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"Three short stories and a poem"

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Christopher KNOX

A Gallery Watch

The first time that I killed him I felt certain, or rather I had assumed, that I would feel either everything in the world, or nothing at all. It turned out to be true.

He lay in the middle of the largest gallery on the fifth floor, in a manmade pool of bright blue blood. Mr. Albers himself, I thought aloud to no one as I studied my handiwork, might have been impressed by the execution of the composition, the careful interplay of light and dark on the suit as the foreshortened material around the breast pocket absorbed the underlayer of blood and brought it to the foreground; the abstract, geometric forms made by the subtle knifestrokes about the neck line; the delicate chiaroscuro of the salt and pepper head of hair. As I took a few steps back to take in the full scale of the unfinished canvas, even as the undrying pigments expanded their reach to cover more and more of the floorscape as if willed on by an all-over or bust driving force, it suddenly struck me that the moment was as good a time as any to snap a quick photo. If there's no picture, after all, it didn't happen.

Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

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I am the one watching, and I do all the looking there is in the world. By day, I am a gallery watch at several of the more prominent and a handful of the lesser-known museums here in the city. At night, to the extent that they are able to, I let my eyes rest.

I pass my day drifting from museum to museum, large and small, encyclopaedic and niche, moving quite anonymously in and out of the bloated crowds, with express orders to observe voyeuristically the behavior of the patrons, and generally to keep a plainclothes eye on goings-on in the galleries, you might say somewhat like the secret shopper but in reverse, and to report back to my clients on the current state of affairs between people and art. I have to tell you it's not looking good, my friends.

Now most people go to a museum under the mistaken impression that they want to look at art, which of course they roundly do not. Whatever else they fancy themselves to be up to, the people who frequent or even infrequent museums are not there to look at what hangs on the walls and what lies in the glass vitrines and stands imposingly on elevated plinths, nor, indeed, could they do so were it their intention. And I ought to know better than just about anyone, for I, on the other hand, go to museums, it is my occupation and pleasure in fact, in order to look at people looking at art.

My experience and many careful years of study stretching back, well, I won't say exactly how far, but in any case to my younger days of graduate instruction, have led me to conclude that most people, in the main, visit art museums so as to *unlook* at something—and not knowing and invariably failing to ascertain what exactly that something is, they rather quickly tend to get bored or drowsy and cast about, God keep them, for the nearest bench or café, or even better, the closest exit. Who among us could blame them? Looking is a great deal harder than one might suppose it to be, and even the average above average person rather woefully fails to make this grade. (Children at or below a certain age, and the stray old person, being the only exceptions to the Looking Rule known to exist.) It's the very first thing one learns in our little profession, and trust me when I say that I am very good at what I do. I have spent the majority of my adult life as a watch (Runner-Up and Honorable Mention two years running at the awards ceremony for our annual trade association gathering), looking at people looking at things, and I have learned far more about the one from the other than I could have possibly fathomed when I first got into this business.

*

The crowds, when they come, and they always do, a dead inland sea with no end in sight, follow the reverse-engineered progress of The Stages of Man: hunched retirees and pensioners, be-caned and be-walkered, make up the first callers who greet the day just as

Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

the doors of the museum are flung open, succeeded around noontime by the austerely non-committal midday men of business out to their lunch hour or so; themselves to be replaced by desperately, insistently not-yet-over-that-Hill, stay-mostly-at-home mothers who command their self-consciously luxuriant prams through the galleries as tank commanders direct their cavalcade into combat and toward uncertain victory. Pods of brilliantly colored schoolchildren, around three or four o'clock in the sliding, down-lit afternoon, round out the day in darting and twisting headlong sorties that snap the museum guards to attention before resuming their gargoylean posts in pediments of thought and half-slumber. The adolescents and young adults, boisterous and unclear, come at week's end when admission is free or discounted, the young men in their wintry, prophylactic beanies and their counterparts in the accepted lower upper middle class uniform of the season, with slight variations on themes of earrings, fingerware and scarves so they can identify one another, and themselves, among the soft bedlam of the museum crush.

Nobody looks but me, I do all the looking there is. Sometimes, in a queer pre-twilit mood that sets in around the vicinity of the navel and takes its sweet time in spreading in all cardinal points at once, I find myself thinking that I alone am looking *for* them, that looking is the only thing I can do for them.

On a bone-dry and airless day in late March—no, it was a cloudful June day wide with sun, I found myself in a gallery in a museum of the city with a predisposition to high early modernism. I was making my rounds in a section displaying parts of the permanent collection with which I was very familiar, and I was doing my looking. In fact, so many were the times when I had been on that particular floor in that very gallery looking at those specific works, that I very well might have been able to walk the space blind-folded, or in my sleep. I could do my looking, in other words, with my eyes closed.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a woman with a medium-sized canvas bag, who had stationed herself exactly equidistant between two large-scale paintings, each done with egg tempera on paper that had been treated with a light-sensitive material. I recognized her at once, as it were almost before I was aware of the fact that I had. Her name, I knew, was Gloria, and she was a notorious Hanger. Before anyone else saw her do it, in a flash she had removed a rectilinear object from the confines of her bag and quickly (and skillfully, it must be said) hung the picture smack dab in the center of the wall, between the two other paintings. She then turned and walked briskly into an adjacent gallery, without drawing so much as a glance from any of the others in the room. I pursued in a casual way and caught up with her in the next gallery.

