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**EPHRAM PRATT SWALLOWS THE NEWS
OF HIS DEATH
~ A Poem by Jack E. Lorts ~**

A clamoring of
oscillating, random

sycophants,
placed among the rings

of silent trees,
climb into graves

of junipers,
lining the boulevard

of illicit dreams,
hung over

from the times of trial
known to abound

among the shackaleers.
Tell them the secrets,

and let them know
their skins will wrinkle

in the wide world
of desirability,

flaming out
among the dolorous

nights of despair
tagged by the cougars

and anacondas
of a virulent language.

BABYSITTING FOR NATIONAL SECURITY ~ A Poem by Tom Fillion ~

In 1961 it was nuclear warheads in Cuba
And Khrushchev yelling *Nyet*
That had us crouching under our desks
At Catholic school
Then came Vietnam
That turned out to be
A parlor game of dominoes
Like the old Cuban, Spanish, and Italian men
Play at Centro Asturiano in Ybor City
After that came a beach party
And bravado In Grenada
Gulf war one was a textbook example
of how the West won a battle
in a much larger conflagration
and Gulf War two was an example of
if at first you succeed go back
and fuck it up
with party favors and yellow cake
and now it is a war against immigrants
characterized as *invaders*
from banana split republics
who come armed with weapons
of mass desperation, travail, and children
and border agents greet
and treat the boys
to an old Walmart
with American incarceration

made in China
the youngest and the girls
have not been seen
but somewhere in America
babysitters in night vision goggles
are protecting us
from toddlers
with Pablum and diapers
We've come a long way, baby!

FIRST METHODIST ~ A Poem by Jeff Burt ~

The church had an entrance runway for rats.
They'd scurry on the two-by-four
and stop, sashay a second, then proceed
to the hole like models in the vermin world,

so my brother and I took site at the moment of hesitation
and squeezed one eye shut
until it teared, then squeezed the trigger
of the borrowed twenty-two.

Rats dropped, and after two or three
one of us would go collect the dead,
then return to wait. Other rats would come, sniff,
enter, stop—the smell of brotherly dead

and gunshots could not deter them.
All afternoon we shot and collected
until we had nine rats in a sack
and two we'd nipped that had gone

backwards and escaped down the alley.
When the janitor came to board up
the holes he paid a quarter per head,
and bonused a quarter for the two injured,

said a dead rat looked like a little human
come out of the side of a hillside hole
like coal miners with tunnel vision
and hard black eyes. He left, returned

with wooden slats and a slop bucket of paint.
That night I feared to sleep,
faces of little men with wild tails
scurrying on a long flat board.

DISILLUSIONMENT

~ A Poem by Gary Beck ~

The complaints we make
about injustice,
abuse of power,
economic oppression
are useless protests
unless linked to action
that accomplishes change,
hopefully for the better.
Knowing the human condition
probably the same, or worse.

Our inherent need
for a good life
is curtailed by circumstance
natural or man made,
expectation for tomorrow
diminished, destroyed
and all our efforts
can never restore
extinguished hope.

SMOOTH WHISKEY
~ A Poem by David Estringel ~

tick ... tock
tick ... tock
The days are long
in a life of slow motion.
Waking up takes too long,
despite the violent assaults
of the alarm clock,
unchained
by a snooze button—
—like me—
worn down
to the circuitry.
tick ... tock
tick ... tock
Get up late,
again.
Take a whore bath
in the bathroom sink.
Wash what needs it
and get out the door.
Shower'd be nice ... really nice
Maybe tomorrow.
Probably not,
again.
tick ... tock
tick ... tock
Office clocks—

harbingers of death
to my soul—
lament the dying of the fire, within.
Telephone rings perforate
recirculated air of lungs and mouths
like a symphony of electric crickets,
tuning-up beneath the hepatic glow
of fluorescent suns
outside my cubicle's walls.
tick ... tock
tick ... tock
Driving home in the same car,
down the same roads,
in the same rancid clothes
that need more than just a good airing out,
stuck in this bad track mix, playing on a loop,
I need a drink.
There's a bottle at home.
Whiskey, I think—a gift for my 50th.
It goes down, rough,
but smooth, after a glass or two or three.
Smooth is good
in a life of no motion.
tick ... tock
tick ... tock
(Repeat All)

