



PLAIN SIGHT

DAVID BERGMAN

PLAIN SIGHT

Leave it in plain sight and the police will
never find the murder weapon, will they,
Miss Marple? But place it in the woodshed,
or in the dresser's bottom drawer,
or neatly behind the jars
of jellied quince on the cupboard's topmost shelf,
why then it's a dead giveaway.
My house keys learned from birth
that just by lying on the counter
they become invisible to the naked eye.
Daily life is the best disguise
for everything that wants to be hidden.
If the world wore its villainy
with the roué's waxed handlebar mustache
or the smirk of a gangster's moll,
we would have no trouble pointing to the perp
and sputtering, "That's them that did it."
But the wanted man doesn't stand out
even in a line-up of one
and not because at the time of the robbery
he was cloaked in a Superman costume,
a disguise any fool could see through,
but because plain sight tastes like chalk,
and we spit it out. It sounds like white noise,
and we grow deaf to it.
Look, I have been lost in plain sight for years,
and no one has found me yet.

The Man Who HEARD VOICES AS A CHILD

After his mother's kiss came the click
of the door fitting snugly into place,

a thin line of light spilling from below,
and a general exchange of shushing from the living room,

as if, by just putting their fingers to their lips, adults
could cast the spell of sleep on a little boy.

The boy knew better. He waited, and when it seemed
long enough, he crawled to the top of the stairs

where he'd sit and listen, hidden in the shadows.
Rarely could he make out what was said.

The voices were distant and low.
Even if one were raised in disbelief or anger,

it was badly muffled. He wasn't bothered though.
For what he loved was the rise and fall

of speech, the waves of language washing up
on the shore of his ears, a kind of soothing ointment

rubbed into his frizzled brain. He especially
loved to hear the grown-ups talking all at once,

and then pairing off and, finally, allowing just one
the floor to bring them to laughter or groans,

gasps or murmurs of consolation.
It seemed to him that nothing was more beautiful

than the sound of their conversation;
it was the music that music aspired to,

and like the 78s his mother played of
Beethoven and Liszt, it crackled and hissed.

He knew even then that he'd always carry
their lilt and timbre in his head

and that they would find their way into
every page he'd ever write.

He never knew whether his mother
guessed he spied on their late-night talks,

but his father often needed to lift him from
the top of the stairs and lay him sleeping,

limbs sprawled as if loosely scrawled,
across the crisp white sheets of his bed.

The Man Who WAS NOT A ROBOT

He's been asked more than once to prove
he's not a robot. He found the very request upsetting.

After so many years, a computer should take
his word for it. And weren't his typing errors

proof enough that he was an ordinary schmoe?
One website had the nerve to claim he moved

so flawlessly and at such superhuman speed,
he could no longer be biologic.

And their test of not being a robot?
An array of badly taken photographs,

all expunged of any human content,
the sort he imagines zombies shoot

on their family vacations. From these
he is asked to select those with bridges,

or stoplights, or crosswalks. Easy,
he thought. But the pictures

are so grainy and dark that with his cataract eyes
all he could see are blobs and gashes,

images out of Pollock, Rothko or Kline.
He's not dumb. A Phi Beta at college,

he's unused to failing exams. Well, not
fail, just not conclusively prove

his personhood. And so he's shown more
and more pictures.

Why don't they pose a real test, he wonders,
something only a genuine human being

is capable of answering, a short
answer to start off with:

twenty-five words or less on how
truth is beauty, beauty truth.

Or on a scale of one to ten how much
do we hurt the ones we love.

And finally, of all the ways the world might
end, which is your favorite:

(a) fire, (b) ice, (c) whimper,
(d) bang, (e) all of the above?

STONES

My mother's mind has turned to stones
as we walk behind my father's casket.
"That one's too busy," she says pointing
to a granite slab carved with stars and lilies.

"That one's too dark. They should be light.
And not too shiny either.
I don't want anything showy,
just large enough for me
to lie beside your father."

On the way back she buttonholes
my cousin for having failed to put
up a stone for his parents.
"They deserve it," she tells him,
"And you've got plenty of money."