"Hello, Gloria. How are you? It's been a while, hasn't it?" I said.

Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

She was a somewhat older woman, I put her age at seventy-five or thereabouts, with under-lashed, pastel eyes.

"Oh, I can't complain," she started to say what she always said, that, anyway, who would listen if she did, but this time stopped short.

"Listen," she interrupted herself with a note of pre-recorded anxiety affixed to her voice, "Are you going to rat me out?"

Typically, I or another gallery watch would be the one to catch her in the act and report it to security, who would then turn her out, painting and all, only for her to try it again a few months later, at the same museum or a different one.

"Gloria, we've been through this I don't know how many times. You can't hang your own art here. Period, end of story."

"Why not?" she said, and meant it.

"That's not how this works, Gloria, and you know it. If you go take it down before security notices, I won't say anything. This time."

She gave me a look that suggested a full and deep consideration of her options, which might have included spitting in my face or making a run for it, but after a few moments she simply turned and strolled towards the bank of elevators without saying another word.

I retraced my steps, returning into the gallery with the trespassing painting in question. I walked up to where it hung in the center of the white wall, poised between its new neighbors, and I had to give credit where it was due. Gloria had made quite the professional job of it, the painting looked utterly natural in its place, hiding in plain sight, as though it had always been there.

To my right an older gent, accompanied, or rather seeming paroled, by a monochromatic woman with frizzy hair who appeared to be several ages at once and also to be his wife, cleared his throat in the universal Esperanto deployed when one wishes someone else to get out of the way.

"Do you like it?" I said lightly.

He seemed to grunt from pole to pole of the short extent of his being.

"Sort of like Hopper, but worse. I prefer Hopper myself."

Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

"Ah," I allowed.

"But who's it by?" asked his companion. "There's no wall text."

"Well, I happen to know, ma'am. You see, I work here."

"Oh, are you a curator here?" asked the man with unrestrained suspicion.

"Something like that."

"Now, let me see," I continued, more broadly now to include the wider gathering that had formed in front of Gloria's picture.

"The artist is Hans von Bitteslader. Bavarian. Associated with the Depressionists. His dates are 1860-1912, a good long life that spanned several important art historical movements. The point you made, sir, about Hopper is actually rather an interesting observation, as von Bitteslader and Hopper actually trained at the same conservatory at the same time in Paris."

"What's of particular noteworthiness in this work is the use of perspective. It's quite counter-revolutionary for its time. See here, and there."

At this the crowd shuffled in closer.

"Not too close, ma'am," I said to one woman, who started at being singled out for her proximity to the canvas. "It's quite valuable, this little painting, one of the more valuable works in the collection, in fact, and very rarely exhibited."

I noticed, coming from the other end of the floor, one of the curators of the museum appear from around a corner, accompanied by a conservator whom I also recognized.

"If you'll excuse me," I said to my impromptu party, "I really must be getting back to our offices before I'm missed."

From there I walked into a larger gallery, which was a flood of light breaking over the high banks of floor-to-ceiling windows. Standing in front of the polished, spotless glass I looked out over the speechless city, seeming itself to be glass-encased like a great hand-me-down toy town or diorama, made a gift of to its citizens by some long-lost god. It was a day's day, that much was clear.

Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

I turned from the city and took in my more immediate surroundings. Oversized, mid-middle-aged men and women, mostly women, sporting the standardized coifs of their socio-economic genus and phylum, like cutouts from different issues of the same magazine, in the flat, declarative tense of the American museum-going present indicative, proclaimed with all the dullness they could muster: "Ah. Edward Hopper," before moving on to the next picture: "Ah. Georgia O'Keefe. Ah, Mark Rothko."

They appeared, by all accounts, to savor most of all, however, as it were almost narcotically, the sound of Hopper. "Ah. Edward *Hopper*. Edward Hopper, I knew it had to be. Ah, Hopper. Mmhmm…Hopper." As if in answer to a question no one asked: "Edward Hopper." As if the attributional wall placards were illegible to the rest of the world: "Ed*ward* Ho*pp*er." With an accompaniment of nods of recognition set to the tune of one endless refrain: "Ah Hopper. Ah Hopper. Ah Hopper!" And on and on and ah, Hopper!

*

When I returned next day to the same gallery of the same museum, I was vaguely shocked, and to my further surprise somewhat crestfallen, to find that Gloria's crowd-pleasing painting had been taken down from the wall on which it had hung the previous afternoon. I sat that first I registered this faint sense of bafflement for the reason that it is usually a watch such as myself who would report such a change in the gallery environment, and I had been the only one on-call the day before and had left without doing so. (As a general rule, back of house types at a museum—the curators, conservators, handlers, etcetera—do not spend much of any time at all in the actual galleries, unless they are installing or de-installing a show, and security guards tend to pay a great deal more attention to what is *not* on the walls than to what is.) So if I had not ratted out Gloria's painting, who had?

In its place hung an altogether different work, one which I had never before laid eyes on. This, too, gave me pause, as I was deeply acquainted with the collection of this particular museum. Perhaps it was a loan, I mused, although this possibility did very little to put to bed certain feelings of disquiet of which I was only dimly conscious at the time.

