WRITERS MOSAIC

Standing in the doorway, looking like the Jack of Hearts

Abigail Parry

I

Meaning what? Let's assume it means
bordered by an architrave he may
or may not be aware of. Which is to say, *a simple, formal frame*
within the bounds of which his shape recalls
the Jack of Hearts.

Poor beau. You see? Here's lintel, jamb and sill
conspiring to pull a simple trick
and hem him in. A looker, looking up to see him framed
and formalised like this, would say *Oh, hey* –
the Jack of Hearts.

His head is turned. Thus profiled – thus surveilled –
he does not see himself, but may perceive
the pose in which he's stuck. And how it looks. He *knows* he is
the spitting image of that one-eyed knave,

the Jack of Hearts.

"I know I've seen that face before" – Big Jim
has hit the nail on the head. As for him,
he's fitted up, he's framed. This is a one-man line-up
and whichever way he turns he's still the same,
the Jack of Hearts.

"It's not so bad, my friend. At least one half
of all we do is vaudeville; the rest
is pointless exegesis." *Just* the sort of comment you'd expect
from a rascal and a rogue. Ladies, Gents…
The Jack of Hearts.

II

"He had another particularity, of which none of his friends ever ventured to ask an explanation. […] This was his anxious care to go out or in at a door or passage, by a certain number of steps from a certain point, or at least so as that either his right or left foot (I am not certain which), should constantly make the first movement when he came close to the door or passage."

James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*

III

Someone asks. And Johnson, on the spot,

finds nothing in his Dictionary to name
his *anxious care* – the grimaces, the tics,
the awkward quickstep. He calls the jinx *bad habit*.
This isn't strictly accurate, but it's
a tricky business, bottling the wind,
and he should know.

He isn't daft. He's worked it out by now –
the best disguise is no disguise at all.
Boswell says *peculiar*, and who
is he to argue otherwise. The Drudge.
The Ugly Dog. The Surly Sam.
A man in drag as what they think he is.
Bad Habit. It will do.

IV

"While browsing through Horney's *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*, I heard peculiar noises, which initially sounded like 'shi, pi, fu', and then began to sound like obscenities. At first I thought I was projecting some of my evil thoughts, and I listened more carefully. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a woman in her early twenties, shaking and jerking spasmodically, and erupting with 'shit, piss, fuck'. I dismissed the thought that it was a Greenwich Village prank as I continued to observe the young woman. She was well-dressed, wore a conventional seal fur coat, and was not otherwise bizarre. She was also browsing through a book; I strained my eyes: it was the collected poetry of Keats."

Arthur K. Shapiro, *Gilles de la Tourette Syndrome*

V

Shapiro there. Like Keats, he can't decide
just what it is he's looking at. *What*
mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
Me, I have some questions.
I wonder, for example,
if this woman in the Village – *conventional*,
not *otherwise bizarre* –
could feel his eyes on her, or was aware
of how the mise-en-scène must look to him.

Perhaps she doesn't care.
Perhaps she'd say Look, Doc,
I don't know what to tell you.
I get that there's a contradiction here,
but it's a tricky business – this seeing,
being seen.
Take my sickly friend
with his cute but irresolvable equations
regarding truth and beauty. In the end,
there's what you said and what they think you said.
Best think of it
like standing in the door in silhouette
or flattened under laminate, a state
of incomplete control.

For the most part, that is all

we know on earth, and all we want to know.

Or something like it.

Abigail Parry

Abigail Parry is the author of two collections of poems, both published by Bloodaxe. *Jinx* (2018) deals in trickery, gameplay, masks and costume; *I Think We're Alone Now* (2023) investigates intimacy and estrangement. Abigail is currently Fellow Commoner in the Creative Arts at Trinity College, Cambridge, where she is working on a verse novel.

A recording of this piece can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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