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Jean LeBlanc

I find myself drawn to writing about art, sometimes in the form of a persona poem, sometimes as an outsider looking in, always wondering about different ways of seeing the world while creating other worlds. Creating other worlds—this is what artists do; this is what poets do. For me, writing a poem is a way to hold a moment and examine it from all angles, turning it so that new light reveals new facets and darkness too can be explored. Every poem is a spectacle, even quiet, reflective poems about quiet, ordinary things. And this is the best-kept secret: we are capable of time travel—it's called poetry.

JEAN LEBLANC

Head of Tutankhamun

He looks like a real boy here, a real boy
being told he is a king, told by no less
than the god Amun, who touches Tut
on the head. He looks like a real boy
who hears, in the distance, his mates
playing soccer in the vacant lot,
and he is grounded for failing math.
A real boy, whose limestone cheeks
give the impression of a tear or two.
Bewildered by this whole king thing,
the stern and easily-angered gods,
his mates enjoying only the freedom
of this fine, clear day. The first time,
perhaps, an artist had the nerve to say,
*Revere the Gods, revere the King, but pity
the boy, the real boy, pity us all.*

In the Sistine Chapel

"You'll be my King Minos, Judge of the Damned,"
Michelangelo says to a beggar in a Roman alley.
It pays in hot meals, good wine. Perhaps
he sneaks back late at night, just to see up close
the master's work. Reaches out to touch his own
face—accidentally smudges the image. *O Dio*,
crosses himself, begs forgiveness. Next morning,
Michelangelo curses the unknown *vandali*,
apologizes that the sitting must be prolonged.
Hot meals. Wine. Alas, there comes a day
when it is finished. It—he—has become perfect,
every sag, every crooked feature, hideous but true.
I have become something, after all, he thinks,
admiring even the ears, those of an ass. He touches
the side of his own head, believing it must be so.

Carrington's Portrait of Lytton Strachey

Her attention to small surfaces—the lenses
of his glasses, his fingernails, that perfect

ear—her soft voice murmuring the parts
as she sketched: *helix, scapha, concha,*

tragus, antitragus. Perhaps they laughed
when she named the intertragic notch,

—*imagine one's poor ear, imbued
with tragedy*—perhaps she told him

that all those hours spent drawing
at the Slade were for this, precisely

this: his long, long fingers, holding—
caressing, really—that lucky, lucky book.

**Emma Lazarus Visits the Studio of John Singer Sargent
and Sees *Portrait of Madame X***

Is it truly canvas, or fevered hallucination—
she has been ill, the poet—terrible and precise,
incandescent? She considers all the years
bound in corset and meter, the constant desire
for freedom, for being known. Not too different,
perhaps, from *her*. Elemental, shoulder and profile,
woman and not woman, line, posture, flesh,
and can one say beauty? No, one cannot, not quite.
She asks for a chair, explains that it is too much,
that Paris has half-destroyed her. Wonders
if it is possible to comprehend, or even *like*, a world
that offers, in one great generous moment, itself to us.

Passione, Collera, Furore

Puccini and Leoncavallo in a Milan cafe
arguing about who can proceed with *La Boheme*—
I started first—No, I have been at it two years,
two years!—and like that, the friendship is no more.
Mimi belongs to me—She is mine—
Passers-by shrug, hardly notice at all, two men
fighting over a woman, over the idea of a woman,
a sickly one at that, one who will break both
their hearts, and ours as well, though we would sell
our earrings to buy her one more earthly breath,
sell our only coat, despite winter upon us
once again, the stove greedy for fuel.

What If Your Dentist Were Zane Grey?

The real Zane Grey, you know, had a degree
in dentistry, or what passed for dentistry
in 1896, and he practiced for a while, until
stories of the west began to fill his head

and he had to travel out to those wild places,
so next time your dentist's masked face
is inches from your own vulnerable self,
the little bib askew around your too-exposed

throat, you may wonder, is he imagining
some new Lassiter, driven by lost love
and the ability to kill, is he creating
in his head right now a world of heat

and stone and sage, dusty hooves
and brackish water, poisoned maybe,
and when he tells you to rinse and spit,
it sounds a lot like he's glad to see

the last of you, and needs a whiskey,
and as the metal tools clank in
the metal tray, his fingers tremble
just a little, just a very little bit.

Blake Teaches His Wife to Read

One thought fills immensity.

—William Blake

A is for Adam; this garden is ours:
B for the bee with silvery wings,
C for the catmint, a fragrant delight,
D is daffodil in spring, daisy in summer.

E, that's you, dear Eve, cleansed of sin,
F, forget-me-not, the mouse's ear,
and G the gladiolus, sword unsheathed,
H for hollyhock, hydrangea, heaven, hell.

I is ivy twining up the wall,
J's June, July, the joyful months,
K the graceful kestrel soaring high,
L, with love and lilies fill your arms.

M, the moths at night, those secret souls, N
the night itself, when most blooms fade,
O, open once again, and see the sun,
P—perfection; no commandments here.

Q, the quince our English clime dislikes,
but R, the rose a rainy day embraces.
S is for sweet William (ah! you smile!),
T, for tulips men have lost their minds.

U is understanding, in heart and mind,
V—let us have violets, violets everywhere!
W, most wonderful and wild,
X the criss-cross of the pruning shears.

Y is yarrow, nodding in field,
Z the zephyr, refreshing on the brow.
Let us peruse again our teeming world,
Where I can see because you have eyes.

Liberation

— after Winslow Homer's painting *Summer Night*

I like to pretend that's my grandmother as a young woman,
that last figure on the left, silhouetted against the surf.
Pearl—Miss Booth she was—is on vacation

with her classmates from Fitchburg Normal School.
The full moon that rose at sunset is overhead by now,
but sleep is the last thing on their minds.

If dinner was at eight, perhaps this started as
an after-dinner stroll. However they came to be
on the edge of the sea past midnight, surely now

they are bewitched by the tidal swell. Five sit
on their rocky perch, while two free spirits,
overcome by the uncanny blue, waltz to the rhythm

of the breakers. The others see them, laugh,
and join the dance. My grandmother lets the other girls
partner up, while she enjoys a solo seaside swirl.

She was nine when Winslow Homer died,
so she could not be that woman on the beach.
It's the profile that makes me invent this truth,

the same profile my father sketched of Pearl
in her late sixties. And yet, you see her as clearly
as I can: a young woman, about to stand and lift her arms

above her head, quite pleased with a night so
free that she concedes a flash of modest ankle
to a magnanimous summer moon.