A few steps beside the new work, a semicircular firing squad of over-eager picture-takers had formed and were training their sights and view-finders on an obvious, and rather over-shot, target of the art historical canon, each more delirious than the next with the certainty that the perfect picture was nearly in his grasp, and what's more, in his power, and his alone, to take. How strange the human urge, the most recently developed of autonomic bodily functions, to stand in front of the same background (be it a statue, a famous tree, a notable edifice, or a painting), with one's head half-cocked at the same angle, with exactly the same pre-fabricated three-quarter length smile contorting the face right at the moment

Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

of its own vanishing act—each pose identical to every other, and yet to feel unshakably that each is unique!

No one, however, seemed to be taking much interest in the unaccountable painting, and I stepped in closer to begin my looking. I was immediately, and acutely, struck by the awareness that it was one of the most remarkable works I had ever seen. I say this not for its beauty, nor for the intelligence and deft of its rendering, nor even for the profoundness of the subject or the ideas being conveyed. I say this for the intense set of feelings it launched in me, the likes of which, so it seemed to me as I stood there in my private revelry, I had never before experienced. One typically experiences emotions in a kind of sequence, with one following the next and hitched together like the individual cars of a locomotive, each with a different freight and size. But this, this, was like feeling every single item in the grand catalogue of human emotion all at once. After how long I do not know, and practically tearing away my gaze, I searched for corresponding wall text. I found none. Just as had been the case the day before, the picture simply hung there, unaccompanied, utterly by itself, with no indication of who had put it there, much less who had executed it. Had Gloria been back with another of her covert installations? However much I should have liked to pin down an easy explanation for what was happening, this work bore absolutely no discernible trace of her hand.

I took a step or two back from the wall, coming into range of the outer limits of the neighboring firing squad. For no reason at all that I could tell, suddenly I happened to recall at that moment that, historically, as a matter of course one member of a firing squad carried a rifle with blanks—in order to democratize the killing—and no one knew whether he was the man with the neutered gun.

As I took leave of the gallery very much, to say the least, in an altered state, I lost my balance slightly and bumped into a woman who looked as though she had come into the world around the time of the turn of the Cretaceous. Despite my begging her pardon, she seemed very abused by this and produced a sort of agitated protestation through means of a coordinated action of the nose, mouth, and throat. By some ultrasensory perception at my core I realized in that instant that she was none other than the one with the blanks.

“BANG! BAANG!!” I said, and before she could mount a response, departed the gallery, and the museum, for the day.

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The dreams, and other troubles, began around this time.

Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

I would see myself as someone else might, but incarcerated in a museum of my own self, with nothing but the unknown painting to look at. Or I would see myself purgatoried in a gallery surrounded on all sides by reproduction upon reproduction of the same picture. Then I would awaken in a cold, hot sweat, and the only way to allay my torment would be to turn on the bedside radio which was tuned always to the misery of the whole, wide world, and only then would I lie back again and recapture my fugitive content, drifting off once more to the narcotizing sounds of other people's pain.

*

A blind woman stands alone in the empty gallery in front of the unknown picture. I watch her form facing the picture with her back to me. By and large, the museum-goers are unaware of my presence, but she seems to hear me coming as I softly approach. In silence we stand in the shadow of the image.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she says to me, at last, without turning.

I have no idea what to say, I think there is probably nothing else left in the world to be said, about the painting or anything besides.

After a while longer, she turns and, using her rubber-tipped stick to lead her way, leaves the room.

*

One day as I was making my rounds I happened to notice an irregularity in one of the galleries (a misguided framing decision on a recently hung new acquisition had rendered a quarter-inch drop shadow alone the top of a wondrous Paul Cadmus), and as I went to phone it in to Art Handling and Exhibitions Management, I came upon a gentleman who was crouched in the back of the electrical closet where the intra-museum telephone used to page other personnel and departments is housed.

"Thanks heavens," he exclaimed. "I've been in here for almost three days!"

By way of background, he told me that the Museum paid him to hide in various obscure places on the premises (e.g., the topiary enclosing a section of the outdoor sculpture garden; the dumb waiter used by the café staff; etcetera), as a way of drilling the vigilance of the security staff. He was, evidently, a sort of contract, freelance stowaway, and almost too good at his job by the looks of it. He had fashioned a nice-looking set-up for his tenure, with snacks and magazines to read by a tiny battery-operated camping lantern. The gentleman went on to tell me that he was paid by the hour, for the total number of hours hidden before

he was discovered. Apparently, not all the money in the world was worth the solitude of his condition.

As I broke it to him gently that I was not, in fact, a member of the Museum's security team, I watched his face slide into an expression of profound disillusionment.

"I'm sorry," I started to say.

Then, an idea struck me of a way that I might, after all, be of some aid to the man.

"If you like, I could try to tip them off to your location, you know, put them on to you, drop a few subtle hints pointing the guards in the right direction."

"No, it never works," he said with a hint of fatalism rising and falling in this voice, the words seeming to uncork a deep sigh of resignation from the very bottom of his self.

"Thank you," he said, "But it's been tried before, and they'll just dock my pay if there's anything fishy. In the end, they always find me. Sometimes it just takes longer than usual."

I shrugged my shoulders and placed the call about the shadowy frame.

"Would you mind closing the door behind you?" he asked after I had finished, and so I did. I didn't catch his name.

*

The emptiness of an empty gallery is like the holiness of an empty café, or of the movie theater that one inexplicably and miraculously happens to have entirely to oneself, or else like the holiness of the empty bar save for oneself and the barkeep. The holiness depends entirely on the fragility of the solitude which could end at any moment with the interruption of another presence (the late-comer to the film who enters after the credits have begun to roll; the strident crowd of entrants beginning or ending their night with a theatrical ordering of rounds of drink and stage fighting over who has this one). And when that solitude, that holiness, that emptiness, should end there is no other ending like it.

