

The Best of All
Possible Worlds

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*The Best of All
Possible Worlds*

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*All is for the best
in the best of all possible worlds.*

—Voltaire after Leibnitz

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THE BLACK HAND GANG

*What if the Gräf & Stift motorcade
of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand
had never taken that wrong turn,
braked, backed up, stalled, etc.
the counterfactual historian
smugly enquires of the lecture theatre.*

His students cradle black bombs
the size of grapefruits in their palms.

*What if the midget Gavrilo Princip,
stripling son of a Bosnian postman
who lost his right arm to tuberculosis
had not taken aim but eaten his sandwich
or fired that shot and missed the jugular
instead just shaving the royal whiskers?*

His students cock their pistols,
sucking pork fat from dumdum bullets.

*Let us do some history together. If
that were so, I wager, none of us,
however well armed, would be here.*
A weft in the warp of space-time
is torn and the lecturer, his students
and you, dear reader, fizzle into the ether.

1915

LOOS, FRANCE

BRAGGING SCARS

When the duellist detached
the lobe of his ear
it was a clean lunge
made with a clean blade

for a gentleman aims
to the left of the head –
a wedding portrait
is framed from the right –

and knows a man's grace
by the scars he wears,
takes the measure of them,
that each makes his mark –

from the fold of flesh
on a barbed wire fence
with a lungful of gas
in an undone birth

to the thinnest scratch
etched on a face
as poxed and pocked
as this patch of bad earth.

1916

ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA

RASPUTIN'S PENIS

It floats in its jar,
not a pickled cucumber
nor the soaked appendage
of a foaming horse
but the business end
of a monk's gnarly staff,
a shaft that's been places –
cured women of the court
of hysteria, counts and princes
of the more open sort.

They poisoned him enough
to snuff five iron men;
he got up and walked,
they beat him down again;
popped him three times
in the back, neck and head;
had him drowned and burned;
all but this, his last pound of flesh,
a totem preserved in a pickling jar
you see your reflection in.

1917

ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA

TOM OF FINLAND STATION

It was hot in that sealed train.
Lenin was coiled like a length of gelignite
in the tight leather shorts of revolt.
Never had he seen so many handsome men
gathered in one place, so late at night.
He handled his bouquet like a bomb.
Seventeen years without pressing his knees
in Russian dirt. Beneath that railway cap
all his hair had gone, but a beard's a beard.
Soft hands pressed rough hands softly,
while the workers stomped their working boots
and danced like there was no tomorrow.
There would be only tomorrow for seventy years,
then the morning after. But that night,
hoisted by sailors onto the bonnet of a car,
Lenin sang 'What is to be done?'
and all the men gathered there sang along.

1918

YEKATERINBURG, RUSSIA

HAEMOPHILIA

In the House of Special Purpose
the Tsar of all the Russias
was forbidden to sport epaulettes,
drink coffee, eat butter
or enjoy his Fabergé eggs.

Reduced to four servants
they retired to the basement
in what was left of Sunday best,
daughters in jewelled corsets,
for a final family portrait.

Alexei was pale as a Siberian winter,
drained by haemophilia,
his sisters wrapping him in the scarves
of their arms, silky and warm.

Anastasia dreamt only of soldiers,
how they flirted with her.
Now their guns pointed in her face
awaiting the order to fire.

‘You know not what you do,’
the Tsar said. They knew what they did.
They did it then, with bullets. And then again,
to be sure, with blades, clubs, acid and fire –
all the tools of war.

1919

MASSACHUSETTS, U.S.A.

LA GRIPPE

It was war
and it was worse than war:

men with the bones
of other men strung
from the roofs of their lungs;

indigo blue
and mahogany
as the strange fruit
of a lynching party;

and their eyes
and their sweethearts' eyes
ringed rouge red
round blanket grey –

men without guns
wrapped against rain,
stacked, waiting for a train

to breach the peace
with a screech on the rails.

1920

LONDON, ENGLAND

THE UNRETURNED

In the first year of remembering
they were remembered
as the living are remembered

then we raised a cenotaph
out of wood and plaster,
in its hollow – the empty tomb
of an unknown soldier.

When the returning parade
they suggest a greater
march past of the unreturned:

three days to clear Whitehall,
the ghost horses take another day;
it is a week on the Champs-Élysées;
in Germany, they crawl –

a fortnight has passed
and still they worm their way
in this, the second November
after the one before.

THE BLACK AND TANS

Tommy took the shilling,
for the shilling he was willing
to bark like a beagle, put on the black and tans.
A dangerous task for Tommy?
Hoist that rag from his jacksie
and parade him down the Falls, walking on his hands.

Tommy likes to travel – check his map,
it's pink as the spud beneath his cap –
that's why the working man of the Tudor clan joins up.
From Templemore to Tralee
he's shat on Calvary
and pissed up the hard stuff in Father Griffin's cup.

Sure as my name is Mickey Nono
they'll be marching with the dodos –
drum the drums, pipe the pipes, wind up the band.
There'll be no more Tommy quips
when his Tommy arse gets whipped,
he'll be spewing from his flue pipe – bloodied, black and tanned.

1922

NORKA, RUSSIA

WRITTEN BY YOUR FATHER

Good beginning
Go you letter from my hand
Go where you are being sent
Go to the best place and show yourself

This summer is so bad
We have to cook with waste
Many did not receive
Nothing did we receive

My dear child
Why you let me to starve
I have asked you many times
Maybe it is not what you think
Perhaps someone has lied

1923

MUNICH, GERMANY

STAMPS OF THE WEIMAR

In my childhood box
stamps of the Weimar
in shades of burnt orange
teach me my first lesson
in hyperinflation.

I am eight years old,
just coming to terms
with numbers in their billions –

some are overprinted,
their value at dawn
a fraction of their value at dusk.

And on one envelope
the address of a family
whose unborn children
will only ride a train
once in their young lives.

1924

MOSCOW, U.S.S.R.

PRESERVING LENIN

Each day we inject under his skin
alcohol infused with glycerine,
flex his joints, the join of his jaw,
and when his face begins to bloom
we dab him with buds of chlorine
to stub out the mould on his chin.
Twice a week, we strip his suit,
dust him down, and wax his hands,
shine his dome like a piece of fruit
and brush powder onto his brow.
Each year, we bathe him for thirty days
in a soup of quinine and formaldehyde –
the broth lacks heart, guts and brain –
then scrub him with potassium acetate,
sponge his cock and balls dry,
reinstate them to 61°, humidity 85%.