

BYSTANDER



Brian Henry

NOTES FOR A SEQUENCE

To test the silence because it's there to be entered
To suggest to the hawk that its wings are too large
To carve the sand into a semblance of submission
To trail the sound of one disinterred
To construct a voice to withstand the surge
To forgo the act to forget the admission
To skew the portrait so carefully centred
To pull the nail to foil the dirge
To permit the request for permission
You scale the notes of the silence that happens
To find a port that might have us

VESSEL

Because another day brings to light what another day brings,
the anchor gripped for a second then slipped
and nothing of any consequence happened.

Because the motion must be constant,
because the motion subsumes all that comes in contact,
the idea of the ship slides, and, its function forgotten,

the day is no longer a ship but a vessel
neither swift nor deep, precious nor sound.
And the descent is undramatic, slow enough

to go unnoticed by those unacquainted
with the art of the voyage, but this vessel is leaning,
that shore no harbour to hope for.

HEART

That fixture
on which to hang
a capsized vessel,

the wind nestled
in its ribs, an eel
picking through the remains

of those who did not survive
or lift to the surface
to hang there.

ABANDONED SHIP

Nevertheless, the boat is on the rocks.
We conjure all sort of disasters,
reaching for bloody details of the affair.
A slow forward motion, and then that's it—
this boat leaning on the rocks, rotted through,
its ribs flaked like sponge, the paint chipped, faded.
These rocks have grown used to the weight.
It gives them something to do
besides hug the mud and wait for water.

You say the town should have moved it by now—
rusty nails everywhere luring local kids
into tetanus shots. Maybe it serves
as a warning to would-be drunken sailors,
maybe as a reminder of lives lost,
or livelihoods. Maybe they are waiting
for a concerned neighbour to start something:
hire a truck, sink it, burn it, bury it.
But there is no motion here—the spirit
stagnant, like the water. Like the water.

(Dingle, Ireland)

EPITHALAMIUM

The haar refuses to approach this coast,
to bring its glossolalia of fish to the shore.
The glottal stops of waves on rocks
recall another tongue.

The detour
written in the clouds has brought us
to this harbour—no haven from the stars' dull ache.
They seem ready to break from the augered slab
balanced above us. Somehow they adhere.

Someone is singing, *the ties that bind*
the only words to arrive. They unravel at our feet,
take their place in the inscription of sea wrack
as you shoulder the wind and its revenants
and I wait for the strands of a new morning
to lurch over the other edge, incarnadine, and defeat
what stands before it. Yet that song is flowing
and flown, its singer's whereabouts still unknown.

(St Andrews, Scotland)

ICONOSTASIS FOR ABSENCE *for Andrew Zawacki*

Rope against wood is another sound.
It places you on your bike at the clay hills,
where the syntax of absence is a coin
slipped from under the tongue. A rope
rocks on its perch in the oak. It's snapped.
A sjambok when the wind cracks.
Less than its former self, but a rope yet.
You used it for something,
but cannot pull the image down.
Of course the hills are gone,
and a line of stores—farrago of need—
fills the gap.

That red a nimbus.
Bulldozers stripping curves off the land.
You cannot call the land dead, the hills ghosts,
the rope a frayed soul. Absence need not translate
into daemon Grief. It has no referent.

(Short Pump, Virginia)

BYSTANDER

Not shamed as a struck branch will quake,
not a match that refuses to flame, the oar
creaks against the boat and smacks the surface
of the lake, neither emerald nor amethyst.
The chorale of wood on water recalls
the clamour before the hood is delivered
and dumped over the bystander's head
by another bystander's blisterless hands.
No song is heard there, no listeners for the taking.

No song is heard here, no listeners for the taking.
Trees reach for bottom-scum farther
than they stretch. Their music breaks no one's heart,
but the boy in the boat, distracted by some call
or hum, lets an oar slip and gather
water as it sinks then rises. Everything must sink
before it can float: the boy makes a note
of it, leans for the oar—having carved
its corona onto the lake—and rows.

(Powhatan, Virginia)

DÉNOUEMENT

Swollen tar-smoke rises, a yellow siren pulses,
mangled steel in tow.

You move from the hood to the driver's seat
and turn the key.

The digital clock eases on, over an hour gone.
The line of cars lurches

to attention and gradually scatters. An egret
circling on the right:

it alights on a shack, the heat breaking the air between.
(Key West—Key Largo, Florida)

PRELAPSARIAN

The silence of the banyans blinds.
They strain to understand the little things:
salt wounds, osmosis, the natural order.

He can taste blood when she strolls by—
in his nose, under the tongue of stars—
bones bared to harm, their roots scarcely concealed.

They wait to adjust to better days.
(Marco Island, Florida)

SELF-PORTRAIT IN A LATE HOUR

The summer holds the day to its word.

A solitary heron, orange
in the gleam, seems strange here.

The water shattered, the child,
on this, the last day of summer, holds.

A treasure in every corner,
the house breaks into flesh.

Were it not for the rule against it,
the house would break into song.

They seem to hesitate.
The child is running ahead of them.

The windows hold nothing out—or in.
Rooms prepare for this arrival.

The wind holds nothing back.
There they are, beneath the archways.

There they are beneath the ruins.