

JOHN BEER

The Sellout

Like a businessman after three drinks
 I mounted three lampposts on the rooftop of
 This poem/ this poem delivered
 Twin packages, labeled

“Hoplite Helmet” and “One for
 The Sellout.” Styrofoam peanuts
 Filling the basement. A crisis
 Quickly arose/ slowly arising

You grope your way to the office
 And see/ “You see, most days
 I feel like I’m lucky to even have
 A head,” reported Jamie Dimon, 55,

Chief of JP Morgan Chase/ chaste
 Mariners. A prodigious storm
 Having battered the isles
 In February of 1734, the outpost

Foundered. A later visitor
 Observed, “Where once stood
 A rude yet sturdy hall,
 Now only pelicans/ pimihkân

Containing cranberries,
 Saskatoon berries, currants,
 Cherries, and bone marrow fat
 Sustained the party/ the party-

Goers rise to toast Aunt C.
 On her seventieth/ his seventh,
 He looks up from the magazine.
 He looks like me.

Martin Sapling

No shade repeats itself, for the pranked dominance
of the story as it had taken form over decades
or possibly even centuries of concerted group effort
rules out in advance improvisation
at this rubescent juncture. Once our hearts

refused all barriers, but nowadays
passports, typesetting reign. So the gathering clouds

will always “clump” into the likeness of an anvil,
so the breeze will bring a “nagging” scent
of spruce to Martin Sapling. He recalls
the rabbit caught in a snare, the haggard girl,
the marble dropped in a cupful of snow.

Now, while the greatest challenge still awaits,
Martin, the improbable hero, grips a spoon,
offers it to the mighty ghost of Grimmon,
as calmly as you might pluck an egg
from the nest of your prize layer, as in fact

Sapling himself did in an early vignette
that struck you at the time as overwrought,
a heavy-handed tribute to rural virtues
in stark contrast to the skeptical spirit

that elsewhere in the work predominates.
Isn't that, though, the ever-present risk
of such minor productions, the larger part
of their charm? Language gives us history
digested, let's suppose. *Guerdon, bike,*
whatever. Each staking out its little sward
of contexts, then striking out from there

into its uncertain destiny. But then go one step further.
Even as the first sequence sharpens its instinct
for abstraction, the second glistens
with a roseate light. The tiny puddles
through their very lack of density
evoke the overlapping clicks of closing doors.
The order turns out less secure than beckoning,

as if in an unmarked elevator you caught
 your own name drifting by, etched
 by a mason impatient for his week to end,
 and all the same impelled by lucid dreams.

“I don’t know Flemish,” you start to protest,
 though the evidence weighs heavily against you:
 the shelves of diaries, the luxurious hair.
 In the end, the other Martin Sapling

gradually came to eclipse the figure
 upon which you’d staked what remained of your reputation.
 No more the hapless villager, afraid to meet
 his ruddy reflection in a blacksmith’s basin,
 this paragon fought for justice with his pen.
 “It shall not stand,” Martin Sapling declares,
 and the calcified desires of the age begin
 to melt into a new configuration. Can you forgive
 the readers who devoured this new champion?
 Didn’t you kind of want to model yourself
 on his bold postures, even if it meant
 that the mighty ghost of Grimmon went unchecked
 in some remote corner of possibility,
 receding into nowhere with every turning page?

When the elevator doors opened, the library was dark.
 “History is bunk,” a greater man than Sapling
 supposedly said, and once forgetfulness
 has seeped into the outlines of the self,
 what chances could a few scattered words have?

A few years earlier, we joined the gathering crowd
 at the *Martin Sapling* screening. “No shade
 shall from this dawn repeat itself,” the titles scrolled,
 while you texted me a lovely, gnomonic warning.
 So I will be more watchful.

Hesher

The men are beautiful, divisible numbers.
They've already jotted down their hidden wishes,
none so specifiable as to be included
in your phrasebook. "We visited them
last year. Today we venture out
to the gates of the Indian Point nuke plant,
our color-coded posters under our coats."
Pennies kept in an aboveground pool.