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I looked and I looked and I looked.

I looked until it seemed as though I were looking both forwards and backwards at once.

Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

Sometimes I suffer from the sinking feeling that I am the only one looking. Could that be? Sometimes it hurts to look, and I want to look away but cannot.

Would you rather be blind or deaf? Or mute?

Would you rather drown in a painting or burn in one?

*

The second time that I killed him was, admittedly, a bit of a sophomore slump.

*

Very soon thereafter, my work as a watch began to be affected, and indeed, as much as it pains me to say, began to suffer considerably. Whereas before the painting entered my life, it had been my custom to make the rounds of most, if not all, of the galleries of a museum, some days hitting two or more by day's end, now I found myself gravitating again and again, over and over, back to that one painting, at the expense of my other looking duties.

At times it had the feeling, I had the very uncanny sensation, of walking in a half-waking dream. It was almost as though I had very little say in the matter; I would start off on a different floor altogether, in a different gallery, not wishing to be anywhere near the work, and the very next thing I knew I would be standing before it once more.

One day, I was in the gallery that, by now, occupied so very much of my time and thought, when I noticed another watch not far from where I stood, also engaged intently in his own looking. (One can spot a fellow watch by the sensible choice in footwear and by the fact that, more often than not, the watch is the only other person not looking at any of the art, which, of course, he has had committed to a place of deep, searing memory by dent of sheer visual repetition.) On this occasion, however, we both saw the other looking, with one eye apiece locked on the aberrant painting, and the other eyeing one another. Closing the smallish gap between us, I introduced myself.

"I don't believe I've seen you here before," I said. "Have we met?"

"No, I don't think so. I'm mostly on the uptown circuit or on the East Side, these days. And yourself?"

"Downtown. For the most part."

Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

"You know," he continued, still not looking fully and directly at me but keeping his gaze divided evenly, "this little painting is causing quite the uproar—among the administration, I mean. They just don't quite know what to make of it. And, what's more, they're afraid to take it down until they can figure out what to do with it. You see, the registrar's concerned it's a cataloguing snafu of some sort, and they're worried heads will roll if it's found out."

"Of course, they can't very well store it off site, which is what they would most like to do, because there's no record of where it came from, no record of the Museum having acquired it. I've heard they're especially anxious about the insurance liability this whole business could expose them to, so they simply want to be rid of it altogether. Poof, like it never existed to begin with. And they're keen to make it go away before the art press gets wind. If that should happen, I am sure that you of all people understand that it could be deeply embarrassing for the institution."

Then, the voice of the watch slid casually into sotto voce:

"One idea that's been floated is to have someone steal it and get it off their hands that way. I've heard they're already in the second round of interviewing candidates. They've contracted with a service specializing in just this sort of thing."

"If you like, I could put you in touch with the relevant parties," the watch said, now looking me squarely in the face with both eyes, which were not blue, for the first time.

"I hear the pay's quite good."

*

The last time I killed him everything had been arranged.

A shipment of dreadful Clifford Stills and Barnett Newmans was to arrive by courier on loan from Amsterdam that afternoon. The art handlers would arrive at four o'clock, and they were never so much as a minute late. Once security had cleared the last of the galleries of the last of the general public, the closed circuit system of televisions and cameras would go dark for ten minutes of routine, museum-wide reboot, during which slender window I would remove the painting from the gallery wall, escort it into the waiting freight elevator and out of the museum by way of the service loading dock. The Dutch handlers would take it from there. All along, of course, I knew in my heart of hearts that simply disappearing the painting would be to the avail of nothing. It would not, I felt as strongly as I felt anything, in the least change matters, indeed could not be expected to half, let alone reverse the course of, what had happened in me. Were the painting to go on existing anywhere at all, even at the farthest corner of the world, I would seek it out, I knew.

Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

At ten of the appointed hour, the warning had been given to patrons that the museum would soon be closing for the day, so please kindly make your way to the nearest exit. At four on the dot, all the galleries stood silent. I took a few moments to stroll from gallery to gallery, soaking up the emptiness of each one last time. There was nothing left to look at. Down to the last etching and offset lithograph, I had quite literally seen it all before. It was the end of art, and I was there for it. After years of telling visitors not to touch the art, as I paid a final visit through each gallery I methodically placed my hands all over everything in sight, groping Greco-Roman iconographies, running my fingers through the hair of Etruscan statuary, feeling my way through centuries of landscapes and battlefields and annunciations, leaving my mark in the form of the invisible acids and oils of the hand on every Trial of Paris and Rape of Cassandra, on each unglazed martyrdom and Lautrec, Matisse, Modigliani, Rodin, Kahlo, and yes, every last Hopper I came across—finally ending where I knew I must, in front of the painting of my dreams.

I stood and looked upon it one last time.

If you've never dismounted a painting before, it may or may not interest you to know that it is not quite so simple as taking one down from off the walls of one's own living room. Each painting in a museum is effectively locked into its place on the wall by an intricate system of latches, mountings, industrial-grade hooks, screws, bolts and pins. One cannot, therefore, simply lift a painting down from a gallery wall. Indeed one requires a specialized key, a copy of which had been entrusted to me in the short term by one of the art handlers who was also in on the job.

