

U N G U E N T A R I A

by Rob Sherman



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And he had tied to his waist a little furnace that was not burning, but was stuffed with newspaper and the bark that he had picked earlier. That was the start of it.

The children who lived on the estates tucked under the mining hills had borrowed this field for their playing at Erik Redbeard, and dotted around and thereabouts were their studios. Their thresholds began with a religious mantle of tutti-frutti packaging that sprung rime when it got very cold, and inside they presented, as if temple food, milk bottles full of assiduous blue-tinged urine and their parent's tea towels. They never brought women here.

The gaffer blew so hard into the pipe that a lick of the hot, wet glass curled back up, dangerously close to his lips, and he clicked his tweezers like the pincers on a crab grasped by its platter head. There was a sun, but it was as subtle as a boiler light, and humbly clicked its timer off at the two men as it went to see to the world's plumbing. Scotland found the evening. It was the last of the proper winter, and here and there interrobanged the first bees, not yet fat.

“Will you want a copy of the *Observer* shots? I'll try and get your t-shirt in. Is it special? Nice light.”

“No.”

The camera on the cameraman's shoulder had been working to shrug off its padding for many years, and its great plans were finally succeeding; the metal slipped deeper in, hitching on the back of the frost. His anchor (as there was no word but the American) had missed her train at St. Pancras, waylaid by her conviction that her only son had dipped his fingers into some drain in North London and contracted antique cholera. The cameraman was now a sidecar, trundling to a stop and the inevitable fall. The artist, the gaffer, the blower, continued. He wore an Indian racing t-shirt and dungarees that had been cut into jeans and tied with a belt sewn to resemble a Tudor window. His cheeks had that webbed look of blood that said that he had been a blower for many years, despite what the news had said, and his skin resolutely refused to goosebump. He was as skinny as he always had been, with no effort.

“Can you explain to me what are you doing?”

“Heeeeeeeeeewph.”

“For the viewers.”

“Heeeeeeeeeewph.”

“...viewers.”

The artist's double was growing from its toe. The glass was still cooling, and strobed a little magenta. It sat on a wide marver, a bowled seat of Inverness granite, designed to draw the excess heat into the hillside. It was still forming, up from the crucible of its curled feet, the glory hole of its bellowed torso, the annealer of its head, a wine glass for the coming, inevitable, Scottish rain. He sculpted with the tweezers as he went, eyes pinched in furious concentration. Blocks and punties lay around him in clusters, and he drew them up as needed, clipping volcanic nipples and body hair that found bubbles in his blowing. Its hands were clasped around its Mason jar arms, the elegant, tilted oil lamp of its neck and bowed head, the sculpted hair matching the artist's own, swept around in bold lines towards the back of his head. They should have flanked each other outside a Chinese restaurant, the cameraman thought. When the glass had been hot and liquid, he had whipped it like meringue, and the dandelions on the ground behind it were beginning to show through. The

cameraman pointed his camera down through its baby-soft skull, revealing the ascetic pose, the pooling natron in the buttocks, the artist's errant drool sizzling its way down there.

The artist finally took the blowpipe from his lips, and lit a cigarette, a black Polish brand. The limbs of the trees further up the hill were beckoning in silhouette. Four kebab shops opened simultaneously down in the town, the lights blowing in one. A roar.

"I'm blowing spit into the thing, to make it set."

"Is that what all of you do?"

"Some will use water, or soap. Brings out a mother-of-pearl in the bolus. I'm afraid I can't see you."

"At all?"

"The light, you see."

He pointed straight above him, and cascades of mauve, ink and then finally a deep, fantastical custard settled down over this hill. It was almost night. There were standing stones hundreds of miles in every direction, pretending to limber up for this fact. The field had a brilliance that bounced them into space.

"I'll have to carry on working, but feel free to speak at me."

"Of course."

The Polish cigarette disappeared, and the flame shot afresh up the slender leg of the glass, and he chiselled out the twins of the veins that he had used in the Seventies to put Dettol into his own arm, which he had followed with a call to his mother who was meeting friends for a fertility ritual. The baby was lost, nevertheless. The mother had holidayed in Goa, and stood on a sharp, ochre-coloured shell, a home to thousands of microscopic freshwater insects, and these things happened.

The head was still soft and open, and in the wind the edges of it smoothed like a jug's lip saying something nice.

"How do you feel that this compares to your earlier work?"

"Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"You don't normally do this, do you?"

