned the new regime,
&, addicted to opiates,
died in prison.

His books were banned
& burned – we read him now
only because stray copies
were buried by a friend.

Charents went unforgiven
until the death of Stalin.
Now the man
is celebrated in Yerevan,
his trusty syringe
displayed in a museum,
his poetry translated,
his grainy likeness
gracing a stamp.

When our men see the opening of “Hetaera Dream” –
Projectiles rocketing with the will of fire
trailed red flaming hair –
they swear that it is drug shit,
the “flaming hair” a curl of blood
leaping into his syringe.
After I offer a definition –
hetaera: high-class, educated woman for hire –
they feel only more assured.
One man turns out his arm,

gestures to purple ravages of bruise,
& says, “Still got a hickey from
the world’s most expensive whore.”

When we take ten minutes near the end of class
to flip our printed pages & write,
I see this man scrawl in clumsy letters
blunt so big
i can’t even roll it
then add a title, “4:20,” and underline it,
twice.

I catch his eye and nod.
“Naw,” he says, “it’s this inside thing,
you wouldn’t get it.”
I consider a retort,
that at a time when the *New York Times* publishes articles
about weed-tasting tours
surely a dreadlocked dude teaching in jail can catch 420 references.
But our man goes on:
“It’s this thing we been working on, like
Truck so tall I can’t even tow it.”

The guy next to him says,
“*Grass so short I can’t even mow it.*”
Our man ends:
“*Wallet so fat I can’t even fold it.*”

& I’m still thinking of their lines,
the American Dream as yearning for
a big truck, short grass, too much pot,
billfold bursting with singles.

Our Man Grows an Orange Tree

by sprouting seeds in a paper towel,
planting one in dust & dirt
he'd collected scraping his fingers along
each corner of the concrete walls,
& using an Irish Spring soap box as a shelf
to lift his sapling to the light.

Our man wanted only
to oxygenate his air
but soon the whole block shuffles by
checking on the tree each day.
They're surprised that it survived,
but proud to see it grow
until the warden declares it contraband.

Sympathy for the Devil

I am a writer as in a vulture, plucking words from others' pain. & sing penance, but never loud enough: we must feast upon this world of hurt we've made.

Words might salve even the poor, so we send free books to inmates. At one prison, packages never arrived. We called & were told we'd impregnated literature with suboxone. We lacked both will & way: we have no budget; drugged pages wilt & yellow; no one would read. Later I heard the state started shunting sex criminals there. Books were a privilege, underhandedly revoked.

Gangs rule

inside: Aryan Brotherhood for whites, Gangland Disciples for black men. *We* are free to believe in post-racial America: in prison, meals might mean a stack of trays sloughed inside a then-locked door. Some men take two. Others will go hungry. The ache of want sends us seeking for what symbols of solidarity we find, hoping for allies against the world.

AB oft allies with the guards. Members reap cushy jobs, access to visitors, untrammelled mail. At the prison binning our books, gang & guards were *very* close, COs inked in crosses, runic letters, shields & shamrocks. Yet AB, there, was weak. So they were fed sex criminals – easy, friendless kills. A guard outs the doomed man's past – everyone lies, asked why he's doing time – and members murder him in the shower. They look tougher than they are.

A dozen deaths. No indictments.

Activists began to smuggle phones, hoping to document abuse. That's when our packages ceased to be received.

I've no deep love for these men – friends of mine were abused. But if those who molest should be punished by death, let's force judge & juries to say it. Not read a shadow sentence of 10 or 20 years. We should say what we mean:

I sentence you to a cruel and unusual death. It will come suddenly in a shower stall, faux-Odinist skin-head slamming your head against the tile until your bruised brain ruptures from repeated trauma. Your eyes will loosen from their sockets, your skull will crack, blood will whelm through your nostrils. In a final indignity, bowels relax. You will know the brief hell of hoping to live when you cannot. Your limp body will drop while the water runs, cascading over your corpse. Although news of your death will not reach those who sentenced you, they will know that justice has been done.

Our Man Is Dead at Fifty-One

Robert Martinson, twenty-four years old,
was incarcerated for non-violent protest.

Until our brothers are free

no one is free, & so, in 1961, our pale-skinned
socialist joined the Freedom Riders
in Mississippi.

Martinson risked murder for the cause
& reaped weeks in maximum security:
all-night lights, stall-less shit-can,
one letter per week, two men to a cell –
he wrote of their breakdown from
“social compression” –
unstated rules, curt nameless guards.

Our man built a chess set from bread
he'd chewed and dried in the ventilator.
He stole chicken bones & buttons
because these possessions flaunted regulation.
And he was punished –
as all Riders were punished –
by blowers full-blast through the night
& the removal of his mattress –
each Rider slept upon cold steel.
But they suffered together
& stayed sane through song.

Governor Barnett beset the men
with screaming turkeys in the yard.
Or perhaps not. In any case,
tortured behind bars, our man became
a boring, unpleasant thing.

And so Martinson resolved –
free again after his forty days –
to study incarceration.
He thought to improve men’s lives.

*

In 1966, hired by the state of New York
to study rehabilitation, Martinson combed
the social science literature. In 1971, he
published his findings – as far as he had found,
education, & vocational training, & counseling,
& medical care, & sentencing reform, & community
treatment, & fostering a supportive environment inside
accomplished nothing.

“[A] prison which merely leaves its inmates to rot”
is no worse than any other.
Or so he wrote from the sanctity
of his air-conditioned office.

His words became fodder
for those who’d inflict more pain:
the *punitive* reformers.
Following Martinson’s report,
they scrapped all education
& sold the labors of caged bodies
to the lowest connected bidder.
Criminals need no poetry.
Sentences grew longer.
The world inside, bleaker
& more violent.

By 1979, Martinson realized what
he'd done
and apologized:
the studies he'd cited were flawed;
the supposedly unnecessary "education"
nothing but guard, textbook, & a room;
the "counseling" little more, *sans* text;
rehabilitation less *failed* than *fraud*.

No one gave a shit.

*

Martinson doomed his brothers;
his recantation went unread;
his name became synonymous
with the idea that *nothing works*,
the men in jail are animals –
bad men, white trash,
black men, & addicts
we cannot hope to save.

And so, as his son looked on,
our man ran toward the window
of his ninth story apartment,
flung himself bodily into the blue
and shattered the glass.
Amidst tumbling shards –
catching light like distant ice –
for one-hundred falling feet
our man could think

until my brothers are free
I will not be free.