

Windows Kiss the Shadows of the Passing Thirty Million

by
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a narrative poem about exile



WINDOWS KISS THE SHADOWS OF THE PASSING THIRTY MILLION

I.

VOICE ONE

this land stretches from the Urals to the Atlantic
under the stars and eternal debris
 spewed into airless space
silent space
where for the lack of gravity
no sounds are heard

below
men and women of various ages
shuffle across a dusty plain
unwelcomed by locals
pitied by few
accepted by less
and offered work by one or two:
 those who see a strong arm and a weak bargaining position

VOICE TWO

as they trammel and splash
there echoes along the granite valley
 off the river's stones
 through the woody restaurant
 pinging off crystal glasses
 sentinels of other's celebrations
a low and tinkling moan:
'oh gertie i'm failing'

VOICE ONE

these people wearing raggedy black
 march along the mountain's ridges
 the river's banks
 the heat soaked antediluvian plains
witnessed with suspicion from afar
by those who have not had the rhythmic certitude of their lives
 broken by the winds of change
and they
 field and hearth bound
 smug in their isolation
 wondering
'are these wild shaggy beasts
of the mountains seas fields or farms?'

VOICE TWO

none or neither
 they rose from stone hewn as building blocks
 bricks piled as chimneys
 from church bell towers and city squares
 from iron ore and steel besmears
 from car plants and the pilings of bridge pylons
 from land once theirs and full with harvests
 now scared by others giant combines

and the marchers knew full well as they marched
they were of civilisation not savagery
and to them
 cobbles and traffic
 hubbub and dirt
 culverts and herding
 lowing and earth
were their natural environs

VOICE ONE

only the wildest dreams of contented men
rested men
fat men
 dreamers that dream and eat
 dreamers with shoes on their feet
 dreamers who dream for forgetting
could embrace
 the raw wind
 the boiling clouds
 the swarming insects
 the cold heat damp dryness
as a romantic notion

VOICE TWO

the marching people knew
 unlike the peeping observers
that they belonged inside the squares of human habitation
and not within the wilds and winds

SINGER

this land
stretches from the emerald runes of Eire
 where horses graze
to the edgy hump-back Eurasian Urals
 where iron ore was mined

VOICE TWO

from there to here
these people enter the fringes of towns
where gatekeepers inspect them
 looking for disease
pilfering their pockets
 taking what they please
and send them round to the coquille gate
 an open shell...

ALL VOICES

...in a civilisation of metaphor...

VOICE TWO

...an open shell
 ribbed like the fingers of an open hand
where a bowl of watery soup
 water clean or not
 and scraps of cabbage float
and a bed of dirty straw
provided by the good parishioner's
await

while their disease
 'is it unemployment aids or leprosy'
is tolerated
but
the gatekeeper
the warden
the good wife
the cops
the council official
the rich man
 and his mayor
warn with fingers raised
 'don't overstep the mark
 don't look at my daughter's face
 don't ask for a job or a handout
for you
 with no fixed address
are not to be trusted
so eat your fill
sleep
and wander back to the hills'

ALL VOICES
and off the stable's broken plaster
scatters a sound like falling glass:

SINGER
'oh hanna i'm failing'

VOICE ONE
before the barns were mildewed
 and the mines were capped
where before anything else
 ribbons or software
 havanas or toy iron trains
 leicas or bmw's
a lucid culture of material things created
 a jug
 a plough share
 a yoke to harness
 a hut to recreate life in
basic
necessary
venal

ALL VOICES
in this europe
fire became lightbulbs
shouts became telephones
words became moveable type
shadows became photographs
photographs became games and the game becomes cinema
pain became an opiate
infection became penicillin
light became energy
 and energy light
and a bird and a dream became a pilot and a plane

VOICE ONE

this europe
capable of sustaining the spices landing on the quays of venice
from barks galleons and the arab dhouds
and the cloth of florence floating down the arno valley
 towards its port of pisa
 for the ducal princes and the merchant's wives
and for so short a time
 the indebted aristocrats of the surrounding fiefs
as the humble porters watch with wonder
 smell with wonder
carrying their burden across the quays
along dangerous roads from the apennines to provence
across the alp's trodden paths
up through the massif's twisting valleys
over hard mountain and hills of fossils and salts
to burgundy and its tariffs
and food and drink unheard of
 unimagined
through towns filled with monstrous mysteries
and splendid fair skinned girls
and finally to the lowlands
 dull and marshy
where mosquitoes in summer
or the nip of winter
beset them between the moments of rest and guard
to trade the rich fabrics for more bales of wool
and there on the flat black path
flashed the juggernauts
 thirty-two wheels of rubber
 spinning
transporting the fabulous wealth
the sheered sheep's wool back to their beloved italy
 well
 the kingdom of florence
where in those rich years
until the spanish took papa's rome
 for god
 for land
 for wealth
 for the rights of kings
where in those years
as history spun
 there were moments incandescent
when all that was
 would no longer be
when change inevitable would seep like water
 and roots would thrive or die

dante
sitting on a mountain
 seeing from above through clouds
 seeing below cultivation and civilisation
 seeing as god could see
pattern
creation
death
relationships between spirit and flesh

and in an invention of himself
 he admitted to what he felt
that he was not a shadow
a smooth and polished creature
 with semi-precious stones for eyes
 a face stamped with god's reflective dyes
 a face without character
 drawn to mirror the holy one's perfection
 gilded in his glory
but like god a being complete
and in one moment of self-consciousness
dante gave god good grounds to vacate europe

in the reflection of dante's death mask
 marble limpid cool sky reflecting
michelangelo and raphael
drew
carved
and reinvented themselves
and while artists paid service and painted
 the him of jesus
 the her of mary
and made certain
the figure of god
 or his son
 or his wife
were inscribed
 trapped at the central position
 fighting the triangle's geometry
but look
 look
at their changing faces
 as the century wore on
caravaggio replaced the nobles with the humble
 huddled before in shadows
 now at least glazed by shafts
 a chiaroscuro of honeyed light
announcing quietly
 a humming from a distant hive
this begrudging hidden history

VOICE TWO

a marcher in his previous life
 sunday best
 girl on arm
 a litre of wine
 a bit of local tuck
 lamb in almond sauce
 peppers with salted capers
 trotters layered with sauerkraut and caraway
 herrings slathered with cream
then a little sunday culture at the academia
and while he slips his arm around her waist he sees
in oil thick with coloured harmonies
not a god
 the figurehead
 the one who vacated europe
but a man in pain

a women in pain
a disciple in pain
 and the marcher-to-be
 proto-vagabond
 spare grizzle in brassy melting pot
seeing these things
recognised his forbearers
 his singular self
in that pain
with those tears
in horror
in death

the marchers
leave their modest rest
 the straw and bowl under the open hand
these people
once welders
platers
plumbers
furnace gritters
heave men on the docks
sailors
tar layers
coal miners
wheel house drivers
these marchers hobo across slovenia
albania
scotland
and france...

ALL VOICES

and again and again like the humming of heated lead
vibrating off the border guard's shed...

SINGER

'oh matilde i'm failing'
the sheep of the lowlands
the fine instruments of prague
the lenses of jena
the oil of norway
the butter of england
produced and reproduced by them
and theirs before them
 but taken from them as if they were witnesses
rather than makers
and someday yesterday or tomorrow
in another's life or yours or theirs
these stolen goods and claims renounced
return in obscure ways
via the schoolmen philosophers
 erasmus st augustin averoise st just
via those who rediscovered the source
 aristotle and his pupil plato
 and all the rest
in kernels of civilisation
 where the ideas
 if not the practice