

I SAW IT ALL

a short story in verse
by C. John Holcombe

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I Saw It All

I saw it all:

the judge's tone
from condescending fall to quarried stone:
The defendant will answer to the questions put.
I tried: more laughter, and was probed again:
lamentable to watch a tenderfoot
in courtroom manners pit his acumen
against the courtroom bullyboys in words
of explanation, point out all he did
was publicize the post, no more than that —
against the regulations, but a bid
to stay abreast of where his game was at.
I used one woman badly where the great
impose their vast infractions on the state.

My stomach clenched. I heard the gallery fall silent as the eyes bore down on me: *Unanimous, your Lordship. Guilty.* It was done. Completely. I could lodge appeal, and have my case reviewed, but bit by bit the courts would let it drop: an imbecile would know society had little time for idiocy like mine. In going down the narrow stairway to the courtroom cell, I'd feel the weight of precedent, the Crown loom high above me, and the pungent smell of cold grey concrete hit me: what I'd face unless and quietly I left this place.

What could I do? Silvered Sir Roderick's head inclined itself towards me, though had said but little, teasingly, as I had done when first they brought our friends in from the Yard: who went through noting how the place was run, to whom give preference, whom press hard. Two months, and slowly, week by week, I went on charming with a devilish glee: *That's clearly possible, but I can say no hint of that was authorized by me.* They opened notebooks, closed them, glanced away. No: no one bothers with a stray remark for all it light up, like a match, the dark.

*Yours is a difficult and onerous task,
gentlemen, no doubt, but you will ask
for any help you need. Here nothing's lost
or can be covered up. We've been on through
a sea of correspondence—at some cost,
I'd add, to schedules we were working to.*

They'd smile. I'd smile. A pause, and then I'd ring
the bell and in would come my secretary,
to pose at them, pour tea, hand biscuits out:
the well-endowed Fiona, fragrantly
she'd drift in front of them, in place throughout
as friend and more, and put a hint across
to treat with deference her helpful boss.

How modestly they saw her, how she'd drape
patrician manners on a winning shape,
and smile ingenuously, when they could view
the blue eyes friendly to them, and could sense
how full the body was, which takes its cue
in swelling quietly from a long defence
of hemline dropping to the small court shoe.
But all bound in, a recklessness and weight
controlled by breeding and decorum, holding
up by never stooping to that state
of careless falling on them and enfolding—
such as gives a restlessness to lives
spent too much sleeping quietly by their wives.

I took them round, and said, *So here we come
to Whitehall's policy of keeping mum.*
They laughed, but warily, a game of cat
and mouse they slowly warmed to, learned to play
by rules of my designing, merely that,
although of course by promise and delay
I held them firmly in my palm, agreed
as much as possible, conferred, applied
myself to every aspect of the leak,
assumed it came from here, that someone lied.
*No more can I account for it, that streak
of malice, than you'd want to take the heat
for some poor plodder lapsing on his beat.*

Sir Roderick doddered after, fought
each breach of privilege as he ought.
Those famous faculties were still in tune
with what the Government would want to do.
His little game, high destiny at noon
for anyone he'd want to pass on to:
a doubtful policy in truth, which now
was choosing bright-faced Hewison or me.
My rival is that earnest, useful tool
for politicians keen on strategy,
but for the rest of us a nodding fool
who turning with each point of view
has not the slightest notion what to do.

I do and always did: the one who played
the outside to the centre, never stayed
for explanation, fall-out, taken blame
for what the meek in spirit always get.
Life is what it is, a bruising game,
and those who are nonentities, or let
themselves be thought so, have no role to play—
more, say, than critics get to write the script,
or those who timidly await their drinks
at merit's overcrowded bar have sipped
much at life's pre-eminence or sinks.
I have at both, of course, and why I'm in
with tricky Tony as his pal and kin.

For him so effortless. His frank blue eyes,
disarming boyishness, and how he tries
to understand you, make you laugh: good lord
the man had genius to frame a war
in not too subtle falsehoods we applaud
by then electing him to think of more.
Such stoic martyrdom, for having killed
Iraqi poor with sanctions, promptly calls
their feeble fight back grossest wickedness.
Illegal flights and tortures: how he stalls
to bring his Bushite cronies to redress.
A very Daniel in the blaze of eyes:
how must his God be great, or he be wise!