Yawn. Stretch. Or at the corner Walgreens,
a Tootsie Roll boosted, a single pocketed glove.
Some such activity was bound to signal spring,
a generic holiday, new travel prospects:
I discuss this in my blog post titled "Hesher."
Like it or not, most dogs don't recognize
recycling schedules, and yet we praise them
for their poise, the bilious excepted.

But just as the sirens seemed ready to burst
into their unwelcome music, winding down
the ongoing statement of her philosophy,
the one we'd bought tickets to see, or at least
talked about buying, until a sneezing fit
sidetracked us, and once tranquility resumed,
no one could recollect the earlier, druggy haze
of enthusiasm, and you were in Duluth,

just then, in other words, a distant portent
pealed its single, indiscernible note.
Somebody claimed, nonetheless, to have heard it.
That one proceeded, in a nasal, yawpy tone,
to diagram its meaning: the prolegomenon,
vague but sonorous; the hermit advertisement;
a subtle digression on the lives of animals;
the ominous last words. No one believed it.

Next door the dancers request a time out,
and if they ask it, you should grant it them,
responds the hermit as he stumbles
toward the unattended grotto. You have to wonder
why the yard takes on a deeper, bluish hue
while he sketches all afternoon from memory
a replica of Michelangelo's David,
nude without being naked.

The Way It Might Have Been

Talk in white palazzos, treasure-hung,
Turns gradually to the seven varieties
Of vice catalogued in some Hellenic manuscript
That failed to survive the sack of Alexandria,
Though its taxonomies of birds and rulers,
Monuments, angels, fountains, and acts of love
Punctuate the dialogue or treatises
Of other, less obsessive but more carefully preserved
Authors. You disagree. Ten types of vice,
At least, and that's not counting
The weakness that attaches to all material
And guarantees that *Night Watch* or *Flamingo*
Will soon enough be dust. I'm somewhere else,

Apparently. I remember one muggy night
On a veranda, debating how armor might be forged;
There's the time that bookseller accosted you
About Lessing, as we ambled along a blue canal;
At a party, talk of life in other galaxies
Led somewhere we didn't expect. We cried that night.
But the gleaming stucco, the tapestries,

The hushed reverence with which the host enumerated
This mythic list? As soon as I invoke them,
I'm like the traveler without a trustworthy map
Who stops for a moment by a roadside stand
To pick out a melon. Something rumbles on the horizon.
Where were you headed? I couldn't say for sure.
A woman with visible scars counts out my change.
Back in the car, a glimpse of this place after the sun
Has flamed and faded. Roads draw together as mere lines.

Welcome Back, Hegel

Schleiermacher is running for student body president, but his campaign turns into a disaster.

Marx is caught smoking cigarettes; Hegel and the Young Hegelians try to get him to stop.

Hegel has a dream about life when the Young Hegelians become old.

Rivera paints a great masterpiece on the walls of the school.

Schleiermacher blames Marx's personal malice for his becoming a murder suspect; Kafka anticipates trouble with a judge who used to date Lou Andreas-Salome; and Nietzsche gets troubling news.

William Carlos Williams drives Allen Ginsberg crazy by inviting everyone he knows to Allen's graduation. Flossie gets ready to leave for Singapore.

After hearing the romantic poem Leonard wrote for Virginia for Valentine's Day, Marie longs for a romantic gift. However, when Hegel forgets Valentine's Day and offers her money as a gift, a major argument erupts. This leads Hegel to have a love song written for her.

Frida Kahlo and Rivera discover each other's secrets. Meanwhile, Trotsky is desperate to get some time alone with Kahlo.

Hegel goes to great lengths to be able to get Marie a nice birthday present.

Kafka's newest girlfriend can deal with all the craziness in his life—except for Josef K's stalking.

Hegel has a big surprise for Marie that he's going to announce on their anniversary. Unfortunately, the hints that he drops makes the others believe that the surprise is a divorce announcement, and Marx tries to talk him out of it while Schleiermacher and Trotsky try to delicately break the bad news to Marie.

Williams and Neighbor Stevens supervise Dickinson's class on a field trip to the museum. Allen organizes a fundraiser for the community center. He plans to put messages on T-shirts and sell them at street fairs. He believes

that he has gotten a great deal on the shirts, only to discover that they do not have neck holes. Allen hopes to handle the situation himself, but Stevens eventually steps in to save the day with his legal expertise.

