

A pretty sight

DAVID O'MEARA





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DAVID O'MEARA

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55 ANS DE SOUTIEN DU GOUVERNEMENT DE L'ONTARIO AUX ARTS



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for Dorothy

Spoiler Alert

Wood warps.
Glass cracks.

The whole estate
goes for a song.

The cardboard
we used

to box up the sun
didn't last long.

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Occasional

As Poet Laureate of the Moon

I'd like to welcome you
to the opening of the Armstrong Centre

for the Performing Arts. I was asked to prepare
a special verse to mark
this important occasion. And I'd be the first

to confess: the assignment
stumped me. Glancing around my workspace's
dials and gauges, and the moonscape

through triple hermetic Plexiglas,
I struggled to settle on the proper content
to hard-text into the glow of my thought-screen.

In the progress of art and literature, the moon's
been as constant a theme as rivers or the glare
of the sun, though even after several bowls

of potent plum wine, a T'ang poet would never
have guessed, addressing this satellite across
the darkness, that someone would ever write back.

The Centre itself, I know, isn't much;
a duct-lined node bolted to the laboratory,
powered by sectional solar panels mounted

on trusses, parked not far from the first
Apollo landing. We live with bare minimum:
cramped, nutrient-deprived, atrophying

like versions of our perishables
in vacuum-pack. The lack's made my sleep
more vivid. Last night I dreamt I was in

a pool where cattle hydrated, then
fell tenderly apart in perfect lops of meat.
(I see a few of you nodding there in the back.)

So what good will one room do us? Maybe
none. Maybe this streamlined aluminum
will become our Lascaux, discovered by aliens

ages hence, pressing them to wonder what
our rituals meant, what they said of our hopes and fears.
Somewhere in this lunar grind, in the cratered gap

between survival and any outside meaning,
must be the clue to our humanity, the way
Camus once argued the trouble for Sisyphus

wasn't the endless failure to prop
a rock atop some hill, but the thoughts
he had on the way back down.

Which brings me to the astronauts of Apollo 11.
After snapping the horizon through the lens
of a single Hasselblad, knowing every boot tread

they left was eternal, they'd squeezed
through the hatch of their landing module, shut
and resealed it for return to Earth,

then discovered, due to cramped space
and the bulk of their spacesuits, they'd crushed
the switch for the ascent engine. The rockets failed

to activate. So Buzz Aldrin used part of a pen
to trigger the damaged breaker, toggling until
it fired the sequence for launch. This

was the quiet work of his engineer's mind.
He kept the pen for the rest of his years,
which is another kind of thinking, akin to *that*

slight pivoting, as Camus would call it,
when we glance backward over our lives.
What we keep in the pause between facts

might be the beginning of art. Which is where
we are in this room tonight. I'll have to stop there;
the teleprompter is flashing for wrap-up. Following

tonight's program, I'm happy to announce
an extra ration of Natural Form and H₂O
will be served by the airlock. I think

you're in for quite a show. So hold on
to your flight diapers as we cue the dancers
who've timed their performance to the backdrop

of Earthrise. There it is now in the tinted
north viewpoint. Look at that, folks. To think
they still find bones of dinosaurs there.

Background Noise

Home, my coat just off, the back room
murky and static, like the side altar of a church, so at first

I don't know what I hear:
one low, sustained, electronic note

keening across my ear. I spot
the stereo glow, on all morning, the CD

at rest since its final track, just empty signal now,
an electromagnetic aria of frequency backed

by the wall clock's whirr, the dryer droning in the basement,
wind, a lawn mower, the rev and hum of rush hour

pushing down the parkway. I hit the panel's power button,
pull the plug on clock and fridge, throw some switches,

trip the main breaker, position fluorescent cones to stop traffic.
Still that singing at the edge of things.

I slash overhead power lines, bleed the radiator dry,
lower flags, strangle the cat

so nothing buzzes, knocks, snaps or cries.
I lock the factories, ban mass

gatherings, building projects and roadwork,
any hobbies that require scissors, shears, knitting needles, cheers,

chopping blocks, drums or power saws. It's not enough.
I staple streets with rows of egg cartons. I close

the airports, sabotage wind farms, lobby
for cotton wool to be installed on every coast. No luck.

