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Christopher Bernard

## A Woman in Arizona

We hardly need more proof.

Our masters descend into barbarism,  
murder on the high seas, contempt  
for the laws of nations, corruption  
uniquely vast, slayings  
broadcast live, quick as an executioner's  
itch for death.

The rich kill innocence with impunity.  
Wars without purpose, goal or end  
erase children like a hallucination of AI.

The world burns beneath our touch.

Why do we need one more lesson?  
A small old woman kidnapped in the night like a child,  
frail from shock and sickness and terror,  
by the kind of beast only our species breeds.

We check the screen to see if she is found  
alive, despite the blood on the porch,  
in the arms of those who love her,  
weeping, now, with joy. And the banal captors  
blinking in the cameras as police  
shunt them into custody toward an end  
earned richly by humanity's evil.

We are haunted by this: where does pity  
bleed like a self-delivered wound  
into complicity?

We check the screen again. We check it again.  
No rescue, no recovery, no resolution.  
We check it again. Again. Again. Again.

## Recollected in Tranquility

A touch of wind warm as a hand  
takes you back long decades to a May  
embedded in a chamberful of greens:  
olive, absinthe, grassy, sea-green, pine,  
wine-bottle green, green as a beetle's  
carapace, blue-green turquoise, banana-leaf,

lettuce, parsley, corn husk,  
or maple, oak and sycamore,  
each green its own way;  
transparent as a grasshopper's wings  
or a locust's sticky spiraling seed,  
or rain-forest dark, stained-glass in twilight green,  
moss green thick as the rock  
it furs; the smell of eucalyptus is green,  
as green as Marvell's green thought  
in a green shade.

You never knew there were so many greens—  
and yet you saw,  
had known, had seen enough springs now to know;  
yet every spring you stared, surprised again.

And not that only:  
a particolor of yellows, blues, pinks,  
mad reds, defiant whites, flirtatious violets,  
inscrutable blacks spangled with treacherous gold,  
crimson and scarlet in the cardinal's plumes  
or the robin's breastplate,  
bluebells and daffodils,  
tulips red as a suggestion, the spotted  
tomato-red of the lady bug,  
the cerulean sea and sky licked  
with creamy smears of cloud and wave,  
bobbed among the greens like bright wreckage  
after the winter's storms.

Nor these alone:  
the singing is a shocking liberty,  
quite modern in its freedom from rusty scales,  
montonies of chords, the tyranny  
of pop charts and counterpoint,  
the dictatorial rules of harmony  
broken with a kick of thunder  
to make its magnanimous own:  
dancing, glittering brocades of sound  
on continental flight paths from pole to tropic;  
as free as love, as bold as force and fire.

Yet more: your own first love  
that long and far-away May:  
she broke your heart, but what of that?  
Hearts are made to be broken  
as springs are made to be brief.

All this you remember from so long ago—  
it feels from childhood a century down to this—  
stronger than time, deeper than desire, unforgettable as your first kiss.

## Ours

A piece of straw on a stream of oil  
staining a sea.  
Alone as an owl  
or a dying stag,  
shivering on a foggy hill.  
A profile like white metal  
against a sky of snow.  
Hard and cold and dry,  
reduced to the  
“not to be divided.”

This is the goal of the long road  
across black mountains, deserts, oceans,  
past moon, Saturn, past deep space  
to the bitter, noble galaxy that is I,  
and Me, and Mine;  
packed into ice at the heart of a universe  
envious of a far-off sun  
that penetrates the wind  
and warms the dust  
of “We,” and “Us,” and “Ours.”

## All One Needs to Do

A sound in the garden . . .

A clutch of wind in the brush?

A twig slipping from a willow?

A bird rustling in its sleep?

An intruder?

You were burgled once,  
the shoeprint black  
against the white windowsill.

Or merely some small animal  
thirsty, hungry, hiding  
in the weeds and the night?

You go to the door with the glass,  
imagine your face haloed in lamplight  
in a square of darkness;  
listen, the door open and  
step to the porch.

Silence. Step to the bridge  
that spans porch and garden.  
Stillness deepening, broadening  
like ripples on a pond  
even in the heart of the city.

Then something above catches your eye,  
and you look up.

A star shines infinitely far above you  
Then a second. A third.  
Against a black as absolute as the iris of an eye.

You did not know in the city  
anyone could see the stars.  
And there they are.  
And awe sweeps over you like a sea.

The universe hangs there above you,  
holds you, bears you, surrounds you,  
greet you; is you.  
It flames beyond mortality,  
forever.

And you return inside,  
grateful, happy, shaken,  
almost weeping.

It is there; all of it.

All you needed to do  
was see.

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Christopher Bernard is an award-winning poet, novelist and essayist, and a co-editor (with Ho Lin, Steven Hill, and Jonah Raskin) as well as the original founder of *Caveat Lector*. His third collection of poems, *The Socialist's Garden of Verses*, won a PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Award and was named one of the "Top 100 Indie Books of 2021" by *Kirkus Reviews*. He is also recipient of an Albert Nelson Marquis Lifetime Achievement Award. His novels include *A Spy in the Ruins* ("one of the best American novels since Thomas Pynchon and William Gass," Miguel de Cervantes–award winning novelist Juan Goytisolo), *Voyage to a Phantom City* ("an enormous achievement," award-winning translator Peter Bush), and *Meditations on Love and Catastrophe at The Liars' Cafe* ("puts one in mind of *Ulysses* as much as *Naked Lunch*," award-winning poet Ernest Hilbert). He also authored the middle-grade stories, the first in the "Otherwise" series, *If You Ride A Crooked Trolley . . .* and *The Judgment Of Biestia*. His most recent book is *The Beauty of Matter*.