By the time I had unlocked the last safety catch, there were but minutes to spare before the cameras resumed their omniscient sweep of the floors. Nestling the painting under the crook of the left armpit, I headed for the freight elevator, which required a different key to operate. As far as it would go, I took the elevator not, as planned, down to the very bottom but up to the summit of the museum.

The museum, all told, rose 13 stories above the ground, although there were 14 floors. (The Thirteenth, honoring architectural superstitions of a bygone time, did not exist. The floors jumped from 12 to 14 on the panel of elevator buttons). As the doors opened and gave onto the roof, I took the painting, which, at this point, was my life, into my own hands and strode to the precipice of the museum where it stretched fathomlessly in all points north, south, east and west out over the great toy city.

I stood hand in hand with the painting on the edge of the air.

Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

There, on top of the world that is the city, but remembering as if all of a sudden for the first time a fear of heights, I thought the better of it and, retracing my steps, returned to the elevator, which I took down to the street, which I gained after a few moments and walked along to the nearest subway, which I did not take home.

The Line

No one, as far as anyone could tell, knew when exactly the line had first formed.

As first appearances went, the line, at a glance, looked quite a bit just like any other line. It had a beginning, a middle, and an end, and stretched along the sidewalk of a street that ran through a neighborhood in the middle of town. Neither the street, nor the broader district that bound it, could be said to be especially noteworthy or distinguishable for its physical and edificial features, or their contents. It was a street of a few trees and a few more buildings, with ordinary shops on the ground floors of the buildings lining either side, and apartments above the shops—a street the likes of which one encounters, and immediately forgets, in hundreds of towns and cities the world over.

For if one did not know any better, the casual passer-by would be forgiven for thinking, in idling going past, that the line was an everyday morning line queued for the newspaper and coffee stand, or gathered amid the antemeridian echoes of a cool, gray 7:21 sunrise in anticipation of an early bird sale. But it rather quickly became apparent that none of the people in the line were actually waiting to gain entry into any of the businesses flanking the street. Most of the shops—the bakery, the little stationers, the butcher's, the bookstore, even the little lotto and tobacconist lean-to—already had their doors half-open to the tentative morning, into whose pale light a light air continuously flowed with late spring.

Under any further scrutiny, however, the line revealed itself to be of an extraordinary and bizarre character. For one thing, it did not, one observed after a few moments, operate in the usual manner of the typical line, which, no matter how slowly it may seem to be or actually be moving, tends to get shorter with time as people exit after conducting whatever business compelled them to join it in the first place. The line on this day, unlike its relatives, never diminished in length even by a single person, but only ever grew longer as the day wore on.

With suspicion or quizzical expressions, or alternating indecisively between the two, many of the shopkeeps of the street eyed the growing line as they swept their thresholds or dumped bucketfuls of soapy water onto the darkening pavements at the feet of those in line.

By ten o'clock, the line extended several city blocks, with intermittent gaps at the stopsigned or stop-lighted intersections with other avenues and boulevards. West Indian nannies, most unsuffering of souls where fools are concerned, commiserated two and three abreast while their milk-white, preverbal charges napped or restlessly unswaddled themselves inside of idle, double-parked prams. Pensioners up since four o'clock from the tossed and turning night, clutched thin bundles of unposted mail and at shawls that seemed half-in-flight from and half in a protracted fight around their necks.

Around eleven-thirty, the line had begun to absorb a vanguard of lunch-goers who merged inconspicuously into place and soon found that their preconceived plans to patronize this frequented eatery or that were to be scrapped with unspoken agreement, and not so much as a moment's second thought. Savvy purveyors of all manner of street food had, by now, hemmed in the line on all sides, parking their carts and moveable stalls onto the sidewalks and by the curbsides all along the length of the line, so that if one turned this way one could order samosas and curry, and if one turned round the other way the smell of tamales and empanadas warmly greeted one.

Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

A young man who had been watching the line from across the way, presumably deciding whether or not to associate himself, and sometimes moving from section to section and craning his short neck in an apparent effort to take it in from as many points of view as could be readily achieved (at one point it looked as though he were rather seriously and studiously contemplating scaling the branches of a tree, to see what things looked like from on high) finally made his move, approaching a man who had come out of his building to walk his dog and who had promptly found a spot and fallen in line among all the others.

“Say,” said the young man, “What’s this line for, anyway?”

“I actually don’t know myself,” the older man replied.

“But it must be good with all these people in it,” added another person ahead of the man with the dog.

The young man seemed to consider this.

“So you don’t know either?” he asked after a moment or two.

“No, no one seems to.”

“Thanks,” he said, at last, and went to take his place at the end of the line, which had moved back several places in the time since he had arrived and which now ran halfway clear across town.

By the very middle of the day, cutting was becoming a mounting concern and threatened to boil over to a crisis point. Bathrooms, too, became an issue, with the people in line at first honoring placeholders when one had to relieve oneself, but as the anticipation, and the line itself, swelled to a breaking point, individuals became more and more reluctant to hold anyone else’s place, or indeed, to allow anyone else to do so.