I build a six-metre-wide horn-shaped antenna, climb
the gantry to the control tower, and listen in.

I pick up eras of news reports, Motown, Vera Lynn, *Hockey
Night in Canada*, attempt to eliminate all interference,

pulsing heat or cooing pigeons, and yet there it is:
that bass, uniform, residual hum from all directions,

no single radio source but a resonance left over
from the beginning of the universe. Does it mean

I'm getting closer or further away? It helps to know
whether we're particle, wave or string, if time

and distance expand or circle, which is why
I need to learn to listen, even while I'm listening.

Socrates at Delium

What do I know? At least these
last two mornings since the Boeotian
ranks massed. The whole lot of us
had been camped inside their border, sea
at our backs. We thought we'd soon
be home in Athens. A set of cooking fires
still smoked behind the earthworks, evidence
of a hurried defence at the temple we'd occupied,
an obvious insult. The old seer took
the ram and made a lattice of its throat,
our counter-prayer
for the terror we hoped to inspire.
Across the dawn fields, the enemy trod
through the stripped orchards and wheat,
farmers like us, setting out cold in linen
and cloaks, the well-to-do armoured
for glory out front. After weeks of marching,
the suddenness of it: the general's shouts,
his interrupted speech passed down the lines,
our pipe marking the pace, and far off,
their war cry rending the November air
like a thousand sickles. The black doors
of each empty farmhouse watched our lines
clatter through stubbled stalks,
my arm already heavy from the shield.
'Stay tight, stay tight,' we called across
the bronze rims, cursing and half out of breath.
Then a new shout went out
and we spilled up the ridge at a run
into the Thebans' spear thrusts.

In the push, there's little room for a view;
dust scuffed up by thousands of men
gagged the air. Best to trust in detail,
watch for sharp jabs at your throat,
stay flush with the column, and above all else
don't fall. Not so easy with the friendly shields
pressing behind, and reaped furrows
snatching your balance. Our phalanx
held, shoving, and forced the Thebans
back over ground they'd claimed at midday.
But there was a too-easy feel to it,
as if we expected they'd break, and we'd slide
through their lines like lava from Hades.
Word spread of horsemen on the hill.
A trick? Who knew? We were servants
to rumour. A few turned and ran,
then the rest. Then I did too.
'Don't show them your backs,' I cried
to a group, shopkeepers from the look
of them. 'Do you want wounds *there*
when your corpse is exchanged?'
That turned them around.
We still had our swords. Scavenging cracked
spear-lengths to keep the cavalry off,
we backpedalled over corpses, boulders
and olive roots into dusk. That was two days ago.
More rumours follow us to Attica: Hippocrates
dead, how we were outnumbered,
whispers of the slaughter chittering in our ears
like broken cart wheels. Though we know the direction
home, we stall, not from plague that still strays
in its streets, but the shame of retreat.

Night, the cooking fires again.
We who are left, battered stragglers, scoop gruel
and wait for orders to seek out our dead.
Now, on the edge of the firelight, a rhapsode
recites an ancient passage, his voice recalling Troy,
the dark-beaked ships and grief for Patroclus.
We were brave enough, but couldn't hold.
What use is a story or a song?

The Afterlives of Hans and Sophie Scholl

'Allen Gewalten zum Trotz sich erhalten'

'Despite all the powers closing in, hold yourself up'

– Goethe

After the war, he stays underground,
still wary of the necessary
horse trades and occupying powers.

