

MIKE SMITH

Byron in Baghdad

*"He knows that comedy is talk, and he takes more than
full advantage of the principle."*

— Mark Van Doren

(PART 1)

Forgive me, Lord, for all that is to come.
Humility isn't easy. I am
a product of my age, and your rima's not
for me. Rhyme Royale's too much too. (I sought
constraint before. The work remains, as yet,
unknown to most, though findable on the Net.)
We post-Postmodernist Americans
like meals *pre*-cooked, in someone else's pans,
swallowing a lot; but since we're not chewers,
I'll honor "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers."
(The name hangs from my lips as from a dog's,
the deadest thing dug up, but my tail wags....)
We've been sound-bit, and couplets might well suit
these epitaphic days of ab and glute.

A lot has happened since your death, as Auden
had it, but nothing's changed. We kill for God-N-
Country, still. War has always been *the* way
to start a century. As of today,
we've got several stewing, backed by the new
old thinking born again between us: True
Triumphalism needs no exit-plan.
(A lot has happened since even the time,
the year, sweet Auden stopped and I began,
I really ought to cc this to him.)

Of course, this isn't as much a letter as
a summons. You're being transferred. Matters
are bleaker than I write. I've left unsaid
how deaths accrue daily upon each head;
how poets' protests settle in like a cough
too dry and weak to bother shaking off.
No jeremiad rings dire enough for
this germaphobic, antiseptic *War*
on Terror's lesson in plurality:
Add foes to maximize morality.

Heroes have never been more common. (A few
I wanted for myself, but I'll make do.)
Which is where you come in. I'll start you out
Smack dab in a Middle East you wrote about
but, like me, haven't seen. The trope's well-known,
but there's no place for growth like a Green Zone.
Think of those women and men, the fighting poor
who volunteered and found the draft's back door.
Not that they're left to spin there like spun tops
alone. Our leader loves his photo-ops.
He cheers the troops with scripts as clear as tantra,
as deft down on his knees as Cleopatra.

Why you? Because I know by heart the life
that put your books on every English shelf,
if not on reading lists for college courses—
Most knowledge comes from secondary sources
these days. Because your zeal for under cover
and/or action begat a whole new lover,
archetypally speaking. Because Iraq's
now also being bled to death by quacks.

Because I would have liked you whether or not
you liked me, though it might have been a sore spot.
(Like Auden, you snobbed grandly as Miss Bishop,

whose greatest moment came hauling a fish up.
And your *Don Juan* nets me Auden, too;
each age rewrites its Shakespeare, why not you?
Seven decades to the month have passed since he
addressed and mailed his letter, which used to be
a lifetime, now it's two or half—There's give,
depending on the coverage where you live.)

Because all acts of satire seem fated
to be eventually updated,
but name-dropping Coughlin and Dick Sheppard?
Why don't I iPod Blondie and Def Leppard,
or blast them from a box riding the Metro?
At least that's young enough to still be retro.
(The Cooper name is recognizable,
but use will only make more sizable
the risk of conjuring Grandma from a haze
age-appropriate for her new life-phase,
and not a cause for your concern.)

Pity

has frequent issues with Modernity,
I find, don't you?

Don't answer that, and I
won't overstep authorial bounds to try
and answer for you. (Though I've barely started,
the time is drawing near we must be parted.
It's murder/suicide for me to let
the build-up build up for one more couplet.
I mean, I may as well just tear a brick
from the Western Wall, while speaking Arabic.)
I'll keep your thoughts to myself, which will annoy
you, but our capacity to enjoy
a fellow poet's speech has been done for since
the advent of the annual conference.

Besides, even the mountains losing face
only results in their that-much-bigger base.
Already, SUVs outside the meeting
idle and serve as overflow seating;
their bumpers show each other how determined
they are that no one gets away un-sermoned.
(I wish all this proved real as, say, clean air,
freedom, or the benevolent millionaire.)

Few fans, My Lord, await *your* resurrection,
coming soon, but in a separate section.

(PART 2)

As when after beating an early boss,
you level up, and back your way across
the board with bonus strength and extra speed,
plus an earned combo, upgrades you will need
just to remain, at the next stage, immortal
and reach the checkpoint of the pulsing portal;
or when at supper a telemarketer
will call and, sometimes, rather than bark at her,
you listen (not for pitch, but pitch of voice,
its busyness of kindness and choice)
beyond her spiel and, by doodle and design,
connive a way to keep her on the line,
once I conjured you up, I spent a week
indulgent, deciding what to do.

I seek
a happening, like everybody else,
an outlet to recharge this screen-lit pulse.
My angst is anti-existential. Ends
and means are everywhere, the dividends
of too much faith and purpose in the world
that serve and starve by turns the serpents curled
beneath our ribs. We've lived and died so long

we think it's meet and proper to die young
once more. Which brings me back to you. And war.
Of course, we like to keep it clean and far.
Word-lists are worth 1,000 Pulitzer-
Prize winning photographs of bullets or
bomb fragments ripping parents from their kids
before they have the chance to grieve from SIDS.
Contrast them with our sudden stars who flash
the brightest when their planes and bodies crash,
those accidents enduring of the age
whose chiseled features prove too fit for stage
or office work, augmented eyes and lips
off-set by strong and narrow prows of ships
that once were noses on heads as innocent
as prepubescent sex and mild dissent.
Which brings you back to me, My Champion.
Poet-subjects have served me amply on
previous occasions. I need a fierce
and slender hand to end this little farce
with the style and force of a CNN newstream:
Lord B. Proud Member of Baghdad Slam Team.

