

# 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.*