

UNDERGROUND FACILITY

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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No Distinguishing Features (wordwolf press, 2011)

One More Civil Gesture (Isobar Press, 2015)

UNDERGROUND FACILITY

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COVER IMAGE

Laurent Grasso. *Studies into the Past*.
Oil on Wood, 45 x 35 cm. Private collection.
Courtesy of the Artist and the Edouard Malingue Gallery.

To
F. E. R. S.
K. J. S.
and F. E. S.

...bid the dishonest man mend himself; if he mend, he is no longer dishonest; if he cannot, let the botcher mend him. Any thing that's mended is but patched: virtue that transgresses is but patched with sin; and sin that amends is but patched with virtue.

– *Twelfth Night*

One must at every opportunity use the subterranean paths of action and thought, erase the traces, appear suddenly and irrelevantly, endlessly conquer oneself, never hesitate to sodomize one's soul so that it will be reborn purer and stronger than ever.

– from *The Secret Life of Salvador Dali*

Why, this is Paradise – we are in Paradise, or at least under it.

– Gene Wolfe, *The Claw of the Conciliator*

CONTENTS

I. AFTERLIVES

Fresh Breath	11
A Piece of the <i>Victory</i>	12
A Salvation Army Boyhood	16
Samson	18
Ares	22
Ashcash	24
Neck Verse	26
King of Shadows	27
Empusa Red	30
A Dead Sheep Under Nab Scar	33
A Feast at Khovsgül	35
Gonzalo's Calculations	37
Judgment Day	39
Two Poems from the Museum of Man and Nature, Winnipeg	
1. <i>Fur Press</i>	40
2. <i>Diorama: Prairie Settlers in a Sod House, 1900</i>	41
Ghost Writer	43

II. LIVE FEED

Haiku	47
A Dozen on the Half-Shell	48
The Sycorax Quiz	68

III. LIFE SCIENCES

Revision	73
Glass Frog	76
Hermit Crabs	78
Safe Combination	80
Underground Facility	81
Flava	83
Tree Snake	84
Two Poems for Elinor	
1. <i>Charms</i>	86
2. <i>Cereal</i>	88
The Ceres of Suburbia	91
Mole	95
Nojiri Hopper	98
Haiku	101
Lelantos the Hunter	103
Memoirs of a Middle-Aged Boxer	104
The Kung Fu Master's Résumé	105
The Tai Qi Student	107
<i>Yōkai: Akaname</i> ('Filth Licker')	109
The Stent	114
A Candle-Snuffer in Notre-Dame de Québec	133
<i>Notes & Thanks</i>	137

GONZALO'S CALCULATIONS

I tracked down the boatswain
who'd manned us home from Tunis.
He was running anchovies and Calvados
between Bruges and Genoa
in a rotting caravel. A crew of degenerates. Nine rusty guns.
He's the man for the job: the job, and then the noose.
The other one's dead – the master of the flagship –
what was it – the *Bohemia*? The *Hydra*?
But dead, these four years. Some sea-fight off Aleppo.

Before I left that island full of music,
vexed to my bones, my world picture in turmoil,
I made certain calculations, by eyeball and instrument,
by compass and quadrant;
took windward and leeward samples of soils and plants.
And I did it hush-hush – made sure I wasn't observed,
except by the winds and tides, the palms and birds –
which, given the isle's unusual properties,
as I measured them were no doubt measuring me.

When we reach the coordinates
no one but the boatswain and I expect
anything but a patch of empty sea. The island's gone.
Equanimity's a curse on those who live too long.
I'm plotting a course on to Bermuda
when the ship's boy drags me up to the deck,
insisting he saw something big pass overhead.
By'r lakin, sir, a spirit! A giant bird.
Did the boy see a roc? Or a *garuda*?

I strain my eyes up at the Bear –
there's nothing there.
Only the new moon, freighting the old.
And why should I expect a miracle?
He owed me nothing, the old Duke of Milan,
for the way I played both sides, keeping my own hand
hidden. What did I do for him and his baby girl
but keep the usurper from cutting their throats outright –
give them food and water, and leave them to the pirates?

My fate's the sentence of the Machiavel
who served whomever happened to seize the tiller.
I was charitable – *that* was never hard –
but I never intervened, and I still don't.
These waters seethe with migrants:
a stew of half-scuttled boats escorted
by overloaded inflatables, by cried-out coastguard,
a sea of flags and flares I ordered my crew to ignore
to get us here before we went down ourselves.

The rotting carcasses bloat,
swelling and deflating with the tides
of wars, pandemics, and the ebbing coffers
of states that I helped fail. A face-down toddler
stays face-down, on a beach where I once kissed
the jewelled pincers of dictator's wives.
I've left more than one child adrift in a leaky boat,
and whatever spirit that just did a flypast knows this.
I should have done more. I should have done much more.

GHOST WRITER

for Stephen Fry

The power-lunchers swap each other's books
with a nonchalant *here's mine* and *who did yours?*
while we raise glasses to our agents' cheers
and struggling poets shoot us bitter looks.