"No. Lucy, that's my caster, my anchor, she usually does the talking. Nah, she's stuck in London. Her son's got a dicky stomach."

"How awful."

"Nah, he'll be alright. Spoils him rotten."

"Ah. Well, what have I done, then?"

"Sorry?"

"You asked me about my earlier work?"

"What have you done?"

“Yes.”

“Well... well, I always like the one on the fourth plinth...

“*Sherpa Squatting?*”

“If that was the Chinese bloke swimming in a bottle...”

“That’s it.”

“And the one in Liverpool. My girlfriend took me to see it.”

“*Peristalsis?*”

“Yeah, go on then.”

“The turtlehead?”

“...Yes. I suppose.”

“That was nice. But this is better, I must say.”

The cameraman realised all of a sudden, and then instantly forgot, that the path that his life had taken had placed him eternally behind a camera and behind women, and it was in this arrangement, cameraless, before phones, that he had walked to the cinema and past the artist’s Liverpoolian work, depicting a man squatting over the Mersey and dropping a smooth bronze turd into the water behind an old dye factory. He had used tensile, almost invisible bale wire to suspend the defecate in mid-air. And now he was on this hill in Scotland, speaking to this artist that everyone had given up on before all the pharmaceuticals and the Brazilian called Canoe (how very beautiful when pronounced well) who had broken that man’s neck when he had taken a photograph of the artist outside that restaurant. He missed his anchor. She would still be in her suit and stroking her child’s hair, in an empty wing of a city hospital that she had managed to wrangle for herself and her boy. She had discovered atrocities in another job, and now everybody deferred to her, especially him. The boy would be just fine, and eating lasagne. The cameraman had hated Liverpool, and the sculpture. He couldn’t even remember the artist’s real name, and refused to call him by the ludicrous given that he had used since the late Eighties. Another Polish cigarette.

“And what will you call this one, when it's done?”

“*Unguentaria*. Heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeewph.”

He heard bees around him, and realised that he could not see them, and that it was dark and then the artist coughed into the blowpipe. The double's head was nodding with each gust of breath, the neck super-heated. He was trowelling the years onto it, the double tracheotomy in Los Angeles, the land snail he had almost choked on in the skyscraper reception in Laos, lain on a bed of water onion.

“And will you put a fence round it? To stop local kids wrecking it?”

“Not at all.”

“Oh. Good.”

“I’ve bought the field. They can’t come up here anymore.”

“Oh.”

He was dying for a cigarette himself, and there was a neat, full pack in his trouser pocket. But there was something horrifically intimidating about that black Polish model; it was utilitarian, almost military in its camouflage against the night, and even its flame looked rationed.

He hoped that the bees were whirling home through the unfamiliar darkness, caught in the field so late by these two strange, sweet towers that were not here the day before. He was not scared of them, but they pushed against him and the light was gone, and all that was left was low, crowded noise. He thought he heard a pound of bass from the town, but it was passing under him like a jet engine in bas-relief.

“Heeeeeeeeeeeeeewph. It’ll have to do. Heeeeeeeeeeeeeewph. It’ll do.
Heeeeeeeeeeeeeewph. It’ll have to do.”

“It’ll have to do, will it?”

“Yes. Heeeeeeeeeeeeeewph.”

His breathing was now circular, both weaker and more confident, and the cameraman admitted defeat, and lowered his lens for the last time. Editing will bring out the genius, he was sure.

“Why is it here, then?”

He saw the hump of the artist rise, and point with an arm past him. A gust that had distilled itself on the topography of some famous fjord reached him, then, and the cameraman’s voice became all too high.

“Where are you staying?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I’m in the Premier down the hill. They put little packets of seeds on your pillow so you can copy their herb garden, I guess, and the owner is so *fucking fat*, but she’s nice and all.”

“Look up there.”

There was nothing there. The sky was now the ground, all dark.

“That line of trees?”

“No.”

“Well, there’s a line of firs on the ridge there. They’re grown into a holloway -”

“What’s that?”

“A sort of ditch. The local tourist office tells everyone that it is a prehistoric earthwork, but they’re graves. They took Eastern European prisoners of war up here, in 1942. The rationing was very bad, everywhere, not just England. You forget. Everyone was hungry. I remember. I was only

two or three, but I used to cry because my mother made me eat bacon fat cooked in the oven because I was the youngest. If you have the right books, you can see that there are little flowers up there that should only be found in one stretch of woodland in the middle of Europe. It's been there since the last Ice Age, and it's the only place you can see bison on the continent. Well, here all of the flowers are in peculiar little rows. All of the soldiers carried seeds in their pockets, and took them between camps, under their beds, in their hair, under their tongues. They missed home. And there they are, all in rows, springing up from those same pockets."

