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Tabula Rasa (with Stray Figure)

I

Cities built and collapsed and rebuilt. And you suppose to be built again, rendered over? There, where foundations were, you'll find the other lives, pushed under, sunk in fecund junk: hospital waste, unexploded ordnance, missile parts. Statecraft, philanthropy. All the wreckage that goes with waging survival in the midst of interregnum.

Collateral losers, spinning to all corners, a galactic scattering. Stalking stem-cells, election outcomes, a probe on Mars won't take us any closer. A Long March 5 still launches a long march. Clintons or Flintstones, go for broke—scratch the surface and all them spooks, or gooks, or kooks appear, waving miniature flags and national colours. Bug-eyed broods spawned in space-helmets, manufactured to re-boot a misaligned planet. Keep thyself well hid, chrysalis of trust, hanging upside-down in time.

But how many times have you wiped the slate clean? A city, that had done as much, eventually throws away its key to the first-comer, always singular not many. The many and the one in you deliquesce, and there is only this solvent, working over and over the remainder.

II

You suppose that's what the Bomb was all about: starting again. But maybe it was just a way to distract from the main event: that in winning a war the victors gain the rest of their lives, the smuggest anticlimax of all. In the widescreen of aftermath you see something, bent down, as if trying to exit the frame, as bright as sun-washed radium in the blank x-ray inspection-plate of time. Things gone back to their original nature. To the face they had before they had a face.

A tabula rasa, with faint convection currents of air from passing F-35s, and this carbon smudge or ovum, bare bipedal form haunting the whiteness of the page. Pierrot, pupal playmate, a soft-robot lover that wants to merge into the stuff of the real, a little daunted by the prospect: to come into being is to bleed for the wrong masters.

Waiting to be born into the world that would have been, with all its would-be portals, had it known how to prevail.

III

History, all kinds, plans to lose itself there as much as in the vanishing-point you can't see on the horizon. Ships of fools have always foundered in its god's-eye view; a few more will follow them. The stray figure, but not the force that bends it. The asymptote etched in by a desert walker, but not the place it will never traverse.

Not the lie in the real, its authentically deft throb.
Not this, not this, sages have said, as if there was
anything left over. As if there was only tabula rasa.
A sheer white-screen behind the flickering signs
cast up there. The afterglow of spent
constellations.