Besides, like all of England now, you were
more an American-styled character,
which makes me think had you not died in Greece,
you might have made it over here, noblesse
oblige, if nothing else, foil to dafter
politicos who live ever after,
true students of the cowboy avocation
of firing from an undisclosed location.

Those guys are made-for-TV monsters and,
although we love a horror flick, demand,
polls show, can't meet increased supply, of late.
(The line between the sunk and saturate
is fine for any sponge. We Pluribus

Unums vote our consciences to worry less
about communalized better interest—
But squeezed enough, all sponges turn centrist.)
One-third alone approve a CEO
whose daily mispronouncements softly echo
his enemies. I've heard myself on tape
and want to sympathize, but stand agape
(in wonder, not in love) at what he says.
Printers once brayed their ink, but he just brays.

Which brings me back to you. My champion
satyr, reputed handy with a gun
and handier in love, a swimmer, too.
Byron, this time and space were made for you.
One double-click will let your Profile show
your pic to friends you count but never know:

“Can you believe it's been two centuries!”
“Let's set time aside to voice our stories.”

And how would yours begin if you could speak?
The English of your birth, your death in Greek?
Napoleonic French or Italian
when putting on your misanthropic mien?

(Forgive me, Lord. I tend to put the scar
before the open wound.) It's true we are
a country full of witnesses, Signor,
prismed by the fabulistic memoir...
Abbiamo mangiato molto bene,
but the price is well above what we can pay.

Our appetites are larger than these lives
that gravitate to blame and praise. Our loves
are pharmaceutical. (Is fame the spur
that drives us on before we find a cure?)

But what drove you? And what still forces me
away from fallow ground I take to be
Alaskan mind (with wilderness to roam
and lead ambition harmlessly back home?)

I fear I've talked too much and dropped again
the tone I took such trouble to maintain.
I seem to fall for every trap except
the trappings of success. (Confessed inept-
itude is no defense, but pre-empts the sport
of remonstrance, renouncement, and retort.)
Solipsism's a theory I can hold
as long as you, who did not set the mold.

(PART 3)

You didn't set the mold, so who am I
to break it?

Sweet of you not to reply—
clairvoyance is one of the lamer bar tricks.
(Plus, servants left in Greece your lungs and larynx.)

Still, I could use a little input, B.
Sequels get hard enough, but a trilogy?
I need some genuine hocus-pocus
unless I want to end up George Lucas.

It's not just form, but material, Byron,
and Research is no strong suit to try on
if you can't afford to buy. The manifest
of poets who wash out sailing midmast
on their good scholarship destined to swell
beyond the broad Tigris, née Hiddekel,
but fails to reach the stolid sea of scholars
who long to hear the lines that loose their collars
(to pinkish tongues of pretty girls and boys),

whose palimpsestic appetites for toys
might well engulf the whole Shatt al-Arab
and give the marshlands back from one bare rub.

But it is fruitless of me to debate these
commonplaces as old as the Euphrates
that only make my task harder. The times
demand their stories honestly told, and rhymes
tend to exact exaggerated candor,
more suitable for eulogy and slander:

He lived a holy life amid good works,
made senior partner, beloved by all his clerks,
but left behind the world, unfortunately,
before he cleared the cookies from his PC.

Born first a firebrand, he glared long enough
to make it easy to forgive his bluff
exterior. He hung a witch or two
on flimsy evidence while young, it's true,
and argued the liberal dispensation
of bunker bombs in lieu of conversation,
but cooled as he softened. He kept his mate
and purebreds on his mountaintop estate.
He even asked forgiveness and wished them well,
the multitude he once consigned to Hell.

You think I under-sympathize. Perhaps
I do. Perhaps interest in inner scraps
of publicly successful lives is crude
and lacks the philosophic attitude
to see that ethics operate within
the bounds of universal law, so when
I judge our George or their Saddam, I ought
to hope that on that unknowable ballot
cast in the skies, even a total loss

might earn a couple points, having done less than they had planned—Most sound businesses set a standard of production they can't meet.

(You set a standard I can't meet, but I digress...)

You've missed too much to catch up by watching old sitcoms on TV, which is the way time travelers in the movies get their questions answered. (Like how to slip you in Iraq without my losing grip! Maybe I'll drop you upstream, far from sea, to let you trickle down like prosperity in Reaganomics, unless, of course, the damned tributaries divert the flow and send you back by rivers underground, which can occur but isn't, they say, part of the plan.)

Forgive me, but you must be used to long delays. They steeped your corpse in spirits strong enough to keep your cheeks flushed for the full three months it took to hold your funeral. (But London treated you like a foreigner and wouldn't let you rest in Poet's Corner.) I won't let you rest, and now I've done you in again, sure as Shelley sailed the *Don Juan*.

I wonder if you knew he'd take that prank so hard. It was cruelly just, pulling rank on a sailor-poet who couldn't swim. Fate let it fall to you to bury him, a conclusion too easily reached to warn the rest of us who aren't precisely torn in two.

(Maybe I make too much of things and scratch until they bleed the bites and stings

that itch of life. He itched for life, or life-
in-death, but were you better to feel the knife
of age before you died?)

 You *were* better
and worse, which labels me aid and abettor,
and keeps you deep inside my mind, a kind
of promise, imperfectly imagined.
Stay there. To seek perfection is to seek
your death, they say. We draw nearer each week,
which means I'm closer now by three or four
than when I started, not that I'm keeping score.
(I'm keeping score, and hope for more volume,
less frequency.)

 It's time I sent you home,
My Lord, as predictable a remedy
as war after congressional hymnody.

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