

Lit

Three Grids

i

The slate black tiles
of the meditation hall
floor—a grid of squares,
from my bench perspective
compressed into diamonds—
gather toward
the near horizon of the wall,
my coordinates not
zero, zero.

ii

In Reverse
on the car dashboard
a ghostly keystone grid
hovers on the ground
where we will be.
Foreseeing an obstruction
the car squeals with anxiety;
with equanimity we turn
and all manner of things are well.

iii

In Durer's woodcut,
a nude woman, like a pile
of spherical bean bags
entangled in a sheet,
at one end of a table.
At the other,
a heavily-clothed, armed man
stares at her through a wire grid
that casts its shadow on the paper
his pen is poised over.
His arms encircle an obelisk,
nearly touching his face
its tip level with his fixed gaze.
He cuts her into small squares
to reassemble her as magicians do.
Later that night in 1525,
perhaps she fixed them supper.

On Stephen Crane's "I saw a man pursuing the horizon."

*"It is futile," I said,
"You can never –"
"You lie," he cried,
And ran on.*

When in high school, I read with glee Crane's poem
About the speaker who confronts a running man
Chasing the horizon, I was myself far from home,
Called to be a Roman Catholic seminarian.

I was strangely moved by the poem's situation,
The man's absurd assuredness, his blindness so
Perfect he cut off the speaker without hesitation,
Whose dismissed proposition is self-evident, though:

The horizon an illusion of an edge in the distance
Always out there, and the viewer always here.
His position static, despite his persistence,
He keeps on moving but never draws near.

I knelt on wooden kneelers on my callousing knees
In the cold chapel drawn by the light of my faith,
A fragile lantern running low on oil, held up to see
The god I would never please no matter how long my wait.

I was slow to give up trying to set my eyes on
That god, to trade one set of scales for a balanced one,
To accept the elusive beauty of the horizon
And the uncertainty of the light of a dying sun.

Similes

Sometimes composing a poem
is like
peeling a bandage off a wound:
what appears can surprise,
 not as bad as expected
 under the blood-soaked wad of Kleenex
or worse,
 a jagged red opening, skin torn away.
Either way it is experience:
 time will change it
but it will leave a scar.

Sometimes composing a poem
is like
peeling off the time
and opening the scar,
driving the nail through the hand again,
to make some sense of it
to keep it open so it will always bleed
and someone else's salvation will
rise from it.

Sometimes composing a poem
is like
wounding a person alive in the mind,
bound to words,
exposing a nerve to
the confusion of claws
or indifference
or death,
and then taking a long walk
on a fall day,
senses vibrating with urgent life.

Sometimes, however, composing a poem
is like
distractedly picking at a scab
and a small piece detaches.
Under it, a patch of skin,
fresh and healed,
So you stop.

A Personal Note on the Word “Remains”

A mid-nineteen-sixties summer college job,
third-trick Baggage Agent—the midnight shift
smoking Camels and reading Dickens
at a battered wooden desk in a cage waiting
in the vast sub-basement, the roots of
the Cleveland Union Terminal Tower
full of shadows of the glory days, darkness punctured
by bulbs barely illuminating random empty spaces,
laced with vague smells of diesel fumes, exhaust, oily dust, and decay
—waiting to sign my name to attest to the truth of a manifest.

At times

when the baggage manifest contained “Remains,”
someone delivered underground nearby at the loading dock
would ride the passenger train as their own baggage.
As the hearse backed in, I would rise up from my chair
to aid the undertaker unloading his load,
briefly bearing the unpalled casket to the grimy worn boards
of the big-wheeled baggage wagon, on which it sat waiting,
gaudy with florets and shiny brass tube handles,
clean and sparkling like nothing else in the slovenly gray gloom.
Distracted by the tip that came with the remains,
I never got into the casket
as I did into the book with the writer
dead 100 years.

Writer Block

A writer block,
tightly-bonded,
open-ended fragments,
separate solids
glued and glued and glued
by happenstance,
dead pieces of would,
stubby, but stacked together
a thickened surface
absorbing desperate blows—
cleaving flesh from bone,
wings from bodies,
cutting out hearts,
disemboweling, beheading,
deconstructing—
and for all that,
battered and creased
only on the surface,
inert, intransigent, unmoved.