10. Despite our manifesto, all the lies of equal and a caring state, the guise was all so masterly in veiled contempt of country, cabinet and commons. Most would quail at questioning, but, made exempt from just this scrutiny, he acts as host who, when his dinner party breaks to many voices, moves them on, majestically.

The path of peace must sometimes be through war.

We fight for lives we hold in common decency.

Quite, quite brilliant, knowing what we're for is bombs and killings, where for him he'll look to cash and chat-shows from the latest book.

But all so different when he came to power: the cheers and handshakes of that smiling hour on which he'd build a quiet, solid base of power so absolute, that no defaulters from his policies he'd need to face, or opposition from his own supporters. A Britain sold off like the family silver, but all so different and the place to be beneath a glittering skyline wholly new—except for the Lords, who with their history of caution, prudence and of thinking through, were now anachronisms from an age that cramped performance on a wider stage.

They had to go: and by the simple ruse
of calling democracy the power to chose
they did. Everything that might confuse us
in a flash replaced: just them or us.
Doubts, complexities—they stood as Judas:
treacheries not worth his minder's cuss.
His show on TV was the modern House:
a stage for slap-stick actors where he knew
to mask the phoney with a candid look.
Ineluctably, impenetrably there grew
more legislation on the statute book
as Tony tightened up the terror laws
he'd made more needful by his doubtful wars.

In fact the shock and awe worked rather well,
the more so on the innocent: the sell
went on relentlessly: a dozy stroll
as cities fell to bombings and surrenders mounted:
Endless were the killed, but on the whole
the enemy's and therefore never counted.
Such is war, my friend, and truth is hurt
as much as men are. Much is burned away:
amidst the blaze of victory, much is lost
in families and maimings. Who will pay
as pain grows steadily and treatments cost?
Others. Tony's was the right address,
I thought, but now must backtrack or digress.

My hero went to public school, where mine
was rather different, a production line
that turned out copies of a ten-bob note:
crisp and convertible. It never did
to speak of salary or how you'd vote.
Ours was small, tight world, and one that hid
no doubt much loneliness, much grief,
but none of this came through, and all those dates
in boy scout dances, cricket fixtures, girls
in flounced their dresses through the garden fetes,
at last turned tawdry as the twinset pearls
in Tatler photographs the middle class
will strive to get before the season pass.

Of course I'm not like Tony, couldn't say
just how contemporaries, from day to day,
should live out purposes. I only saw
a world of outer suburbs, quietly run
in leafy parks and bus-lanes, general store,
in keeping up appearances, where one
could be a cut above, but not that much:
not showing off. I went to Sheffield, where
my attic through small windows looked across
a row of red-brick back-to-backs, the air
sulphurous with disappointment, urban loss
that underpinned my reading social science:
all quite trendy then, which breathed defiance.

The young are impressionable: my tutors spoke
of class divisions, how those classes broke
the spirit of the working man. I knew
the truth of that from digs and launderette:
the shabby pointlessness of lives soaked through
with little thought of change, at least not yet.
Men are the authors of their fate as well,
of course. I looked at broken glass on walls
round smokestack industries and defunct mills,
and saw how tawdry was the light that falls
on faded photos, cinematic stills
of lives used up, retired or thrown away
in yearly wrangles on small points of pay.

Yet how they told their stories, had their say,
not noticing how lifetimes slipped away,
and what was sunshine grew more overcast.
Behind those hemmed-in walls they stood
to watch the minutes on the clock tick past
from junior trainee through to parenthood
and age at last that threw them out. They had
their beer and whippets, skittles, Whitby trip,
a flutter on the dogs, occasional wedding,
the lassies lechered at, who took no lip,
the skirt the owner's son was likely bedding,
or so the talk went: frankly no one knew,
though money counted, in that old world too.

Those were the Thatcher years, and all the same
was anyone with sense who played the game
to gated residences, private schools,
Bermuda holidays, and weekend breaks.
Doubtlessly they worked for it, not fools
my artful fellow students: few mistakes
they made in fixtures or in fielding well.
I had no quarrel with them, sometimes see,
in city offices or chauffeured car,
a well-dressed businessman who could be me.
Why not? I wasn't born a commissar.
But now I had to make a living fast,
well-trained in social consciousness at last.