*Le Monde, Die Zeit, New York
Times; Vietnam, Rwanda, Srebrenica:*
years go by. In the stone arch of a busy

coffee house, Sophie is waving him over
past the billiards table, unfazed, looking
for all the world like she's just

breezed in from 1933
and there's no nightmare to come.
But the picture's all wrong, her face

unaged, and where are Alex,
Willi or Christoph?
Sophie sighs, presses

a hand against her brother's cheek.
'Hans, it's because we died.'
She describes the trial,

its forgone verdict, the bulbs
that burned all night in their cells,
the shared last cigarette

in the courtyard. Hans has turned
the details over again,
his memory tightening the blurs

like a Leica lens while the tension
in his face subsides
in the respite of knowing

at least they tried. They're even laughing,
aping the parrot shrieks
of Friesler's indignation,

gossiping over the Führer's last pose,
Hans with a finger
cocked against his temple.

They order *café viennois*.
Sophie pokes at the dollops of whip
while ordered traffic crawls

past the painted glass
of the window. The newest papers
in wooden clips

fanned across
the billiard nap. Skinhead rallies,
latest dictatorships. Hans makes

another hopeless gesture.
Did everything change, or nothing?
Coffees done, they consider the years

like doors they never entered,
as if history's just a lot
of people trying

to get from one room
to another. Outside, Hans
mounts the steps of a slowing tram.

Sophie ties her hair back
with an abalone barrette
as she turns

down Leopoldstrasse
and waves, looking for all the world
like she's going to haunt it.

Vicious
(or, On Dissent)

CHARACTERS

Socrates

Sid Vicious

SOC.

Wait, stranger! Why the rush? This place
just turns upon itself, so to leave is only a step
to hurrying back. What's the difference
if you pause and talk? Those scars
across your chest and face: did you once march
with spear and shield? I fought
at Potidaea and Delium. I'm Socrates, of Athens.

SID.

Yeah, I've heard that bit. Righteous bastard
with all the questions. I must be dead,
to run into the likes of you.

SOC.

Was it an accident? A sudden
fall from craggy heights? Or did you disturb
some starving animal in its sleep?
Who gave you those injuries?

SID.

I did.

SOC.

You?

SID.

I cut my chest with broken glass.

SOC.

And the scabs on the back of your hands,
were they not left by spear tips?

SID.

That was just a laugh with a cigarette, some game
we'd play in the Hampstead bedsit.

SOC.

What was the purpose?

SID.

It was funny. It was supposed to give
them second thoughts about trying to smack me.
Show them that anything they'd try
isn't half of what I've had already.

SOC.

Who are they who'd seek to harm you?

SID.

Suits and coppers. Punters in the audience. The fucking lot.

SOC.

What were the reasons for their enmity?

SID.

They didn't like us. We were wasters
and fuck-ups who wouldn't settle for what they
stood for: blind acceptance, apathy and moderation.

We pushed some buttons. Got kitted out in handcuffs,
leather, safety pins and razor blades. Nicked stuff.
Punch-ups. Three-chord songs with aggro-lyrics.
Style as revolt, arrogance over ability, violence
if the music failed. Like Rotten said, it's worth
going where you're least wanted,
since there's so much more to achieve.

SOC.

Were you an actor, or a rhapsode?

SID.

A what?

SOC.

A person skilled in reciting verse. Who takes the stage
at festivals with words stitched together so dramatically
that the rhythm of the music loads the crowd with feeling.
Years ago I met another rhapsode, who came from Ephesus.
I convinced him that the passion of his art passes through him
from gods into the audience; in effect he becomes possessed.
That when the beat and tone are right, frenzy builds,
and like the bacchants, he can momentarily lose his mind.

SID.

Yeah, sounds about right.

SOC.

When you look down upon the spectators
from the platform and see them weeping,
awestruck at the power of your tale, is it proof
you are a conduit between the gods
and the common crowd?

SID.

Are you taking the piss?

SOC.

What was the source of your enthusiasm?

SID.

Speed. Heroin.

SOC.

Are these some other, newer gods? What was their purpose?

SID.

Purpose, mate?

SOC.

Let me ask you this:

do you claim they brought disorder
into your minds, while still protecting you?

SID.

Yeah.

SOC.

Tell me, what is the meaning of virtue?

SID.

Fuck off.

SOC.