By this time the woman at the front of the line had begun to garner no small amount of renown. She was a woman who was neither young nor old, the color of whose hair, as it silhouetted the last hour of daylight savings time, was like a broken halo at the head of the line. An escalating and increasingly profitable bidding war had hiked the auction price of her spot in line by two hundred fold by the time the doors of the city released, at the stroke of five, from the land of work and out into the desert exile of early evening the ranks of workers, thousands deep, semi-freed now to use to the utmost the brief, unhappy hours which form the intermissions between their days. Curiously, rather than hitting the bars as they would normally do, or seeing to the few final errands they had failed to attend to during lunch, they, too, found themselves inextricably drawn, as if by a strange and unyielding form of magnetism, toward the line.

“Two grand, I’ll give you two grand right now for it! Take it or leave it.”

“I’ll make it three thousand. Would you take a check?”

“A cool $5000. What do you say?”

The woman at the front of the line (rumors, all unconfirmed by either anecdote or the news accounts being filed lived from the scene, abounded as to her name) refused all offers and entreaties to trade or sell her foremost position. At this point crosstown traffic had devolved to a standstill, as the sidewalks could scarcely contain so many people out in the streets at once, and as the crowding overflow of people spilled into the bus and bicycle lanes of the avenues and boulevards. Cyclists, at first miffed at the impasse, dismounted at the places where their progress halted, and joined the line with their bicycles in tow. Appointments, social calls and engagements of every sort and degree of fragility were broken, as more and more curious souls found it quite impossible to pass up the chance to be in a line of such an unmistakably rare and grand importance, and so forewent even plans weeks or months in the offing. Three births, and one death, were reported in the line over the course of the day. The sun, at last, largely set, and in its descent along the downside of western sky, seemed,

Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

at the final moment before its disappearing act behind the final curtain of horizon, to have found its own place among the rest of those waiting.

The end of the line came almost as unsuddenly as the early onset of the bluesy twilight that contained and imbued it. One by one, as though prompted by the tug of a great, unspoken collective conscious which surged and moved by synapse down the entirety of the congress of strangers, individuals began to peel away from the line--to bars, to belated rendezvous, to trains underground and above, to cars waiting and hailed…ere long to beds from which to watch the game (it hardly mattered which), followed by the nightly news that, presently, previewed an upcoming segment airing at the top of the hour on a line that formed out of the blue today and stretched clear across town.

The End

The Round

Deborah Smythe—Deb to those who did not really know her all that well, in that way of the more familiar sometimes being reserved for strangers and casual acquaintances—worked on her feet all night and sat all the day at a desk a half step too short for her. She slept, when she had the time and was not simply too tired to do so, evenings between jobs, before clocking in "just in time for the graveyard," as she and her coworkers liked to joke. Her house, which she shared with an older sister and a cat that was more hers than theirs, was plainer than she, but situated in a nice enough part of the town, and roughly equidistant between her night and day lives. The geographic and occupational convenience of her situation most likely would not have been lost on her had she the luxury of a spare hour or two to take stock of it. On nights off (generally Thursdays, when she did not pick up an extra shift), she had begun recently to see somewhat regularly a slightly older man who had a curious habit of ordering his rounds at the Chapter House Bar and Grille, where they usually trysted, non-verbally by means of a little card that he carried around in his pocket and on which he had scrawled his drink order, right down to and including the specified brand of gin and the proportions he favored, and which garnish. He did this even when the Chapter House, or "Chappy" as he referred to it over the phone when asking her if she could make it out tomorrow night (he *always* asked her out the night before—a point of mild contention between the two sisters), was mostly deserted except for where they sat in their usual booth, and when there was no possibility of his having to shout to the barman in order to be heard above the din. Deborah had been trying to decide whether or not she felt this was an affectation on his part or simply a quirk of being. She was inclined, finally, to feel that perhaps it was a little of Column A and a little of Column B, as so many things of late seemed to her to be. With one another they were still on 'Deb' terms of address, which, she thought, was where she would like to keep things, for now.

Of the two she did not like to talk so much about her night job, perhaps because it was still faintly new and she had yet to make up her mind definitely as to how she felt about it. Deborah liked to know how she felt about almost every thing. Also, it, the job, was unlike anything she had ever done on any kind of gig before, and she had bounced around between so many different types of jobs over the years (seasonal, temp, part-time, you name it) since she started working that she reckoned she could only fit a fraction of the total on to the one page all the resume workshoppers told her she had to squeeze all of her relevant past experience. The time she had spent in Houston, for example, was not relevant experience she had once been told, and so she ought to leave it off. The people who helped you with your resume-building and interview skills, also, had told her to consider lowering her voice in the phone interviews, if she were contacted for any, in order to sound more mature. "It's silly, I know. But it works," they had told her.

Deborah had gotten the night job in the first place through one of those fairs they held periodically downtown at the convention center or else at the Masonic Hall, and it had been the first time as far back as she could think that things had ever worked out for her in such a way, since usually, for her, those sorts of things had proved to be nothing short of a total waste of time, and what's worse, of gasoline.

Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

Her shift ran from eleven at night to seven the next morning. Deborah thought she liked at least a few of her new night coworkers, and on the drive to the plant she filed through an index of their names in her head to decide, so far, how she felt about each of them.

In the company locker room—which was unisex and caused her to feel a vague uneasiness in spite of the fact, as she reminded herself over the course of her first few shifts, that, after all, it was the 21st Century—there was a general palling around before the shift began among those who had been with the company longer as they all undressed and re-dressed into the dull, starchy red overalls and heavy pants and reinforced work boots that made up the plant uniform. She had bought special inserts for her feet, at the suggestion of one of the veterans of the floor, to help with all the standing, and to an extent they had helped. Deborah felt she was glad no one she really knew would ever, so she hoped and prayed, see her in the uniform. Most of her coworkers still called her Deb.