I started with that mixed-up invitation
which led to Falklands, when a sovereign nation
rose as one beneath the flag, a waste
of frost-chapped hills and peat in truth, but still
a part of England, inviolable and chaste.
How dare the Argies test the British will?
While Europe dithered those nice Chileans helped;
our navy steamed up to the isles of sheep,
their long-lost destiny at last fulfilled.
The Argies gave up what they couldn't keep.
Manoeuvres, skirmishes, some men got killed.
The mainland sent its fighters over: one
by one our missiles downed them, just for fun.

20. Also the Belgrano, sunk as known
outside a self-imposed exclusion zone.
*War, the Almirante said, is not for fools,
but if that country means to rule the waves
would it please not also waive the rules
in pitching conscripts into watery graves?*
One ran the bunting up: the other mourned.
But what are fifteen hundred young men lost
among so many in the flood of war?
And did it matter what the error cost
to grieving families, that silent corps?
Or that the log afterwards of the submarine
had sunk mysteriously and left the scene?

Obvious scribblings, but they made my name
where that Westminster village has the claim
of being national talking shop. It's true
but also baleful, rather: no one likes
the closeting of minds, the poisonous brew
of quid pro quo. Indeed it sometimes strikes
me I'd have done much better if I'd gone
as Guardian correspondent to the Middle
East or China, though it doesn't pay
unless you have some sideline or can fiddle
the expenses or the rake-back, but, as I say,
still hopeful, wanting a convenient perch,
I angled winningly and got research.

We thought alike. Our PM put aside
high-minded principles and beer-soaked pride
to be as our Americans and know
the cost of all things, which and when to buy
in policies and people, things which go
no doubt against the grain of times gone by,
but now quite necessary, which also worked.
Our Tony knew that, and was also bored
by self-important fools who make it rich
in social consciences we can't afford.
In calculating how to bait and switch
it would be years before the one high-flyer
need fall to earth at last as one B. Liar.

Ten years, I calculated, till that war
knocked all our futures sideways. We were for
the all-American and decent way
of Wall-mart, shopping malls and barber's shops.
Influence and oil would make it pay,
we planned, but in that land of fuzzy-tops,
of ranting mullahs and incendiary faiths
who'd want to poke the wasps' nest when we were
succeeding nicely through the UN route
of killing millions off, where deaths incur
no awkwardness of photo: soldier's boot,
his rifle, air support, the rain of shells
that turn the playgrounds into pock-marked hells.

And when to secret airports, sad, downcast,
the quiet and flag-draped coffins came at last,
did Tony stand there, chastened, and reflect
beside the families and sober dress,
how oddly can a fool-proof plan be checked
by a few score martyrs and perverted press?
Of course not. Sensibly he gave the orders
that none be photographed, or more than facts
allowed us in these private hours of grief.
Unless so dignified the case detracts
from that high hope, or more: a firm belief
that history will judge him and in ages hence
award him prescience in world events.

The needed counsel of a wise old head
could trade for stand-up comic's part instead.
So Campbell told him and so Tony thinks
of all the stratagems his artful mind
can serve up smiling as his rating sinks.
How hard for us, who were his friends, to find
the stale banality and bloated phrase,
the self-apostasy of righteous laws,
the vote of Parliament for peace or wars,
the scourge of terrorists and their prime cause,
become the toast of Congress, long applause
that spoke of armaments, at which a wall
of silence and discretion buries all.

If lust for notice is a fearful thing
then so are women and a two-month fling.
Such urgent longing for the female shapes
that rose to mind beneath their walks. I knew
the high slopes of each swelling bust, the nape's
descent in shadowed vertebrae, each hue
of desperation in the eyes, the long
release to hopelessness, beyond the stop
for pity's sake, and then the lift within
the surge of buttocks and the haunch's crop:
I knew the wet abrasiveness of skin
and most of all, within the eye's wide stare
the brief astonishment of being there.

Continually I saw them in their slips,
their breathing torsos swaying from the hips,
a reaching outward in each swelling breast
as quiet as weather-bells in clouds, a lift
to fullness in the cloths that pressed
to apparitions in their blouse or shift.
I saw the soft betrayal of the skin
so beautifully arranged there was no sound
upon that blest-and-long-astounding day,
but soft as mushrooms scattered on the ground,
there came that beaching in a dawn-swept bay
with cinders following as that old fire
burnt out at Babylon or new-built Tyre.