Remember, I was once like you, the stubborn
rube who stood against society's rules,
then was put on trial for revering new gods

and corrupting youth. I too pulled faces
at the world, and shouted down
the ruling powers. Didn't a jury find you
guilty of crimes against the state
and sentence death?

SID.

I got fixed for good before they had the chance.

SOC.

What was the vehicle of your death?

SID.

Drugs. It was the drugs, mate.

SOC.

Me, too. This was equally my fate.

SID.

Oh yeah? What did you in?

SOC.

Hemlock.

SID.

Where'd you get it?

SOC.

It's brought by ship from Crete or Asia Minor.

SID.

Must be good.

SOC.

The effect is satisfactory. Your legs feel heavy,
then retreat from feeling anything,
as if a cold blade went tickling up your thighs
to snip and trim off portions of your body
with a thousand nipping cuts. It leaves a chill,
a glaze that frosts toward your heart,
pinching off your breath. It was the punishment
they prescribed, all because I asked
too many questions and failed to compromise.
Ever since, I've been cited as an example
of how to live the good life. You see the paradox?

SID.

Listen, geezer, fuck right off. I wasn't
looking for a dialogue, just the karzy.
But if all this tripe you're laying out
is meant to serve me up as some stunned muppet
for your logic to outsmart, I've got a few words
you might need to chew on first,
since I'd hardly time to write some weepy memoir.
All that's left of who I was
are press interviews, Pistols footage
and video of me in skids, scarred and junkie-thin,
dancing to an Eddie Cochran song in the sheen
of a scuzzy mirror. When I came on the scene,
I was just naïve, then turned volatile;
they shoved me in the spotlight, stitched me up
with all the drugs and hype, then threw me to the wind.
I couldn't get my head right, and never surfaced.
Since you're so keen on painting
you and me as being two bin bags from
the same rubbish, I'll tell you what: the question

isn't virtue, but how you exercise it.
You can't know if a wheel rolls till you nudge it
down a slope. So where was all that search
for virtue's definition when the pro-Spartan Thirty
lodged their regime in your democracy's agora
and started topping the opposition?
Suddenly, you were keeping mighty quiet.
Remember Heraclitus: *ethos anthropos daimon*?
You got yours, didn't you?

SOC.

Are you suggesting I deserved to die that way?

SID.

No, mate, I'm just saying you must have seen
it coming, like I should've, coppers everywhere
and the tabloids predicting the end of the world.
Backing slogans like 'No Future,'
I had to go the distance, didn't I? Once the Pistols
imploded, I'd have been a pretty sight, in silk
and power tie, tugging a handgrip on the Tube,
counting off the platforms on the way to the office
and some thicko with a Green Day T-shirt shouting,
'Hey, weren't you Sid Vicious? Yeah, you did it
your way, looks like!' I think I see that now.
This afterlife must be the best detox going:
a clear head and all this time to wonder
what I think, now there's time to think it over.

SOC.

You speak as if the person you refer to
were someone else, a completely other soul
than the one you've left behind.

SID.

Look, I don't know. There's no fucking logic
in it, right? How can we know ourselves?
We change. We backpedal. We try again.
One of you blokes once said the soul's
an activity, not a state. That would give me hope.
That way, I could've worked through the trap
of being me forever. What a laugh.
This still isn't you or me talking anyway,
just proxies in a poem. We never got to play
our parts; you'd your man Plato spinning
yarns about how ridiculously smart
and virtuous you were, while I got Gary Oldman.
So what's one more tosser playing puppets
with his hand up our collective arse?

SOC.

So who are we?

SID.

A monkey's tea party, for all I know.
Counterweight to the comfortable
and approved. A fishbone in the throat of those
who never bothered asking
whether wealth and power were such
gasping pursuits. But what's a better way
to go than making one unholy noise
when you've got the world's ear?
You might've been an annoying prat,
but I'd back you every time, even while
you were turning blue across a mattress.
At night, I hear feedback so constant
I think I haven't dreamt it. There's

no wind here, no sky or streets,
not even a proper pissar,
and I'm with my mind all the time.