Politicians, archbishops and pop idols,
footballers, faded reality stars:
I've leaned across my pad to catch their scandals
and craft them into bestselling memoirs.

Homo rhetoricus, my working model
still holds that last *matryoshka*, that last doll
secreted in its nested lacquer shells:
the bitter pill, the irreducible

anised lure on which my readers suck.
Competitors, so quick to call it luck
would find my methods quite unorthodox:
Ouija boards, ectoplasm, pendulum clocks,

half-silvered mirrors, a spirit cabinet,
the music of a bell inside a bell jar –
the fraudster's apparatus proves adept
at raising subjects for a real ghost writer.

But Limbo never held my interest –
its tales so long, its ghosts so virtuous.
Instead I sussed out where Lord Lucan's bones are
and who shagged this or that prime minister.

Who was your source? the cocktail minxes purr.
My Alfa Romeo, my fine Mont Blanc –
I shake my head, and take their mobile numbers.
I could have been a poet and a drunk.

Maybe I liked the work – not anymore.
I write at midnight, peering through smoked glass,
taking dictation from these tapping bores,
testy that all things passed have never passed.

You think the dead appreciate the scum
I've skimmed from Hell and Purgatory's ghettos?
People still moaning when their time has come
didn't contribute much. And I should know –

I've spilt my ink on libellous offenses.
My ghosts whine I'm a lame amanuensis
for trying to improve on what they've said –
not every author's better when they're dead.

ASHCASH

for J. B.

Hedging his bets, never one to be caught short,
my father-in-law retired to the estate
of a zero-hours contract as an undertaker's mate:
a growth industry, even in this climate
he said, as they measured him for his tails and top hat –
suiting him to his late profession
as one of death's impeccably dressed dustmen.

Nitrated by the dead,
his East London slang germinated,
sprouted nightshade and wolfsbane:
mourners were *grizzlers*, sobbing or gargoyle-grim
behind the hearse.
Vicars slid into the oven doing *St Peter's handstand*,
the privilege of clergy – i.e. headfirst.
And the two medics lucky enough
to double-check that every stiff's a stiff
got their *ashcash* – the palms of their latex gloves greased
with a hundred-and-eighty-five quid apiece.

Money for old rope, my father-in-law said.
And I thought of another kind of ashcash: his own fee,
paid cash in hand, but a pittance –
less than an obol for a much longer journey –
and after he'd learned the ropes – the lines and sheets
in death's ever-expanding corporate fleet.

He'd mastered the secrets of the sacred hoist
despite his arthritis and a bum knee,
with as much an air of dignity

as the Eternal Footman would expect –
going the extra mile
for the fallen rank and file

like his unobserved respects
paid to a nameless biddy,
when not a soul came
down the crem to claim her remains
or mourn her council-issued urn's descent:
no obsequies, no cerement,

just four white-haired men
like waxworks in the rain –
count them off – *Lear, Gloucester, Albany, Kent* –
bareheaded in the silence
of a more than Christian reverence,

not grudging their pittance
of ashcash, not noticing the old church clock
was running slow – as slow and sure as hemlock:
waiting a good while after
that black mouth in the green was sealed –
waiting for that wound, somehow, to be annealed.

KING OF SHADOWS

'Believe me, king of shadows, I mistook.'
– *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 3.2

I know a bank where the wild times blew
the roof off every IOU
and promissory note. *'Quite over-leveraged'?* –
more like pulled arse-backwards through the hedge
and spider-web of our own securities,
leaving our clients mostly on their knees.
Some nights I bunked down on the trading floor
in those last days when nobody was poor
but the actual poor, clowns with no capital,
and with no balls to take it from the till.
I snoozed, lullabied by a mustard-seed –
a Zopiclone, or a wee Ambien,
or the snaky woodsmoke of a little weed
exhaled into the ventilation system –
by fantasies of a fleet of private jets
financed with margin calls on forex spreads,
or shorting solid small-caps till they cracked,
laying a family business on its back
for me to have my way with what they built –
three generations mortgaged to the hilt.
I slept with my suit coat rolled under my head,
soft as the duck-down of our moral hazard.
And when the snake oil ran a little thin
and the investigation widened,
we weeded the servers, wiped our histories
and dumped our cache of fairy fantasies.
We knew the public purse would make amends,
just like I know those days will come again:
the management will spread a little bling,
press the flesh, juice the buds of spring,

while our analysts and accounting wizards
dance a roundel with the regulators.
We'll run rings around any opposition,
leaving them dazzled, sated, or undone
in the back of a mile-long limousine,
or laid out on some dew-damp public green
staring at the cleavage of our go-to girls
or maddened by the full moon of an eight-ball.
Our sweet Athenian action was a sure
thing – till it wasn't. For the small investor
like yourself – the working woman or man,
or the pensioner with an aggressive plan
for growth – you should have seen the risks, the shadow
lengthening on your fat portfolio.
Rant online that there's one law for
the rich – for capital – and one for labour
if it makes you feel better. You made your bets,
you strutted it, shadowing my calls and puts –
you and your penny-players down the pub
talking so big, but running with the mob,
every man with his *Financial Times*,
every man past it, locked in way sub-prime,
plumber and joiner and low-level crim
each telling your mate that you're one up on him.
Now each of you has got to live with it –
squint through the hangover, take the haircut,
bin your dream of a Costa del Sol retirement
since you (and coastal Spain) are now insolvent –
foreclosed to us. You thought that we were mates
since we talked the talk – the East End, the estates.
But you were never an insider – you were never close –
like the waiter who counts himself a wedding guest –
you couldn't afford my suit with a year's pay.