Fiona walking on as though in sleep
I saw continually as those who keep
within a circuit they can circle through
but rationally, appropriately, the same
as other women keep to, and must do
to have no catcalls to afflict their name.
What can I say to those who more and more
walk out delighting in the summer air
and lift the instep from its undone thong
as though a silent sound was threaded there
and brought them travelling, as will a long,
soft, silent welling through some ocean reach
say nothing till it rises on some beach—

to curl there distantly with all the pride
of unused summer in its foaming tide?
That's what I thought and felt but always hid
beneath those silly politicians' shows
of power in purposes of all I did.
I saw that proud, long-stemmed and swelling rose
as mine, or almost mine, and would be soon:
despite the name, good family, with brains,
to cede in any group to whom the nod
is given, finally, and thereby gains
the bold and ever fragrant under God.
My meetings with her were a sonic boom
of fragrant quiet in an upstairs room.

30. It took some doing, plausibly, a few
demanding recompense, to pull her through,
but still she came, replacing my PA
who stared and bit her lip, but had to go.
But all done easily, with extra pay
and pension rights of course, and super show
of missing her, with pressies: we all got drunk
a little, anyway, and my long speech
with anecdotes I trawled from Personnel
with tears brought back the things from time's long reach
that made us thoughtful when we wished her well.
Afterwards of course I walked on air:
just one more conquest and your man was there.

To cross that obstacle the plan said more,
a Red Sea passage to Sir Roderick's door,
some means of knowing what the old fox did
to help or hinder Tony's rule. It's true
he didn't like me, but the manner hid
much ruse and posturing: he had to do,
he said, as Tony wanted. That I doubted,
but wasn't privy to the battered box
of party secrets (yes, forgive the pun)
that Liz presided on. I heard the clocks
now ticking furiously that Brown had won
but then more halting, maddening and slow
as when for certain did our PM go?

I knew what my fraternity had done
in plays of gallantry and teasing fun.
But not with her: Sir Roderick's own PA
was not some empty-headed little fool
but had a truly Alpine rate of pay.
No doubt in helping me she broke some rule
or regulation, showed me things, or warned
of moves afoot, but for a price that clocks
be wound up nightly by her partner's toil.
The world of politics is one of knocks,
that tells you never let them off the boil,
but hold them closer as they clench and cry,
as in her little deaths I saw them lie

out in their undressed hundreds while the blood
congealed and hardened into Baghdad's mud.
Vicariously, of course, not yet PM,
I went on playing with this grim old trout,
abused the power I had, as he with them,
and pounded harder till she wanted out.
At last, with correspondence copied, say
I couldn't understand it, *really, such
a bubbly figure and such glorious fun,*
well, I was sorry, desperately, and much
more angry at myself for what I'd done.
Always obfuscating, but the loner
still to Liz now, and of course Fiona.

And so it went, though slowly, Fiona mad
at all the presents that her rival had:
one so beautiful and half neglected,
the Liz the opposite, but spruce and smirking.
The danger was Sir Roderick who'd detected
some subtle change in us, we two now working
amicably for once, in close rapport.
He wondered at it, called me in and tried
to fathom patterns in the always shifting
me that was and is. I never lied
but felt my purposes were also drifting.
But not for long: I knew now what to do.
He left in August and my Liz would too.

For all was fading, dropping out of reach
because of that most idiotic breach
of protocol and common sense—I mean
the dossiers, the sofa government,
the brimming confidence of having been
much, much cleverer than the papers sent
by experts and his own FO, he saw
the shades now gathering on his shabby reign,
that what he'd promised us could now be pressed
to measures, simple measures to attain
what ten year's government had not addressed.
He hung on hatching one success to last
above the tawdry scandals of the past.

I need not tell you I expected this,
and got all ready for the parting kiss
of Chancellor's appointment. True, a few
of Roderick's old chums would go, but in
the main it was the time-befuddled do
of pouring old wine into new wine's skin.
The which it must be, for the great machine
runs with and for our civil service. All
as I say, was organized, each man
had case and dossiers close on call:
this was my masterstroke, but, if you can,
just think how simpler things would all have been
if Tony had as promptly left the scene.