On cue as the shop talking and joking around ceased with his entrance into the changing area, Zach, the floor manager, walked through and notified each worker of his or her shift position for the night.

“Deb, you’re on QC 4. You think you’ve had enough training shifts under your belt to handle it?”

“Sure, definitely. Lisa was great at the training stuff.”

“Okay, sounds good. I’m sure you’ve got it. I’ll drop by later anyway, just to see how things are going.”

QC4 stood for Quality Control Station Number 4. The “s” and “n” had been dropped somewhere along the way, or maybe, so she thought on her way to the floor, whoever had come up with the training and the names for all the different floor positions had known from the start that more than two letters would be a mouthful to have to say every time. QC4 was not, per se, a tough position because it demanded any more of a person physically, but because you had to pay much more attention than when you were stationed at, say, QC5, and definitely more than at QC1 or QC2.

Deborah got into place, aligning her inserted, booted feet with the diagramed outline on the floor in front of the belt that told you where you were supposed to stand. A red light went on and a buzzer sounded, and then they came rolling out down the belt. For a moment there flashed a glitter of coppers and silvers and golds streaming towards her, and she thought of the penny fountain in Houston, but quickly had to put that out of mind, since they always came faster than you thought. She had a split-second to pick up each one as they flowed away from her, inspect the casing for imperfections using her eyes and fingers, and then replace it into the flowing tide along with the others. If something looked or felt funny, she threw that one aside into a bin at her right elbow. She did not know what they did with the discards or where they went. Maybe they melted them down again and tried to get them right a second time.

“QC4! How we doing?” Zach called.

“Great!” She practically had to shout above the mechanical clatter of the floor. Zach gave her a thumbs-up.

*

The 3:40 PM Lakeshore Lmtd. to Chicago marking intermediary stops from New York City in Croton-Harmon, Poughkeepsie, Albany, Schenectady, Utica, Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo, Erie, Cleveland where one could dismount for a quick smoke stop in the early hours and look out sleepily upon the lone, lonely wind turbine perched near the football stadium like a sentry on the shore of the great lake, Toledo, Sandusky, Elkhart, and with the sun coming up the next morning, South Bend, was as usual running behind schedule. As was often the case, the problem had its origins upstate, where the freight trains took priority over the passenger lines.

Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

As the set of the sun flickered out over the western bank of the Hudson, with a lumbering thud the Lakeshore ground to an unceremonious halt, all ten coach carriages, two sleepers, luggage and café cars and all, somewhere between Peekskill and Garrison. There was but one, one-lane bridge up ahead at the next crossing, and to their unified chagrin which grumbled up and down the entire length of the train, the passengers were informed that they were holding in place until such time as the southbound freight passed on its way down to the city from which, for the most part, they had all just come.

As the passing trains came abreast—the northbound dully silver and fluted along either end, the southbound rusted, bulbous, and laden down toward the earth like a beast of burden—the faded stenciled lettering ARTEMIS SYSTEMS came into view in patches of train where the freight cars remained ungraffitied.

Despite the preferential status of movement held by the one over the other, the conductors of both trains, as north yielded to the passage of the south, exchanged a friendly, tired, commiserated wave of the hand from the perches of their respective engines.

“I always wonder what’s in those great big things,” one of the passengers in coach said to her companion, who appeared to be of a somewhat less contemplative outlook.

“Oil, probably,” he said, without much more than a glance in the direction of the rusty caravan.

Then:

“Did you hear about that huge oil train that blew up right as it entered that one town, in Nebraska or Iowa I think it was? Anyway, one of those places, you know. Blew up and nearly took half the town with it.”

She had not.

“Well, it looks like we might be sitting here a while. Do you want to get a drink in the café car?”

“Okay. I’m going to call Mom first to let her know the train’s late.”

*

The late, late afternoon delivery was the last on his route, which was never on his way home but always it seemed in the exact opposite direction.

The requisitions sergeant had already left the precinct for the day, and he had had to wait around for another supervisor to be scared up and come sign for the delivery. There were four medium-sized containers, in all, each with the branding “INSPECTED BY AFT” on each of the six sides, accompanying the seal of the bureau.

“Is that it? I’ve never signed for them before,” said the signatory.

“Yep, that’s it. You keep that one for your records.”

“Alright, then. Thanks.”

“You take care now.”

“Same to you.”

On his way out, the man gave a cursory glance over the small crowd gathered in the antechamber of the precinct. By the looks of it from their varied expressions and languages of the body, some of the assembled appeared to be there at the heed of complaints, while

Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

others appeared ready to file complaints of their own. Through the unrevolving doors he made his way out into the last of the light of day.

*

Planning to finish his work on the bus the next day, the boy had gone to bed early, nevertheless he slept through his alarm, again. From his dreams in the night he had heard the long distant horn of a passing train.

The mother of the boy was already at work by the time he finally got himself up out of their bed. There were many steps to go before he would be ready to leave the house, and he found a comfort in their doing by counting them off as he went. He brushed teeth, washed face, applied an extra helping of deodorant as there was after school track, ate a bowl of cereal, drank a glass of orange juice, dressed into the white oxford and khakis of his school uniform, and crammed binders, folders, and the stray loose leaf sheet of paper hastily into his backpack. Last but not least he brushed his hair.