Cheerio – we've gone to ground, left you to bray
in protest at the terms of your defeat
that are no terms. You are not the elite
and never will be, while we control the cycle
of boom and bust – the price of wheat and wool –
while you hang your limp donkey-ears and squat
like Midas at the bottom of the market,
rated as junk – a human pack-animal –
hating yourself for being so gullible,
and cursing me, who brought you to this pass:
downgraded to the lowest asset class.

THE KUNG FU MASTER'S RÉSUMÉ

The kung fu master looked over his résumé:
his start-up had just gone belly-up or
face-down on a thousand pounds of new practice mats;
the lines of credit were cut; the staff in an uproar –

hadn't they heard there's a recession on?
But you have to look out for number one,
and he was the entrepreneur: 'Death Fist, Inc.'
was his baby. The fun was over, but it *had* been fun,

and he'd keep his head up, while all the others sank.
So what's next for the boss, the *sifu*, the *sensei*,
now that he's packed up his swords and his sparring pads
and pulled down the poster advising, 'Preparation is the Best
Defence'?

He sat in his office one last time,
eyeing the heaped corpses of the company accounts,
and read through his résumé, weighing his options,
trying not to think about which of his cheques would bounce.

It was a brilliant résumé, but would they believe it?
Or would they find his achievements a touch – abstract?
Created a workforce of invulnerable men and women –
Remodelled head office to withstand ninja attacks –

And what about his skill set? Did it lack relevance?
Can punch through a block of reinforced concrete –
Can turn the strength of multiple opponents against them –
Can stand on his hands and fight with his feet –

Would they say he needed to ‘diversify his experience’?
No, he’d read *Fortune* magazine – his skills would impress them.
Shows no mercy in competition – every CEO had that one,
the same goes for *Trains employees to obey without question*.

Some doubts circled like assassins, but he fought them off,
like the nightmare of the only interview question he dreaded:
‘What is it you can actually *do*?’ In dreams, he gives the honest
answer:

I can get away from anyone – and then hit them bloody hard.

He had a degree in physics – once thought he’d go into finance –
or something to do with computers – something profitable.
But a hobby became a career: the sweat-stink, the locked gazes,
and the thrill of the thud as someone else took the fall.

UNDERGROUND FACILITY

Not that we needed to go underground –
not that our love was in any way illicit
but we treated it like it was: hell-bent, hell-bound,
as if we were complicit
in some fatal plan or conspiracy:
a love like a pair of nuclear weapon keys.

We went underground, literally.
We made love in the kind of darkness that sticks:
not the fake dark of a bedroom with drawn blinds
but the dark of abandoned fall-out shelters and mines,
where we laid the plans for our own facility,
a maze to confuse superficial semantics.

Maybe it was the Cold War ‘Diefenbunker’
in the Ottawa suburbs – that worst-case scenario
turned tourist attraction, that atomic elf-barrow,
where I first kissed you from suburbs to epicentre,
deep in a man-made karst: a teenage conspiracy theorist
making love to a debunker.

Years later, maybe it was one of the few crypts
worthy of our worship – the crypt of the House of Commons –
where I lay my suit coat under your bottom,
where I lay my head on the cold flagstones
under the shaft and flanges of a mace: my brain, my bones
feeling a new facility, under sentence of your lips.

Decades later, it must have been Postojna’s caves,
where a train runs through a ballroom white as salt – a
 chandeliered ballroom –
where I led you astray like false fire, like a glow-worm,

into a side-tunnel, and your cold fingers slipped home
dextrously as a blindworm, as an olm,
to rub light into life, from ember to blaze.

Wherever this facility of ours was, it drove
my expansion plans, my plans for a whole new level
beyond the cave-blindness of adolescence –
to build a complex too deep for bunker-busters
or ground-penetrating radar,
a research facility, a site for new developments –

but primarily for refining sex into permanence.
It's no bomb shelter, no Lost World to cope
with this one, but a habitable foundation for hope:
a maze of bioluminescence – a maze that love extends,
where our steps are lit by the decay
of long-dead lovers in their graves.

So no maybes: it was all this interiority –
chamber after chamber of unmaidenly thoughts
and deeds – our deep landscapes of stalagmites,
crevasses, cul-de-sacs, dripping grottoes –
that dug us in, that mapped our subterranean
thirst for each other's surfaces and veins.

Whatever it is, whatever it grows, or holds
in store, we grew it together, this facility,
the way the earth secretes its rarest crystals:
atoms at a time, not for commercial sale,
not for industry – the way soil germinates seeds
well out of sight, in warmth the world thinks cold.