

American Incident

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BRIAN HENRY



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for Andrew Zawacki
&
i.m. John Forbes, 1950–1998

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“Adorno on the Gold Coast”: John Forbes’s “Ode to Karl Marx” (“At the moment tho’ this set up / works for me, being paid to sit and write & // smoke, thumbing through Adorno like *New Idea*.”)

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American Incident

Barely Wept

The failure to observe the power of ritual in daily life
brokers a familial debacle: matricide, patricide, infant-

Sucksters all, the children mill as if truly occupied
by something other than posturing, sartorial pleasings
pleasing because of visual acuity.

Forgetting the equation between cause and affect,
the boy in the center holds his long face a moment
too long, and the effect falls so flat his face falls, flies
toward the ground on which he can no longer stand.

The rug will be swept, combed for evidence;
the walls will be scrubbed of the life feeding:
only then will the cricket leap from the drain
to hurl itself into the room, damp from its trip
and prepared for a speech, if it were given speech.

Such a gathering recalls the tempests of yesteryears
when moths awoke in new hampshires and worms
shut down for want of real moisture, the land fucked
dry and parceled into polyhedrons ungraphable.

Deliver the goods, Teach, or the little ones surrounding
you might realize you know nothing about angles
and squares, nothing about your own childish desires.

Hardly here, the boy you see yourself in
picks up the pieces of himself he dropped

and moves.

He moves.

Marginalia

flutter through the air's unlikely practices
with me at the curb wondering how seriously to take myself,
if I've already flubbed it with an intro of abstraction
or if what first came to mind is passable.
I promise to get concrete real quick.
The beer truck propels gutter dust up and around it,
my hair a crisp site of paranoia, these shirt sleeves
delegates to a foundry's inane reunion.
My city is being torn apart. Orange
painted onto the sidewalk warns against digging
but the men dig anyway, jacking the street to life.
Black pipes susurrate as if moving
something along, within themselves.
I cannot cross, there is nowhere to cross
the street because here there is no street.
The pear trees were pulled last week.
I would have wished for a storm to rip through
and shear the trees from their perches,
but that yields nothing but a Tonka truck
rusting into the driveway. I would buy that truck
but my wallet is empty and I cannot fit it in
my pocket or under my chin
despite the extra flesh come lately.
I would say *No sweat*, but I'd be a lying bastard.
I would say *May I please Forget the price Take pity
on me I need something like pity you see*
but the energy such words require eludes me,
and I've convinced myself of the merits of poverty.
As the city, my city, is being stripped
of places to escape the sun for a spell.

Pariah

As if the shudder you call a breath could keep you
on top of the currents crossing your house
from the back and the garden side

where the perforated cow
cooking over briquets and propane
moves you to close the window

and you lose your mastery of the atmosphere
and you lose the atmosphere
grape-shinned and flagrant

despite your offer to be opened
for vivisection by the neighborhood
vet and displayed as a pro bono wonder . . .

Forget the direction the ceiling fan takes
as it works on your skin

the shadows it slices across your face
while you lie on the floor for sleep

the door mat a rough pillow
allowing you your accomplishment for the day:

making due with what a room has given you.

Patricide in C Minor

He considered telling her he would take on her pain if he could, or half of it, but assumed the thought, the sentiment, lacked originality, the sort of punch she preferred, and feared disappointing her with a sentimental sentiment, her resultant disdain, so let it go unsaid.

Patricide in C Minor

One could accelerate the rate of dying such that she died the next day, or at least became so ill she lost cognizance of what was said around her, and allow the sentiment to fester into guilt, but the overt manipulation inherent in that approach would alienate in its obviousness. One could make a motif of the unsaid, spread it across her story—choice integument—or front-load the piece with speech held back and deliver it, that much stronger for the emotional connection developed, at story's end. One could wake him late in the morning, touched emotionally by her pained sleep, and

Patricide in C Minor

How crushing, she thought, flipping through the day's mail. Nothing but rejections. Jobs, middling graduate programs, ex-friends: all had in common their disregard for her, her skills. However one looks at it, she mused, however I look at it, the arrival of bad news can never co-opt the absence of news. News needs no void to fill. There is no saturation point.

Am I Offended

Imagine, if you will, dying
by scratching, skin so inflamed
you rake it beyond repair.

Rakish angles will get you just so far
then you must rely on blood pressure,
the softness of skin in all its forms.

Confronted with a choice
of deaths, the most sensational
competes with the most painless.

The new architecture software
allows the user to peer
through plaster and particle board.

Of course the buildings are
uninhabited, therefore sad,
like the person peering at the screen.

It is well-known and widely
lamented that cubicles demean
those working within their reach.

Something about the segments,
the conflicting pastels; something
about the velocity of sound.

See how the lines wrap around
to what one could call a beginning,
as if a narrative line were pursued?

See how I offer myself to you
by pretending to retreat, to pull
the rug from where you're standing?

You could say I'm telling you
I'm fucking you while I'm fucking you,
and you would be justified, sure.

Somehow this seems less offensive
than fucking you while you're asleep,
fucking you while I pretend not to.

Perhaps there's some charm, honesty
at least, in telling a person
they're about to be fucked.

Perhaps it's a shit approach, just wrong
and desperate in its spinning
of language into lines and lines

past the boundaries established
at the outset, and for no other reason
than the look of what's contained.

Does the form contain anything,
keep me from pissing on the heads
of those who most need it?

Or am I taking a piss
too far past the point of propriety
(assuming that point can be found)?

My previous behavior was appalling,
being previous: tradition calls for respect,
structure requires rigidity, chastity

the be-all and end-
all for us all
forever.

Hold to one position and refuse to slacken
your grip, coast onto the shoulder
when the tank is empty.

The graveyard on the front license plate
grows with each passing mile,
an insecticide of the vilest sort

if not for the familiar melody scratching through—
an investment opportunity without equal
in its capacity for erasure.

Patricide in C Minor

But the lapse of integration precluded the introduction of different races into the neighborhood, and further segregation was the result. Increased isolation, increased stratification across social shelves. Largesse as populist impossibility.

Patricide in C Minor

From the basement he could see light canting through, could see the edges of furniture, the placement of things. He found the bed's edge below which he could hear nothing but box springs.

Patricide in C Minor

When he felt the other's scrotum knocking into him even as he arched his back like he thought a cat would when it was being hard-fucked, he realized he was having sex *but not fucking* for the first time. Aside from the occasional tickle from previous girlfriends and his mother checking for worms, he never experienced penetration by another. Even as he squirmed between discomfort and pleasure, liking the fact that he could not decide whether or not he liked a penis inside him, *deep* inside him, he thought of Jennifer, how she rejected his offer for sex on political terms—wouldn't be penetrated by a man (though his tongue was somehow acceptable)—and he decided it was a good time to jack off, thinking of Jennifer, being penetrated in a most apolitical manner.