

PAUL BRESLIN

Four Poems

Assignment

“Pouch, human remains, type II. Nylon; chloropene”

(Description from a Defense Contract, quoted by Nicolas Kristof, *NYT*, February 18, 2003)

In my dank warehouse, packed inside a crate,
I picture you in sunlit afternoon,
Choosing nine long-stemmed roses for your date.
But I’m not jealous—it’ll be my turn soon.

When you go overseas, I’m sent as well,
And, from the bottom of the medics’ stack,
I’ll work my way up one by one, until
There’s none above me. You and I are next.

Like you, obedient soldier, I’m designed
To do my job and then be thrown away.
Don’t grieve too much when someone’s bullet finds
Your heart and does *its* job as well. They’ll say,

We honor your remains, your sacrifice,
Then ship you home inside me, stiff as ice.

(Written February-March 2003)

The Bequests

In the year two-thousand-two,
My country groaning for relief,
I ask what all the cash might do
That otherwise flows through the sieve
Of campaign ad or legal brief;
And from the fifteenth century
I call Villon, great poet and thief,
To help conduct my inquiry.

François, it's worth your voyaging
Across the ocean and the years,
For what's not spent on public things
Is private profit, mine and yours.
And since you never were averse
To pilfering some extra francs,
We'll squander half this bulging purse
And stash the rest in off-shore banks—

A skim-off insignificant
Compared with what the market bears;
They'll praise our virtuous restraint
In taking modest quarter-shares.
So to our wine (The cost? Who cares
With such a vast expense account)
And let us see what quick repairs
Are possible with this amount.

Item: to the FBI,
A guide dog and a red-tipped cane,
So that when students learn to fly,
But not to land, an aeroplane
And other warning signs as plain
As the proboscis on your face
Escape the federal detective,
At least the dog is on the case,
Though bureaucratic sight's defective.

Item: to the Democrats
We offer a transplanted spine—
Too bad we didn't think of that
Before the party flopped supine
And told George Bush it would be fine
To start a war we shouldn't fight.
We think it's time for them to join
The vertebrates and walk upright.

Item: to the G.O.P.
We offer, Oz-like, a new heart,
Though cardiologists agree
The transplant is the easy part,
Not a solution, just a start.
The hard part is the angioplasty
Needed to clean out the plaque
From years of circulating nasty
Bromides from the hard-right claque.

Item: to the wealthy few,
A zero budget. After all,
There's little left for us to do,
Now that you've made your taxes fall
And gutted virtually all
The agencies of regulation.
So do not lobby, write, or call:
We've put you vultures on probation.

Item: to Pat Robertson
And those who think the good Lord's will
Is evident to them alone;
To jihadists who live to kill;
To those who claim that Israel
Is theirs alone, since God will cherish
Just one people, and expel
All others, leaving them to perish—

One island, twenty miles square,
Arid, uninhabited,
And one-way transportation there;
No tools, no shelter overhead.
They'll either all be swiftly dead
Or tolerate each other's views.
The rest of us, home safe in bed,
Will scarcely care which way they choose.

François, I feel much better now.
Drink up, and then we'll split the gain.
That island cost too much, but how
We'll relish having peace again!
Although the surgeon's bill's insane,
And HMOs reject transplants,
And guide dogs cost a lot to train,
We're rich, François—and so, to France!

The Boy Who Cried Wolf

Oh, they'd scold me. But then
my mother would brew some tea
and they'd loosen their boots
to talk for hours in the parlour
of stock and crops, the flood
twenty years back; the uncle
who'd come back from the war
one-legged, the aunt
who ran off with the tenor.

I heard each word from my room
where I was banished to bed
without supper. As long as they talked,
the world held promise and danger.

And then it was empty.
I tended sheep
as they shambled at random,
grazing and piling up dung.
The sun had moved, I could see it,
but from mid morning
(when dew dried from the grass)
to just before sunset (when gnats
began turning like dust-motes
over the pasture stream)
nothing but shadows changed.

Was I shaking with fear
or joy that the wolf
finally came? When its teeth
ripped through the arm
I was raising to ward it off,
I wanted nothing—
only my life, already
pouring brightly away.

The Rivals

All right, concede
the muscular bod.
But his beard
is coarse and smeared
with all he's eaten.
The wine stains on his necktie
look much like blood.
You know he came straight
from a woman's bed—
see that blond
hair on his collar?
The brunette
pressing herself to him
in the corner won't.
Only his face and hers,
held in a mirror.

*Eros, that swine—
What does she see in him?
She might have chosen
Thanatos, neat as a pin:*

his linens dazzle
like crisp-edged clouds;
his trousers,
knife-sharp
cut the air in planes
at each stride.
His tie, straight
as a plumb-line,
is slate.
No idle metaphor,
he is dressed to kill.

*Thanatos has arguments
that Eros cannot answer.
But Eros has a killer smile
and is the better dancer.*