

Mephistopheles, *Artist*

by Benjamin Jardine

I shouldn't be here.

Scratch that: here shouldn't be where I am. Here is nightmarish. Here confounds what should and should not be.

My life floats by, a series of images. Phone wires in a loose webbing that shake uncontrollably in the wind. Childhood ceiling fans that rotate and wobble, while a son tells his mother all of life's mysteries. Through my window, a boat storms across Long Island Sound towards horizon and empty space. All across the country flags are hoisted to half-mast.

Fame unravels like a Faustian stage play that comes to town on the back of a freight train, auditioning non-actors. I have been given the part of "Mephistopheles, Artist", the American people have been cast as "Pawn Nos. 1 through 141 million" and yesterday's president stars as the titular anti-hero.

The curtain lifts.

I shouldn't be here. This isn't happening.

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He swings the suitcase from my hand and tells me his name is Torlieff. I tell him the other bags can ride up front with me. He drives carefully, and I ask him how long he's been in the President's service. His chin propped on the leather wheel, he tells "me as

long as the man has held the title of president”. Our Ford slices through thick horizon patterns, cobwebs dancing in the distance.

Fresh tar seal makes the road smooth. I’m asked if I’ve ever met a President before, and I say yes I met this one two years ago. I mention the portrait from that day and tell Torlieff it now hangs in the Correspondents Room. He gives a nod of approval.

Branches whip by my window and I catch myself surprised at Georgia’s foliage. The road narrows. Flashes of milky white repeat like Morse code through the trees, until a miniature White House appears before us.

“The President built this place to replicate the one in D.C.,” Torlieff begins, “when he first fell ill. See those columns there? Made to look like the Parthenon’s.”

I respond with a wistful observation, something like, “Well that’s just the neoclassical style, a nod to the Greeks”, or “Nesting dolls of influence”.

The sky is pregnant with clouds that hang in a heavy suspension. My feathery hand speaks only in lines as I sketch what lies before me. The split-planar view developing before my eyes: this quiet pearl bundled in tree-lined cacophony, puffs of smoke that rise from an off-center chimney. The house’s façade looming like a fossil of antiquity.

Mrs. Rutherford must be making tea, Torlieff mutters.

Dust, lit up like powder from stars, floats around our heads. My briefcase feels soft as I press against it, drawing out plumes of smoke. Old leather, worn and spotted with incisions stares up at me like a Rorschach face. A trick of the light, ghouls appear.

He mentions my name, says it sounds Greek, and asks if I’m European.

“I’m Russian,” I tell him, and memories of childhood come flooding in. Winters spent before a fireplace, my mother watching, hawklike, with nothing else to do. The lump of charcoal that felt heavy that left black soot on my palm. A feeling, like moving the Earth itself, deep within my bones. A lotus flower unfurls in gray scale.

Torlieff carries my suitcase to the cottage where I find Lucy Rutherford waiting. She greets me with excitement, shouting salutations in French. Asked how long it’s been, I respond, “Not long enough”, and she mentions a party in 1937. She brings up the sitting and how the President is looking forward to seeing me again. “Preserving our nation’s history,” she calls it. “Forging a legacy that won’t rot when you die.”

Her eyes are nestled over bags of dark, which have been poorly covered. She tells me the President hasn’t been sleeping much, so neither has she, and insists there isn’t any funny business. Her face contorts when I mention Eleanor, and she insists further that there is *no* funny business to be discussed further.

A Scottish terrier does laps around us. Red flecks drip from its mouth, and it yaps maniacally in an excited stupor. “Cochineals and salt,” I say, bending to the grass to pick up my plate. “Crushed beetles from West Brazil.” Lucy apologies for her slippery hands and instead offers to carry my briefcase. Like fingers from an ancient time, the gnarled branches of oaks point the way up an embankment to the main house. I ask after the President.

Busy. “He’s overworked, Lis. Complained of dizziness last week and hasn’t eaten in a day.”

Mustard yellow linoleum greets me with unease. We move into the Drawing Room, and I’m pulled to each corner. The energy of the place reverberates, melts my

core. “They should call this the painting room,” laughs Lucy. She stands before a towering bookshelf, sunken from the weight of artist folios and memoirs. Armchairs are scattered and the President’s cousin, Margaret Ackley, snores on a squat sofa. Her legs stick out like the arms of trebuchets.

An object, obviously an easel, stands covered by a sheet next to an open window.