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YOU TRY TO IMAGINE THE MIRROR
~ A Poem by Simon Perchik ~

You try to imagine the mirror
though there was an understanding
the jacket would not show through

and you could lift your chin
into the same wingspan
that hangs over this frost

just now coming in
already in front, same place
same time and at each get-together

the jacket tags along
as if it and the skyline
for a long time had been one

HEAVEANLY TEMPLES AND TOWERS
~ An Original Chinese Poem by Hongri Yuan ~
(Translated by Yuanbing Zhang)

I rode a heavenly camel towards a desolate desert,
a jade bottle poured the sweet dew of the Kingdom of Heaven
from which emerged a lake, an eternal spring that never dries up,
and giant trees in prehistoric times grew
Their branches and leaves rustled in the garden of phoenixes and birds
The song of birds was music, it intoxicated the clouds
Colourful pebbles grew into huge gems in the dreams
That transformed into heavenly temples and towers.

PUTTING YOU THROUGH NOW, CALLER
~ A Poem Sequence by Christopher Barnes ~

*

“Mr. Repper fingered the spotlight back,
Tilted on a campstool, guarding his patch.
A whack-out in the alley got loudmouthed.
That gave me a frame.”

“So you went hooky?
Not too chipped at I presume.”

*

“It was matchable to that dine-point dateline.
Echo what you please.
Belmont’s such a deal-impress hatchet.
They’re plucking a 12-bar now.
He’s grungier than a dollar.”

“You’re shrugging off Drysdale?
The wheel’s trundling again.”

*

“An ought-to I surmised. The riverscape was eye-filling. Downhomers utterly
venomous. You buzz around witching hour? Most fingersmiths push the Turkish
baths.”

“I sky-hopped to L.A.—Pen-and-inked Karina, an unrelenting bye-bye.”

*

“Mrs. Sarin put on a forlorn demeanour.
Always totes a revolver.
Mouthpiece for notorious Wilshaw.
Garments rank-sewn to dominance.
A heavenly act on the crew.”

“Discount moonlight and witchwork.
Can she execute the tally?”

*

“Rackman fumed a cheroot, yea-saying.
The provisos for this adventure are built-in.
His mutt under-wrapped its gnashers, tail-flapping.
You’ll shanghai Nibber at the airport 4.30.
I’m humbled to fret you.”

“An itchy thrill makes my heart jiggety.
Roundup at 5 in Butterfly Swoop Café.”

IN THE FIVE MINUTES THEY ATE ~ A Short Story by Nik Perring ~

0 minutes

I'm not saying there was anything wrong with restaurant or its food or the company, it just wasn't quite doing it for me. So that's why I left them inside—at the table in their suits—and decided to fill myself up on cigarette fumes instead.

Five minutes, I told them. I promised. They nodded.

There was a breeze and it was cold so I buttoned my coat against it and pulled my scarf tight. Under a street light my lighter's flame fought with the wind, dying a few times first, struggling, but we won in the end. In the end it's about how much you really want it, and I really did.

I liked that town from what I'd seen of it, and I'd not seen much. I'd only arrived in time to leave my bags in the hotel room and jump inside a taxi as the sun went down; you can tell a meeting's important when other people pay to get you to it. The taxi was idling by the front doors when I pushed them open, and I couldn't afford to keep them waiting.

And the restaurant was pleasant, fancy even. I really should have been grateful. It's just, outside, I felt better. I checked my watch:

1 minute

I've always liked harbours and piers and I have always liked the sea—they remind me of being small and playing. And I like the smell and I like the wind on my face. There's a coarseness to even the gentlest of tides.

The pier was almost dead ahead and I climbed onto it and, for a few moments, I thought I was the only one there. It was that kind of town—everyone else was either inside restaurants eating, or at the amusements—pushing two-penny pieces

into jangling machines—or waiting for the Bingo caller to call their number. Or at home, long bored of it all.

2 minutes

And then: her. Impossible to un-see in the gloom. She was close too—I thought she would have heard my shoes on the wood and startled, or at least turned around to look, but she was busy.

I could not tell you what her face looked like, or even what kind of nose she had, or whether she looked like she was the sort of women who frowned. I would have liked to and I'd regret that later. I think I still do. There, she existed in a dimness, and that was all she needed. I would know why soon.