The cameraman was thinking of muffins and Cajun chicken crisps and how fucking cold Scotland was. He thought that he had eaten bison at a dinner that Lucy had taken him to, once.

"I see."

"It's the right field."

"I'm sure."

"The Romans used to use those woods to hunt bees. They made perfume from their honey. The whole of Poland was just filled with warrior-cults that made great honey."

"Still like Poland, then?"

"You know I do."

"I don't read the interviews."

"Have you filmed me before?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"The statue of the politician?"

"Lech Walesa was not a politician."

"Unionist, then."

"Yes."

"What made you come here?"

"Now, that has been in *every* interview."

"I said..."

"I thought the food would be better."

"Right."

"They used to step over gold to get at that fucking honey."

The artist, the gaffer, the blower worked his hands up his own glass leg like it was female and she had just bathed, and this is when the cameraman saw that another flame had conjured itself halfway across the field, next to a desiccated cattle trough, and he stared at it, willing it to banish. It stayed, and moved in time to the reedy noise beside him. The artist worked the leg harder, the blowpipe bubbling like a monstrous, farting bong, his seventy-two year old tears substituting themselves into his mouth and mixing with the spit already

pooling in the base of the thing, the ground gently frying under the marver, and everywhere the sound of bees landing and perspiring. He was whispering a word, as if the glass statue was his to-do list and all he had to do was tell it to remember, and it would.

More lights popped into view. There were four of them, all around him, one far up near where he thought the copse was.

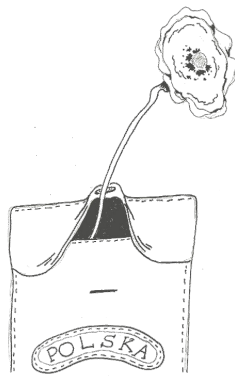
The cameraman needed a drink and began to drool himself, wiping it onto the arm of his kagoule, feeling it in the wind, and realised that the town was gone, or had shut all its own lights off as if at some great, fearful signal, and he thought he could hear kebabs grilling themselves into black husks and kitchen fires far off. But maybe it was the sea. He thought that his hotel would miss him, horribly, and imagined the owner in a nightcap.

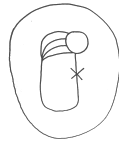
The glow began to fade, and the dribblings ceased, and the form of the artist and the blower and the gaffer stood and began to caress his work, running hands over the now hard glass, moving up to the impassive face, and finding the androgynous hole he had left unsealed, the hot glass-slop dripping over his dimly-lit fingers. The cameraman wanted to warn him of the heat, but he seemed to feel no pain, and like a gourmand dipping his favourite spoon down into his own twin, he made a low, humming noise, followed by a click.

And then morning was there and, almost predictably, the artist was gone. He had left only two ear-shaped depressions in the long horse-grass where he had knelt. The cameraman felt that he had gently wet himself for waiting, like a parent had slipped a pillow under his head. His camera was gone, and when he tilted his head upwards he saw the top of the hill, and the copse, he saw a line of children trudging up there with milk bottles. He heard the rising notes of a distant railway announcement jingle into being, and saw a red Vauxhall filled with car-pooling commuters wend its way along the bottom of the treeline. It was bright, and hot, and the sculpture of the artist, in hollow glass, sat in front of him, watching the sea, the waves rubbing their own shoulders.

The sculpture was filled with bees. They dug their feet into each other's heads, tore at wings and legs and cannibalised feelers to move deeper into the structure. They never stopped, and never tried to escape; the head was still open, still curled into an open sneer, and a gentle steam rose from it, a cauldron heated by the googolplex footfalls of the insects within. A bright, conic smell of cumin and clone came out to meet him, and he realised that there was an amber liquid inside, slowly churned by the thoraxes shifting and stirring. He wanted bacon. And his camera.

He stood, dusting his wet flanks with grass, and moved down the hill like a drunk man would, surrounded on all sides by a thousand sculptures, a thousand artists, a thousand gaffers, a thousand blowers, filled to the brim with bees, and scenting the hill with the spermatozoa of a quadrillion of them. The smell blew back into land, and was netted by the trees under which the Poles were buried.





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