Hegel is disgusted when he receives a traffic ticket for failure to yield on a right turn. Hegel is sure he did the most prudent thing in the situation and lets Kafka talk him into fighting the ticket in court. Hegel is prepared to fight for himself but once in the court room he finds himself being represented ... by Kafka!

While Trotsky adjusts to married life, Schleiermacher sets up an interview for a job. Marx gets the job before Schleiermacher, unaware that it's the same job. The two get into a fight and end up in a gym ready to box.

Frida Kahlo has Rivera served divorce papers, and then he meets a new woman who looks just like her.

Nietzsche gets dumped by his girlfriend Lou when she catches him in a web of lies. His guilty conscience causes him to vow to never lie again, which ends up creating many more problems than it solves.

After he cancels a party the students were holding, Marie (in disgust) leaves Hegel.

Six months have passed since the events of last season. Even as Hegel and Marie plan to celebrate his birthday privately and quietly, Karl and Jenny Marx decide to throw a lavish party for Hegel on their yacht. Hegel helps in reconciling Karl and Engels, who is still burdened with his troubled marriage and missing lover. Ludwig is reunited with his illegitimate son, while Hannah and Martin Heidegger escalate their relationship. Franz reveals his feelings for Lou to György Lukacs. Amidst the Marxist drama, a death occurs within the group, and someone is arrested for murder.

Hegel has a dream about life when the Young Hegelians become old.

Rivera paints a great masterpiece on the walls of the school.

Scenes from an Italian Restaurant

I.

That winter, the days slipped by:
 one kid spent an unexpected night
 in a snowbank, his cheek purple-black,
 a couple toes severed above the knuckle,
 while another drifted back to the neighborhood
 now that the war was winding down. Brenda
 kept a weather diary for a week or so,
 trying to discern in isobars and aerosols
 a guide to the coming bad times.

Voice distortion had a fleeting moment
 at the top of the charts, but once the daylight hours
 restarted their march toward diurnal domination,
 saccharine harmonies rained from the airwaves.
 The outlaw sipped grappa and listened intently
 as the popular songs continued: "Let's Find a Way,"
 "Piano Player," "Fireworks All Afternoon,"
 one after another on the portable radio.

II.

"sarge grips lupu" "doctor fuckweed"
 "nastyass tony and his pine badger trio"
 "big wheelie criazzo" "festering phil"
 "jimmy lip" "jimmy horse" "jimmy the table"

"lazy eye rita" "poppy napolitano"
 "the legume boys" "angie the frump"
 "cue card costello" "joey two-tits"
 "the hamburger king of south philadelphia"

"five-topping fran" "listerine eddie"
 "little tom turco and his legendary boner"
 "sam casino" "sam mercedes" "sammy kerosene"
 "thirsty pozzi" "maria go-it-alone"

"wooden ass marino" "three strikes lou"
 "andy the weirdo" "perpendicular mike"
 "dustpan della rosa" "carmine come again"
 "the cheesesteak king of south philadelphia"

III.

Everything was remarkably green:
the outlaw saddled up and rode
into the backdrop. Wasn't something like this
the fulfillment we'd been waiting for,
a thin filigree of gold around your ankle,
a light dusting of product leaving my hair
memorable and firm?

An offstage sneeze
and the moment unravels, just as the saxophonist
raises his glass. He had seemed so cutting-edge,
a Falstaff for the locomotion era, and now
he was tumbling with the rest of us into the past,
pinioned along with monochrome and Faberge eggs
in a collective display of what stood in for happiness.

In the next block, an argument broke out,
disrupting the calm upon which the high-wire act
depended, and though he waited, impassive, equipoised,
it was starting to look like the event we had expected
so delicately that even a single breath in its direction
would have betrayed it utterly hadn't ever had a prayer
of coming to pass, our celebration altogether premature,
so we quietly made our way back home,
an apartment with steam heat.

IV.

You couldn't have done this if you knew what you were doing. You find a way of saying something other than the thing you really want to say. You look around the room but there are only unfamiliar faces.