The boy, of course, was late. Sister Prescott, as was her wont when she was especially peeved, did not turn her back from the chalkboard as he entered and simply told him to see her at the end of the day. As with a conductor prompting a section of a choral ensemble, this immediately sent up a chorus of “Oooohs!!!” from the voices of the classroom. That meant no track that day, but after hours study, which, in turn, meant that he would have practically to run to make it home in time for dinner.

*

The responding officer drew and fired exactly one round from the chamber of his newly issued service firearm.

It was a perfect shot.

The First Time You See Africa

I. Levante

The first time you see Africa you

are distracted by the house of light

and Don Quixote’s wind turbines

cutting the sun

flowered air

a sea of sun

flowers

the sun flowering

air that calls itself Levante

off the Isla de Las Palomas

Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

beaches advertising the end of a continent

II. Siroco

The end of Europe

is not greater than

nor equal to

the beginning of Africa

as much as you

might have hoped

or supposed

at Tarifa

The white and yellow

The white and blue

walls of the houses of the old city

were flaked and raw in places

the perfect seal of a city

battered and re-battered by centuries

of hard ceaseless

winds coming in from the Estrecho

("the most southern point")

that unites the whore of the Mediterranean with the whore of the Atlantic

as the not-so-old man with the cliffside little store and the motherless kittens

of the Kasbah pointed them out

to you to the left and to the right of the Pillars of Hercules

III. Mediodia

in Cadiz legend

has it that the ceaseless winds

will drive a man

right up to the very point

Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

of madness which is why

gaditanos talk and sound

the way they do

back in the Kasbah, scrawled in graffiti-ese on a windless wall, you see: “Si el amor no nos puede salvar de la muerte, por lo menos nos puede salvar de la vida”

which strikes you as eminently sensible

IV. Lebeche

Remembering yourself

throughout the palm shade of the parque de Maria Llosa

the carriage-and-tourist

-drawing dusty

sevillano horses

, even, seemed

to clop-clop-clop

along the garden paths

in the

1
2
3

1
2
3

metrical trot of flamenco nights

By the sea gate granting access to the old

city stands guard he who, evidently,

from the Moors for good retook the town,

and at the other, main end above the Puerta de Jerez a benediction:

MUY NOBLE MUY LEAL, HEROICA CIUDAD DE TARIFA, GANADA A LOS MOROS REINADO SANCHO IV EL BRAVO EN 21 DE SEPTIEMBRE DE 1292

at Bab el Fahs and Bab el-As’aa

Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

the checkpoint gate

the door of the rod

passing in or out of the Medina

some twenty miles to yesterday

over bluest blue

some twenty miles yet to its shore

you see no parallel gate keepers squared off along here

the Med the ancient line of scrimmage

but only a one-eyed young cat you

weren't supposed to feed

do as the locals who might not appreciate your scrap-feeding and encouraging a brand

of domesticity in the tangerine street cats

only to depart and leave them to sort it out between themselves

do

V. Poniente

On the ferry

it's pleasantly difficult

glancing from face to face

the boat glancing from wave to wave

to tell who's who

among the Mediterraneanized

browns and bronzes

Moroccans, Spaniards

Andalusians, Tangerines, Gaditanos

handsome homeric chicos y chicas morenos all

not, as back home, the drab Sherwin Williams swatch PoC

but then someone says something

opens his or her mouth

and the jig is up

Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

VI. Mistral

Playa del Chica at near midday

the wind sails of the wind

surfers like a leeward confetti

medallions of light

mottle-dapple the old made of limestone-looking machine gun bunkers

“You see how they’re rounded at the top there?

That’s so that if a bomb is dropped

from above, the detonation will deflect outward instead

of being a direct hit.”

Later,

or earlier you get pointed out to you the stony slits of the parapet
crenellated like a castle
of sand that had been for shooting arrows out of

before, likely, shooting rifles out of

the fortified strata of centuries but

You didn’t have enough time,

or simply you forgot,

to walk out to the end of the end of the finisterre

always best to save something

keep them coming back for more

VII. Tramontana

Fresh *on* the boat

you very nearly missed

(Because of the hour time

difference, and the fact that the ferry

takes exactly one hour to cross

you arrive at your destination

at the same time that you left)

Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

VIII. Gregal

This, my friend,

right here

or over there just a bit to the left

is as far west as Hercules got

so they say

they, also,

say it's an ill wind that blows nobody any

good

Out out out beyond

the Estrecho the watery equivalent of terra incognita

container ships of children's toys and Saran Wrap

their sitting hulks standing guard

along

a horizon lost at sea

but bound by winds

on high

for New York and

the old new world

and all points West

Bioprofile of the author:

Christopher James Knox is a freelance writer of fiction, poetry, and non-fiction who has written extensively on the history of jazz and the contemporary music scene. Among other outlets, his work has appeared in Jazz Speaks, Rainy Day, and The Cornell Book Review. Educated at Cornell University, he has held positions at The National Jazz Museum in Harlem, The Jazz Gallery, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. An advocate of jazz and a devotee of the New York scene, he is currently at work on a trilogy of jazz novels and an oral history of the iconic Greenwich Village jazz club Smalls, among other projects. When he is not writing about music and culture, he enjoys dropping by his favorite jazz clubs for the late-night jam sessions. Born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio, he now calls Harlem home.

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Knox, Christopher. "Three short stories and a poem." JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research 1.X (201X): pages <https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>