I stuck it out, of course: procrastination,
lies and promises and more evasion.
Liz was pressing me, and more Fiona,
I went with one and then the other, each
denying how the other thought I owned her.
In heaven's name what I had I done to breach
such furies in them? Still I'd take them out
to ever more expensive places: immense
the capital for that. I got a loan
but not sufficient to survive the sense
that Liz's funeral might be my own.
But for Fiona there was some estate
of coming wealth and privilege if she'd wait.

At last the ultimatum came: to chose
the permed and dyed Elizabeth or lose
the post I had been working for, along
with liberty in short. How did he know?
He laughed, Sir Roderick. I had got it wrong
in climbing that back stair, he said, as though
the correspondence copied wasn't his:
the bets he hedged, his notes, the favours paid.
He looked me up and down as though a cat
had dragged me in, or I had gone and made
a stinking puddle on his floor. *So that
was that*, he said at last and with a grin
buzzed to let his smirking PA in.

I smiled and clenched my jaw, but saw too well
the last exclusive he would leak or sell.
*Is this how civil servants earn our trust?
A woman used and dumped: who would not feel
some tinge of rightful pity and disgust?
A stainless character, who could not squeal
because of protocol. How was it fair
that men with prospects, perks and shorter day
could act so caddishly and at the crunch —
you get the tone of it — make women pay
for all the extras to their canteen lunch?*
Richly beside the point, but on it went,
and to the saintly tabloids heaven sent.

40. But life, as I have said, is only show.
I leaked his papers first: indeed he'd go
with face and quietly, keeping hands on wealth
and pension, contacts still, they all were his.
It was a sort of putsch by stealth,
and would have been but for discarded Liz,
who cut up rough of course: indeed for all
the nights I'd spent with her would choose for thanks
to threaten with her carefully detailed notes.
Such is the PA training, when the ranks
would suddenly be shown as scrambling goats.
He went, Sir Roderick. Fiercely, Liz hung on
until my one protector would be gone.

Tony at last resigned: a wave went round
of frank relief and rush for higher ground.
But I, no envoy, downward went and weighed
success with errant follies, how I'd ranged
advantage over principle, where strayed
beyond the necessary, what had changed,
when not so different looked those student notes
on policies, hypocrisies, though now, of course,
it was a murky grey when no one thought
the State beneficent, or moral force
lay in democracies but actions bought
by oil and armaments. Although it's true
our Liz was gone at last, but I was too

on threat of prosecution. Not so men
who wrote and, pondering, would write again,
scrupulous of custom, those who bought
their shirts from Jermyn Street, wore Church's shoes:
the wise old heads who took the weather, caught
each shift of emphasis, the changing views
that swirled through corridors and then lay dead,
to be revived as all things are revived:
the wise, the outrageous, the plainly daft
all settle into period, yet are hived
off to new adventures, starved or staffed
according to that long deliberation
that serves as measure of a thinking nation.

I saw the polished shoes on parquet floors,
heard voices drifting down long corridors,
saw plush recess of libraries, filed report,
the endless annotation, summaries sent
for consultation that are piquing thought
in offices and board rooms, Parliament
with privy councils and their witnesses.
I pictured all who hung there on my word,
the lines of juniors who silently
would stake their very life on how they'd heard
I thought their prospects fared. There came to me
sad laughter, empty rooms, the door on door,
a bounty given me but now no more.

New names, new ministers: the order passes
like wind through hayfields of the toiling classes:
all to be cut down time in time, as all are reaped
by policy not knowing what it should.
Small men on the whole, but honest, steeped
in that long ethos of a public good.
Perhaps community is shared deceptions,
but that I cannot know or where I next
may pledge my services, but if there's trace
of useful merit in a well-honed text
it won't be long before I find some other place.
And yet Fiona, my most desperate throw,
now smiles at Hewinson, for all I know.

Sir Roderick was right: those feints and ploys
are airy mobiles only, glittering toys.
I stared at all the windows: souls at work
no less oppressed and hurting than my own
but bought off quietly with that thoughtful perk
of job security, a comfort zone
that keeps them going, good days, bad, throughout
their marriages, the high schools fees, that aunt
who left them nothing after all, that night
they woke up breathless, the hopes they can't
reduce to office scheming or the girl that might.
What's life? Advancement, graft, an artful game,
and politics that follows just the same.