She was slim and her coat was long and unfastened—it billowed behind her at first like netting and her legs were thin inside boots that were heavy and thick. They made me think of small trees in big pots.

She was stooped. Knees bent. Not quite crouching and I did not take the step towards her I wanted to. She looked busy, and I did not want to interrupt.

3 minutes

She was almost mechanical and her movements reminded me of the games inside the amusements which, now I thought about them, I could hear on the wind. They sounded like they were weary, like they were tired of trying to cheer people up.

And that wind. I shivered. She did not. I pulled my scarf tighter.

She continued. Stooping, as though tending the ground. Then she'd push her hands inside her pockets, deep and, after a few seconds, she'd do it again. And again, and repeat. Over and over.

Her hair, in the wind, was beautiful and it billowed too, like her coat, and that was when I imagined what her face was like and all the ways I could kiss it. But her hair was thin, I noticed then—and unkempt. And the air tasted of sea.

4 minutes

I'm not sure when exactly I understood. Sometimes you don't want to admit that you do, or that you have. It can make you, somehow, less.

When she stood I was most disappointed that still I could not see her face, that the light wasn't better, that the moon was not bright. A slim body under that coat—too big for her and heavy and wild, would have looked lovely and I wanted to see more. And with her hair dancing too. But it was not the night for things like that.

5 minutes

In the end her coat would not lie flat against her sides or her hips. Its pockets were full and they jutted out at angry angles—what was in them stopped it from flapping in the wind—high now—they weighed it down, made it heavy. When she moved to the edge of the pier she was not graceful - with those thin legs and heavy boots I thought she could have been on stilts. She walked like a cowboy of my childhood towards it—she might as well have had a belt full of bullets and six-shooters heavy at her sides.

She made it to the edge but she did not go at her first attempt. She struggled against the weight of all those stones in her pockets and the Victorian iron she'd taken from the café's windowsill after one last cup of tea; I would read that in the paper on the train back home. She must have cradled it to her chest. There was pride in her work. I respected that, even when it felt wrong in my stomach. And I think that's why I didn't take even one step closer, why I didn't scream even one word, why I didn't once at least try to get her to stop.

And not two minutes after she'd gone—dropped over the edge and into the dark with barely a sound, save for a groan—I loosened my scarf and I decided I'd not rush back to the restaurant and the meeting and the food that was going cold there. I allowed myself that. Granted myself another five minutes. So I lit another cigarette and I walked slowly back towards the street. And I felt better that I'd not enjoyed the restaurant earlier, that it hadn't felt quite right, and I knew then that that was okay and that I wasn't alone in not enjoying the things you should. It's just now there was one less of us fighting with the wind and, over there by the pier, there were a few fewer stones, cold, on the shore.

SLEIGHING SANTA

~ A Prose Piece by Mir-Yashar Seyedbagheri ~

A mall Santa shoots Betty Botkin's son Nick in the heart. Sixteen year old Nicky with his bad jokes, brooding temperament. His love, expressed through gruff proclamations.

She couldn't stop Santa. The fact resounds like a bad carol. She just stood frozen, couldn't even leap into action, while mall Santa shot her child.

Santa hated children, the cops say. Irony alert.

They promise *justice*.

And she still couldn't stop Santa. All around her Santas wear blood-red suits, smiling. Their beards hold the weight of her dead child. A son who could have been a writer, a pianist. He was a man who created his own magic, gave birth to brooding beauty.

He lost his father to lechery. Lost his happy go-lucky soul. And now he lost his life.

All Santas must be vanquished.

She amasses automatic weapons. Rehearses with precision. Finally, she shoots. Santas are felled left and right, collapsing. Heads are ripped off.

Sometimes, she feels embers of regret, thinks of the families these Santas are leaving behind. Their wives and children, left alone on Christmas. She sometimes weeps for their sons and daughters, learning that Daddy won't be coming home

But she scolds herself. She is betraying poor Nicky crying for these Santas.

But it was Santa who took Nicky. She thinks of her son being felled, tumbling before her. Thinks of the blood, the way he tumbled backwards, struck the concrete with the heaviest of thuds. A thud that resounded around the mall.

And Santa took it all from her.

She shoots on, trying to vanquish all feeling. With each Santa shot, it becomes natural, the act discharged with ease.

Nicky can sleep in peace.

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