

Robert B. Shaw

Back Story

From middle age through what comes next
my back (belt-level) has been vexed
by twinges lately grown to pangs
(the way lit fuses lead to bangs).
A recent X-ray brought to light
just what it is that isn't right:
a disc has been disintegrating.
Whittled down, well, it's simply . . . grating.
Down at its base, my spinal column
molders on, mean as Tolkien's Gollum.

Darts from its quiver are dispersed
throughout the day, but morning's worst:
getting upright is hard to do,
assuming what will then ensue.
"Discomfort" would be understating
what I've been used to find awaiting.

Up in its penthouse, though, the brain
surveys with stoical disdain
the sparks my neural net transmits.
If there's a problem, it's not its.
With less-than-lukewarm sympathy
for what it deems the lesser me,
it doles out each day's bitter pill:
a pep talk touting Strength through Will,
so Boy Scout leader-like in tone
it adds a second cause to groan.
When it's in that sententious mood,
calling it "brain" seems almost rude:
its favored soubriquet is "Mind."
It brands my lagging unrefined,
thinks I should dwell on Higher Things,
not body's qualms and whimperings.
Woes of the flesh aren't worth a snort
when it's inspired to exhort:

*“So: vertebrae are misaligned?
What matters Matter? Heed your Mind!
Time to put both feet on the floor!
Nothing you haven’t done before.
Your clock is buzzing. Just who set it?
No one but you, and don’t forget it.
Get yourself up, and one good stretch
will stop you feeling like a wretch.
Quit dawdling! That’s a mattress edge;
it isn’t the Grand Canyon’s ledge.
Hop to it, Robert! Show some spine!”*

“Be glad to, if it wasn’t mine.”
I say, or ought to, in rebuttal.
But it’s too early to be subtle.
Mostly my comebacks come as sighs
or grunts, the while I temporize.
Our dawn debate, habitual
enough to count as ritual,
runs in the same disgruntled way
day after disenchanting day,
mired in standoff, Mind and me,
postponing verticality. . . .

Then I get up. It hurts like hell.
But I’ve reserved my right to yell.

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A Neighbor's Rooster

The sole apparent rooster
strutting in hearing range
emotes as is expected,
but here is what is strange:

it isn't only daybreak
that keeps him on his toes.
From morning on to twilight
he fountains out his crows.

His ardent *cocorico*
(must be a Gallic bird)
repeatedly announces
that daylight has occurred,

unless that's vocal ogling
of unenamored hens
who yearn, each time they hear him,
for segregated pens.

Or maybe he's campaigning
for a much grander post
than what he's got to perch on.
A pedestal, almost?

From there, he'd broadcast edicts
to anyone with ears
trying to get some work done
even as darkness nears.

What ails him? Or, what thrills him?
That noise we've come to know,
rasping out raw — why is it
exultant even so?

His "sunnie seed," I'm thinking
(on that, see Henry Vaughan),
confoundingly has burgeoned
to mark each hour as dawn.

His notes are never dulcet,
but in them I discern
a zeal for standing dazzled
that most have yet to learn.

If so, for the duration,
let's tender him some slack.
Wise to his looking forward,
not falteringly back,

let's count him as a herald:
this votary of sun
who crowns his hours by hailing
beginnings re-begun.