“You’re wearing new shoes,” he says. Like sandpaper, his hands feel warm and coarse. “The last time you painted me, you were wearing the same dress,” he pulls a cigarette from a dispenser underneath the table and lights it, “but today you have on new shoes. I like them very much.”

His hands were not that rough when I painted him last, and I asked him why.

“You told me how much I looked like Tiresias. A man mustn’t pass on opportunities like those.” He mentions his anthropomorphic paper-machê sphinx in the Oval Office. I mention him telling me about it in 1943.

His walnut-brown suit fits so loosely that it pools in piles of fabric around his ankles, groin, wrists, chest. His face, so angular and perfectly geometric, shines brighter than a thousand fires. This man, perhaps the most powerful person on the planet, looks no more powerful than a boy who put on his father’s suit and took his grandfather’s chair for a spin. I yank the sheet from the easel while the two women on the couch talk with the President about stolen Nazi art found in German salt mines the week before. Lucy asks how soon I thought they could send artists the good news.

“Those artists have forgotten their art exists.”

I unbuckle the latches on my case with a pop, and think through how many times I have gone through this procedure. The room watches as, onto the poker table that sits before the two of us, I unload a small wooden box; two packs of Lucky Strikes, one nearly full and the other empty with brushes rattling around inside; and a soft handkerchief, spotted with various colors. “No good can come of symbols of status,” I add.

A glass of water the taste of strawberries has been left out for me on the table. We all sit for a few minutes in silence while I get initial measurements in pencil. I use a protractor. The President looks through his stamp collection. Nerves nearly overcome my steady hand as I mix my seven tones on the plate, one for each note of the human face. Light, shade on the face, hair, collar and shirt, tie, suit, background; arranged for translation so that I have a blotchy, chimerical depiction of the President on my ceramic plate.

Before I begin, I hand him a stamp Leo gave me earlier that week. “A gift from my husband.”

His face lights up. “Florida’s 300th Anniversary?” He said he would add it to the collection immediately, and started flipping furiously through the plastic-lined pages.

Starting with the eyes, I dab in circular motions to get the almond shape and in short strokes above to get eyebrows. His nose reminds me of my husband Leo’s, and upon applying folds along his upper cheekbones, I suddenly noticed how much color he has in his face. Under the wrinkled and spotted skin, he looked young. At my comment on his apparent youth, Lucy asks the President if he believes in reincarnation. He howls.

“I sure hope not, or else some poor fool will be forced to bear the weight of the free world on a pair of faulty legs all over again!”

“Are you ready for lunch, sir?” A man in a tuxedo looms over the President, with eyes looking down an L-shaped nose at him. The tuxedo turns to me with eyebrows raised. “Madame?”

The President asks me what I thought and I told him another five minutes would be fine. He waves the tuxedo away. “We have another fifteen minutes of work.”

Our eyes met in that empty space between artist and subject—the precipice before the abyss of global criticism and fame—for just under an hour. He had more emotion in one expression than entire actors do in films. Weeks earlier this man had presided over a conference in Yalta, with Stalin himself—in one room, the leaders of peace and tranquility! I struggle to imagine the images processed through those eyes, the plans and secrets stowed away in that memory. His hair swirls like a fingerprint, and his chest rises slow as he sits in silent peace. His watery eyes hold no shred of humor, and his rounded cheeks begin to melt into a fluid swell of watercolor and reserved darkness when I mix the paint with water on paper.

Timpani drums and the sound of slamming doors shatter silence. The man in the tuxedo rushes to a now empty wheelchair, and, in clutches of air and absent fabric, he shouts exclamations of disbelief, “Witchcraft! Imposters! Witchcraft!, and rattles the chair’s unoccupied leather. No human life to be found. Lucy and Margaret rush into the room, pushing past me. Unwavering, I stand with my brush held to the canvas and my eyes closed. I hear shouts, yells beyond human comprehension, and feel an

overwhelming sense of weightlessness. The tuxedo collapses to the floor, causing Lucy to shriek “Oh!” at his unresponsive body. Margaret turns to the only person in the room at the time, the only person witness to the events that just transpired—events that would bring about the end of an era and kick-start decades of stagnation. An i-dotting, t-crossing incident shook America to its core. And I stood fixed in the moment.

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In a recurring dream, I cycle through avenues sprinkled with rubble. Washington’s monuments are split open over homes and businesses, ruptured fruit left in the sun. Effortless revolutions spread out beneath my feet. The bike has no wheels or tires. The ground and bits of brick and bodies pinned by road signs soar below. The sky is layered blood red and dripping like wet paint drips down blank walls. Shadows fall on the wrong sides of buildings. Light is scarce; clouds blot out the sun. Planes soar overhead but all sound exists in a vacuum.