But it's not a matter of expense.
Rocks are where you shed tears.
Rocks were made for tears.
Everybody should have one.
The Grand Canyon for my mother
is just an enormous Wailing Wall.

She won't forgive my grandmother
for having her ashes scattered
over Biscayne Bay. "Where could your
father go to mourn? Where?"
And when I suggest Biscayne Bay,
she waves aside the suggestion,
"Ach, that's no place to be dead."

The Man Who COULD NOT SMILE

The inability to smile was just one more
symptom of a disease he'd learned

to live with over many years, a disease
where muscles failed to take

direction from the brain,
the orders lost in transit,

their stamps (forever) falling off
before the letter had a chance to arrive.

It was not stroke. Strokes cause faces
to twist and droop, split down the middle.

His countenance was of a piece, a mask
signifying neither comedy nor tragedy

but symmetrically impassive and aloof.
He had watched the changes come slowly—

his cheeks finding it harder and harder
to rise to the occasion, the lips to bend

their crimson bow. His skin a curtain drawn
before a dark proscenium.

He lost his subtler expressions early—
the contemptuous smirk, the brief leer,

the flicker of bemusement.
Then his pout unpuckered and finally,

the shit-eating grin had its full
and was over-written and erased.

It was a matter of eyes. He hoped
his conveyed still the excitement of living,

the new and surprising joy he felt
as body slowly untied itself from spirit

and let him drift free
through the currents of time.

He was told he had a poker face,
but he refused to cash in on his disability.

Instead, he tried to tell the people he loved
how much he loved them,

but it sounded, even in his ears,
needy and desperate.

Yet it was love and joy that overwhelmed him now,
emotions that demand to be shared

with those who stay and care about you.
Someday he'd have to instruct them

like a mesmerist: *Look deep into my eyes.*
Have you ever seen such wonder!

Author's Notes

THE MAN WHO series was one I worked on for many years and grew out of my fascination with the case studies of Krafft-Ebing, Freud and Oliver Sacks.

KINDERTOTENLIEDER

The title refers to Gustav Mahler's cycle and means "Songs for Dead Children" composed between 1901 and 1904, a setting of five of Frederick Rückert's over four hundred poems on the death of his two children from scarlet fever. The poem is indebted to Charles Lamb's essay "Dream-Children."

THE MAN WHO HAD NO HOME

Dedicated to my student Ricardo Bartee, who provided the details of the poem, and who is now known as the photographer-writer Gioncarlo Valentine. He supplied my author photo for this book.

THE MAN WHO HAD PARKINSON'S

I was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease eight years ago. While I do not wish it on anyone, for me Parkinson's has been a fascinating experience, which has taught me so much about my body and my mind. It has affected my poetry. Like many people with Parkinson's, I suffer from micrographia, that is my handwriting has become very small. It's also easier to

write on the right hand page of my journal than the left, as you can see from the following pages. Since I write my first draft by hand, my poetic line has become much longer when typed. And since much of the first draft is unreadable, transcription has become another stage of invention.

THE MAN WHO WATCHED BIRDS

In the conclusion, I had in mind “Sunday Morning” (1915) by Wallace Stevens (1879-1955), a poem which ends with:

*At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.*

GRACE

Behind this poem is the story, perhaps apocryphal, of W.H. Auden urging early television viewers to “give to the undeserving poor.” When asked what he meant, Auden explained that to give what one deserves is simply justice. Charity, that expression of grace, begins when we are offered more than we are worthy of possessing.

* Though long expected, long hoped for
his matriculation was also bitter -
that was the surprise, not really a surprise
but under appearance.

Not high school graduation which
was so close to
of an accomplishment that meant everything
but at the same time it was
new, no more all those things
to accomplish and she


It was not despair, but a pushing of
willed acceptance
an unhappiness, she had long looked
forward to -

She felt the loss of the fulfillment
that was hers.
because the achievement was so close
she would just be returning to how
she knew this.

boyhood was a dream she had had
and to which in this time period still
she found herself returning, clinging

She wanted him to miss her more than
she wanted things to be what

and horrified if ^{paralyzing} home/dances were ^{forced} to be back



“Rich, intense,
and remarkably generous
in a world of refusals,
this grace suffers,
this grief signifies.”

RICHARD HOWARD



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