

Robert B. Shaw

Muscle Man

The child wasn't scared of skeletons.
They looked easy to kick apart; they had
nothing to see or smell with; they could only
go on grinning with their silly teeth.
But on a nearby page of his big children's
gateway book designed for future doctors,
there was a character that proved disturbing
enough to give him nightmares now and then.
"Muscle Man" he called it, sensibly:
a vivid anatomical illustration
of a man with skin removed to show
all of his muscles as they clung to one
of those unscary skeletons and made it
a form to flinch at.

For intent observers,
there comes a point at which monstrosity,
without giving up strangeness, grows familiar.
Poring over the image periodically,
the boy could not have said when, in his mind,
the thing got dignified by pronoun slippage —
quite soon, though, "he" had muscled "it" aside.
And this made Muscle Man, if anything,
even more creepy. Everything about him
repelled: the muscles' bulgings and striations,
their swathing of the shape like some organic
mummy wraps, or (was it?) rubber bands,
gathered in sheaves, stretched taut from head to toe.
The color was a kind of grayish-pink
(the boy would think disgustedly of earthworms).
Unlike a skeleton's, this hairless head
had two eyes looking out of it. At *him*.
No one could look more naked (after all,
somewhere, out of the picture, thankfully,
all three layers of skin had been shucked off).
Some smaller pictures in the margins showed him
using himself — swinging a sledge hammer,
plying a shovel, bending a bow. He looked

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like someone sent from an unfriendly planet,
engaged in staging gruesome parodies.
Who'd want to meet him? The boy felt relief
each time he closed the book on him; and each
time he opened it he felt a sense
of clamminess when coming near that page.
His visits to the image petered out
once he moved on to books with denser text
and pictures that were plainly not totemic.

For reasons well beyond his fixed aversion,
he became something different from a doctor
when he grew up. As just another patient,
over the years he put out of his mind
the flayed, intimidating bogy-figure
until he tore first one, and then his other
rotator cuff, and couldn't lift his arms
above his shoulders without stifling
a yell that just as well could be a curse.
Talk about the return of the repressed . . .
Muscle Man wasn't any more appealing
to him in retrospect, but he could see
that any muscles that might give him grief
were no one's but his own, so long neglected,
paying back insults now beneath his skin.

Devices

In '40s movies that our parents watched
this was a standard scene: an empty room,
which someone had just left or not yet entered,
and on the table a black telephone
ringing away with no one to pick up.
A plot device to send lives off the rails:
She will not learn that he is still alive.
He will not know that she's forgiven him.
She will assume he's gone for good to Burma.
He will believe her parents have succeeded
in poisoning her mind against his pleadings.
The phone stops ringing. News does not get through.
They and all others doomed by such bad timing
head for the wars or marry the wrong people,
and end up suffering for most of the film.

That black phone with its black snake of a cord
(one thinks of Henry Ford's first Model Ts:
"Any color they want as long as it's black")
updated earlier calamitous
miscarriages of tidings: lagging couriers
leaving Romeo and Juliet
to blunder through sequential suicides;
as well as countless intercepted letters
destroyed through malice or possessiveness,
adding an easy poignancy to novels
(novels, of course, from when we still wrote letters).

But now these tragedies of happenstance
are lost to us. Shrunk and minus its cord
the phone goes with us now, snug in a pocket,
vibrating as though with its own pulse.
There is no way for us to miss connection,
no way to evade it if we wished.
The good and bad news find us where we are;
the old excuse of being uninformed,
however tempting, can't now be believed.
Breakups happen, but the couples trade
remote reproaches while they walk through airports,
make their own mess without the folderol
of interfering relatives conspiring.

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We got so tired of being out of the loop
we've made the loop our daily route to plod.
Can it be phones feel free without their cords?
How free do we feel, tied to our devices
which are different, but not different enough
from what the Prayer Book, soberly probing, calls
the devices and desires of our hearts?

Around the Block

Why must I always be the first to show
my face at any meeting, party, dinner?
Tired of being everyone's precursor,
I park a good way down the street from where
this evening's hosts are no doubt occupied
with pulling plates and bottles out of cupboards,
or mounding salted nuts in little bowls,
or any of the chores they'd rather not
be tied up in just when I ring the doorbell.
It's a big enough block to stroll around
in order to arrive on time, not early.
As I pace around one corner, then a second,
the slowly gentrifying neighborhood
reminds me of the one my first few years
were spent in, although that one, unlike this,
was headed down, not up, and none too slowly.
There are the same Victorian mansard houses,
some better kept than others, and the same
postage-stamp yards with sparse platoons of grass
and stoic trees, new leaves dusty already.
No one is out: they must be at their tables.

Now that I've turned the corner I must look
over my shoulder to see the sunset deepen,
pink tensing to an operatic orange,
courtesy, perhaps, of some pollution.
Even with that gigantic flare behind me,
my body throws no shadow I can see . . .
This is one of those times I feel that time
is growing porous, this place now providing
a serviceable replica of my
pre-kindergarten *mise-en-scène* . . . where am I?
A sound comes from a house I'm just approaching —
a stubborn window grudging its way up —
and there, framed in that upstairs corner lookout,
an older woman peers impassively,
gaze fixed not on me but on the sunset.
My grandmother used to sit like that each evening,
giving the sinking sun appreciation
for a few quiet moments, staying sometimes

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until the twilight overtook the sky.
Just as I tell myself I shouldn't stare,
the woman introduces a false note
by lifting to her lips a cigarette.
Grandma never, ever smoked, of course.
(She made me promise: if I ever smoked,
I wouldn't smoke in bed. I gave my word.)

Eyes turned to the sidewalk, I pick up
my pace as sentences in counterpoint
scratch out a pointless rut of inner protest:
This isn't all that much like Philadelphia.
The trees there stood taller, and the street
had to be wider (room for the trolley rails).
It would be warmer there this time of year.
And the air had its own damp rusty smell . . .

I thought I'd come too early, but it feels
as though I've come too late. I check my watch.
Another corner: one more after that
and I should be where I should be on time.
And sunset maybe will have burnt itself out.