The dream ends with a sudden terrestrial collision. A bright light, mushrooms in the distance. I wake in sweat and my bicycle’s mangled frame burned into my retinas. Images of my life’s portraits zoom by. Lady Bird and LBJ composed of brushstrokes that look amateurish. The Royal Family of Luxembourg is burning.

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News spreads first to New York, then on telegrams across oceans and rivers and centuries. Morning papers around the world misspell my name and a haunted image is printed in thousands of history books. Radio silence rings out, but the truth does not.

I ask Lucy if she thinks they loaded it with books or if they took time to craft something more body-like. She doesn't answer. Fear shepherds the shaken through tempest and disbelief until land, or deliverance, is in sight.

We haven't said a word since we left Washington and she has had this absent look on her face for the whole parade. In the window reflection I see no movement in her eyes, as if a lifetime of memory were being projected just outside our car as if she, focused on the picture, could only live in the past. Throes gather around the first train, eager to get a touch to the casket. Women and children in black stand off to the side, dabbing at eyes, while men stand shoulder-to-shoulder in succession. I watch as the coffin, dressed in an American flag, gets passed over their heads. It glides along hands with no hesitation, into the bed of an extended carriage drawn by horses that neigh and stamp their feet. I wonder if they understand what's happening. The twenty-one gun salute. The drawn faces, blocks upon blocks of them lining the Hudson. Hours go by, the train horns still ring out as the coffin and our procession carries on.

Wailing parade-goers drift past my window, a sea of people who now have no-one. Hardly no-one. They shuffle through clouds of dust, staring at endless pavement. Listless waiting cements itself on faces in the crowd who have chosen to plant themselves on the curb. Those who hear the news for the first time break down in tears.

Army men march in perfect squares with white fists and white hats and white faces. Round one curve of the Hudson, men climb statues of great leaders, nestling in hands and embracing necks. I see reporters on every street corner, shouting over each other and at our car and the cars behind us. I hear the marching band play a requiem.

Brass trumpets pierces the silence of mourning, and I wonder if they were ordered to leave out “Hail to the Chief” from their repertoire.

Window reflections show her eyes as she watches my hand bend the archway of the George Washington Bridge. She tells me I shouldn’t leave the portrait unfinished. Would Delacroix have stopped painting if Liberty herself had vanished while Leading the People? Or would Michelangelo, when God and the Divine grew tired, have decided to hang up the scaffolding and call it a day? I ask if she’s forgotten the agreement we signed that morning. “To hell with them,” she says.

A nervous actor, Harry Truman’s eyes dart uncertainly from side to side. He looks worn out and pale in the face, now carrying the weight of the nation and a secret. Maybe he’ll go next, I think. He shakes hands with the bereaved, extends an arm onto the occasional shoulder. Eleanor takes a handkerchief he offers her.

“Truman wears that mask well,” says Lucy. She eyes Eleanor with trepidation, not wanting to be considered the other woman. Hedges, nuns, surround us. Men crank a pulley, and the casket begins to slowly descend into grass. Lucy puts a hand to her mouth but does not turn away. “Grief takes on many forms,” I remind her. *For some it takes no form at all.*

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Lines are processed by the brain in seconds, and lines on paper are sold for thousands. This one I donated.

A phone call, a generic male voice on the other line. Oh no, I couldn’t accept that much for the piece. It’s unfinished. Haunted. Let me just give it to you. That’s right, free.

I don't see the value. His nose juts out crooked. The shading is all wrong. No, I don't remember much from that day. No, I haven't been back since.

Even after our loved ones have passed, fragments of them remain. As if through delusion, we smell them hanging in wardrobes or etched in the surface of a pillowcase. In winter, stumbling through double-doors, dripping head-to-toe in torrential rain and clutching a wind-torn umbrella bent out of proportion, its limbs like some shedding wintery branch. In grey skies, in tranquil lake surfaces that reflect passing grey ducks and parting grey clouds and grey skin absent of elasticity. In songs and in words. In paintings. Paintings, like people, can be empty too. Even when the artist has fixed their signature to the work, it has room to feel emotionless. Unfinished. Contours of personality, shadows of experience without anchorage, translations of human existence.

Visual lingua franca. *Humanisms*.

His eyes look like a vivarium. They stare up at me, a future version of the me he knew. His body unfolds like a ghost, hollow lines that make up his suit. The left lapel stitching I was rounding out when he vanished.

It still looks exactly as I remember it.