

Witness protection program

If you could draw him in to conversation,
he would have much to say.
He doesn't miss a thing; he catches everything.
But he has a talent for never letting on.
That's how he got here in the first place.

There must be a certain schizophrenia about it all –
what you see and what you get,
what is true and what appears to be true ...
what appears to be false.

Yet there is a reward for these people
who betray their friends.
But they need to give up everything;
the price is nothing short of everything.
That's all we really know – you know there's more to it.

After being hunted, indispensable as the vessel
of knowledge – knowledge unique and prophetic –
he gets up at seven o'clock, he picks up the paper
inside the front door, he hangs out in his housecoat
all morning, makes toast, maybe feeds the birds.
Tuesdays are garbage days.
He also recycles his soda cans
and his pasta sauce glass jars.
He crosses at the green and stops at the red.
In spring he washes his windows
and turns and waves to neighbours,
Good morning.

It is now his full-time job 24/7
to conform, obey, yield,
knuckle under the mundane tedium,
it is almost unbearable –

There is so much acquiescence:
it is sometimes so vast.
He might even feel as though
he could just *kill* someone ...

Pregnant woman

When she steps onto the streetcar,
the passengers feel judged.
In this, for an instant all strangers are related.
A man may sigh a nervous laugh to himself.
Standing near her, he can hear the other music of her body,
and it startles and embarrasses him:
his animal-self is waiting for signals from her
that his cocksure instincts can ordinarily understand.
But they don't come. He turns away
and looks out the window
a quivering fist at his mouth
as he chokes on his lust.

S & M

Like a beast, he comes to her
when she calls out to him from across the street.
He has eyes like vaults,
he is inarticulate and emotionally crippled,
and there's something about his jawline –
the way his lips fold over his teeth
as he twists his face into a smile.
She can tell he's a perfect client:
desperate and wretched.

Once she shuts the door to her room, he says,
“Until I beg.” And they go to work.
He pretends to thwart her as she wrestles him down
to secure the handcuffs to his wrists.
She gets him on the floor,
steps on his back and whips him.
And each time she whips him he asks for it harder,
asks for her to hate him more savagely than before
until finally
he is writhing and whimpering
the name the *madame* has given her.

There are people who provide services
using whips and chains, ropes and handcuffs,
because there is a demand from those
who need irrefutable proof
that they themselves are worthless.
Self-hatred can be so powerful,
sometimes there's no point resisting it.

Mother and child march with the Bolsheviks

Mother and child, we march with the Bolsheviks.
We walk among the gathering groups
at the May Day Rally
in the gardens of City Hall.

He *knows*,
and yet he asks me
to read a certain banner out loud:
Unfuck the World.

The police stroll among us.
They look at us and then look away.
“Mama, will we get arrested today?”
he asks, unable to conceal his delight –

delight as powerful
as little boys' bragging.
When I reassure him that No,
we will not get arrested today,

he is disappointed
but squeezes my hand with glee.
I do not think I would come here
without him.

My little man,
he protects me from harm.
Mother and child,

shining like archetypes.

The mad wife

*This is part of the text
that accompanies the slideshow of his memory.
His life an epilogue to her, to his mad wife.*

i

He keeps his photo albums in the basement
so that, throughout the ache of daily reflexes,
he can't see their spines; but if he ever wanted to,
he could go down stairs and pull them from the shelf,
as he sometimes does, slowly, carefully,
like a paleontologist handling the vertebrae
of a long, rare fossilized beast.

Inside is a collection of snapshots
of his wife at twenty-five years old,
twenty-five years ago.

The photo album plastic, opaque with age,
covers her face like cataracts: her face without wrinkles
under brittle plastic without wrinkles.

As such, he nestles her in the hardened amber of his memory,
though he knows she is probably in a psychiatric ward,
the traffic of madness idling in the passages of her DNA,
as she sits in the wreckage that has become her body ...
if she were still alive, in some way.

Of course he has wedding photos, and shots of the few years that made up their marriage before she disappeared for good. She would disappear for several days at a time, like the family cat, or a feral creature. He had to ask the neighbours if they'd seen his wife. One day he didn't ask because he knew it, then, that she was just gone.

ii

He watches for chances to talk about her. Sometimes he shows the photos to someone new. As he speaks, he goes into a trance. His irises grow wide and round. His listener becomes small in his eyeballs. He can't stop himself. Then suddenly he looks through his listener – the glass of his thoughts opaque to the fundus of his mind.

iii

He keeps her in a sealed container in his mind. He has stopped trying to reconcile the poles of what has been and the *way* things *are*. He has taken to performing meticulous rituals of cataloguing time. Nothing has happened to him in twenty-five years. He swallows the rest of his life mechanically along with his other pills.

iv

It is already four in the morning.

He thinks: "If she were here, what would she say?"

How would she see the colours and the faces

and the flowers in the wedding photos?

The baby's breath I planted in her fine brown hair

to hide the raw naked scalp where she had pulled it out?

For a moment, her madness might lift

like a bride's veil and she might say:

Yes. It must be true: I must have married you.

And that is good.