

Deniability

*When faith and politics mix:
poems from a
forthcoming volume*

George Witte

Uh-oh

No photograph records
that day's unmaking roar.

Things ripped from skins,
words from definitions.

Letters distilled until
incomprehensible,

whistles, clicks, thrummed diphthongs
an underwater song

too deep for human ears.
We wept, or cursed in fear,

beseeched unanswered phones
Please God, alone,

walked home in single file.
The broken and defiled

crept close within our space,
affording grace

we disregarded, lost:
two beams a blackened cross,

missing person fliers,
watch warped by fire.

No explanation why;
the perfect alibi

your word, no witnesses.
You saw this coming, yes?

Our brazen structures razed,
immense collapse the praise

you craved, that roar's
descending, perfect chord.

Hearts and Minds

The heart recoils where mind's inclined
To justify as war expense.
Smells the euphemizing liar's
Sweat condense, penetrate, and dry
Beneath crisp uniform and tie
In rings no cleanser can erase.
Denies the truth when truth's denied,
Withholds opinion pending facts
Revealed irrelevant by faith:
All damage is collateral,
Intelligence reliable,
Election verifiable,
Our casualties acceptable.
The heart believes where mind relies
On evidence from satellites,
Translated cellphone intercepts,

Raw film one cringes to behold
With eyes askance yet curious,
Passerby become apostle
Having witnessed demonstration,
Persuaded not by risen life
But murder's power to appall
The silent heart and free the mind
To contemplate its purposes.

Friendly Fire

That dog won't hunt, nor ostrich fly,
that trout won't hasten to the hook.
That staged withdrawal plan's a joke
crusaders whisper while they die.

The rationale's irrational,
mission misallied, delicious
lie from tongues entwined when business
interests coincide. That skull

won't house another soul, which roams
untethered, restlessly between,
cannot ascend, by none redeemed
or mourned, light withering to gloam.

Our maddened hounds have fled to chase
the shades of flightless birds. Undone
we blindly fire into the sun,
that witness prayer won't erase.

You Break It, You Bought It

I can't take you anywhere.
Now we own this dangerous
Mistake, combustible beyond repair.
Signs were posted, plain as day:
Do Not Touch Unless You Plan To Purchase.
How many times do I have to say?
Your father will be furious.

Divine advice aside,
What makes you think you own this place?
Maybe your consultant lied,
Amused by earnest plans, and sent
You forth crusading in misguided grace.
Soldiers fall while tidying dissent;
You subsidize the mischief he creates.

So stack the dead in pyramids,
Join mouth to groin, whatever most humiliates.
Engineers and architects grid
Shops where craters yawn, retail paradise
Inviting every human taste.
There nothing is forbidden, no one dies,
And every broken orphan is replaced.

The Hero

He shifted weight from toe to heel, erect,
rage buttoned down in medaled blues,
meticulous, correct,
observing our authority. Refused

the chair left free by everyone,
heard levelly all latecomers' respects,
surrounded but alone.
We gobbled sandwiches and antidotal juice,

our noncombatant share of spoils,
roast beef glistening on teeth.
His eyes were terrible.
He'd come to front a writer's pitch, beneath

contempt: a book, adrenal rush
for spectators and open casket for the souls
of friends he'd lost. Voice hushed,
professionally wreathed

with tact long practice brings, his ghost began:
Dug into a fogbound ridge
above a village in Afghanistan,
his SEALs surveyed the video mirage,

their highest valued head,
who walked in white among his clan,
inviting snipers, unafraid,
his martyrdom our privilege.

Then bells invaded their redoubt.
Bearded elders gazed at them, absurd,
chewing gravely, lost in thought,
goatherds shouting foreign words

the team mistook for praise,
so offered cigarettes. The ambush caught
them from behind, amazed,
blind with blood and mortared

deaf, razed by enfilade.
The last alive, legs shot to shit,
face torn half-off by hand grenade
he killed five terrorists,

furtive men with skinning knives
who hunted him and paid
for getting close, their lives
his to resurrect in nightly visits.

Eyes askance, the hero winced.
His writer paused to bask in self-regard.
Orchestrating silence
he measured our diminishment, prepared:

Ya'll think this book is worth your while?
Will it please your audience?
Your kids are next, it's all a dress rehearsal
now. Aghast, we stared

each other down, lunchmeat stiffening, curled dry,
unable to believe the obvious,
as if a witness to Thermopylae
brought news too true to trust—

the banquet hall in disarray,
our not-for-attribution lies
confessed, armies swept away
like table scrapes before a god's disgust.

G. WITTE

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Failure to Comply

Seduced by legalese
we undress piece by piece

belts and suits penitential shoes
inspectors wand us through

surrender laptops cellphones keys
to mortgaged kingdoms property's

our status quo and credit line
complicit citizens

except that woman's squalling flock
with any luck they're screwed Ziploc

insufficiently transparent
we wink in mutual assent

guess she didn't get the memo
what goes for us means you

eye level screen restrictions scroll
no scissors fluids alcohol's

allowed if duty free
one nation under penalty

of law look who's going postal
I'll give you something to surveil

she slings the diaper bag
unwadded contents hemorrhage

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POEMS

goldfish wipes cartoon brand pull-ups
suspicious sippy cup

my god what garbage cops converge
around the demiurge

one bends to confiscate it spoils
of war her baby wails

Motherfuckers eyes wild
she's doubled over down and held

arms bent behind her cuffed
okay enough's enough

we back away say nothing no
one notices us go