You looked around the room but there were only familiar faces. You raised a glass and everybody matched your gesture. Behind you, the piano player picked out the opening chords of "Tell the Truth."

You hear the opening chords of "The Way I Want You to Be." You recognize the tune but you can't quite remember the words. You realize that you are more afraid than you expected to be.

You thought you would be afraid when they called your name. You cried during the rehearsal, but when the actual moment arrived, you were filled with an unusual serenity. You felt as though everything were working according to plan.

You feel as though nothing is happening the way that it is supposed to. You realize that you are wearing the wrong clothes. You are watching your lips move as from an infinite distance.

You observed yourself closely to eliminate any hint of self-consciousness. As you left the event, dozens of well-wishers congratulated you. Only weeks later, with a sickening sense of dislocation, did you begin to realize what you had done.

You raise a glass and everybody matches your gesture. You hear the opening chords of "Everyone Dies (Sooner or Later)." You couldn't have done this if you knew what you were doing.

V.

Somebody was knocking,
four times someone knocked
at the door, and when I opened it,
he came in. He poured himself a grappa
and then he said, "I can kill with a smile.
I can wound with my eyes."

He said, "Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday."

He said, "Blame it all on yourself."

Then everything began to reel before my eyes, a fiery gust came from the bar, while the ceiling cracked in two, from end to end, and a great sheet of flame poured down through the rift. Every nerve in my body was a steel spring, and my grip closed on the revolver. The trigger gave, and the smooth underbelly of the butt jogged my palm. And so, with that crisp, whipcrack sound, it all began. I shook off my sweat and the clinging veil of light. I knew I'd shattered the balance of the day, the spacious calm of this Italian restaurant in which I had been happy. But I fired four shots more into the inert body, on which they left no visible trace. And each successive shot was another loud, fateful rap on the door of my undoing.

Nougat Frenzy

The line of well-wishers as you step off the queue
flashes nothing hungrier than cats, that distaff syrup
reminiscing I'ma go this way, I'ma go
listen up Sunnyside for the ultraplex project

stylish biographer hanging to the back, and you
vomit, yep. "Let's all stand in honest recognition."
The pathways never seemed so loud
in the yearbooks we pored over, we ichorous,

we double-pounced and dragged. Half an hour
till the mermen bring their giddy sense of drama
to this otherwise not-so-swinging carnival.
I'm over switching socks. Next, catch the bonus.

*Umpteen Million Prospective Buyers Never
Chose to Be Wrong*

A stronger light above his bed
Blinks in perpetuity its message
To the effect that this tiny basket
Could, once the syzygy has released its impressionable followers,
The lake trout returned to the cooler side of the lake,
One or two of the bucket brigades improved
Their *jeu d'esprit*, their playful teamwork
As they haul the cooling bucket toward
Each lowering inferno, then might the basket
Take on at a steadily increasing rate the significance
That presently only chains and the odd stiff rod
Exert upon the collective imagination. "You'll see,"
Croaked Mayor McThing, but we didn't. The long-awaited curse
Had extinguished our sight, and in the minutes that remained,
What seemed like centuries from a less geological perspective,
Most of us chose to bat at whiffleballs
Badly. *Whiff*, you might hear,
As untended rattraps sprang,
And then again later, *Whiff*,
While children in mismatched outfits
Threaded through the crowd, idly
Eating the poison.

Eddie Money

A yard or two of air, that's all there is
To tell the cherished grandfather
Apart from the moldering corpse.

A house should be somewhere else.
I spent an afternoon drawing a map
from now to when I started. No one

called me back. According to the calendar,
today I'll find out all about
the heart of poetry. Here we go.

But the spotlight turns to ice.
Getting into scuffles, popping wheelies,
Eddie Money never imagined

how much he'd leave behind. I'm shakin',
but I'm not shakin' for you. No!
As though I were that other house.

Camp Tutelage

What I felt like doing the public didn't want to hear
but only a few bats indicated a friendly disposition
by batting their wings about and quasi-smiling,
though I might have been at that point
projecting upon their odd and febrile frames.
Nobody wants to end their little life
pursued by mobs, torchlight, imprecations.
No one, really, wants to be the bad man,
the sad man, the blue-eyed soul singer.