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Zhicheng-Mingdé: At First Sight (A Cardinal Number)

AT FIRST SIGHT (A CARDINAL NUMBER)

Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé

Helen Keller's *Three Days to See*

(understudying Russell Edson)

The apple is first rolled across the floor, bounced, bruised like her forehead, like her small brown tired eye. The apple tosses, itself a tennis ball, against all four walls – still she thinks it's the parrot out of its cage, out all four walls. When it finally dribbles to land against her shoe, a knob, soft knock, she thinks it the rain and how it moves to a stop, the way she only wished of her every day.

These days, it's all been about apples, and sometimes oranges the rest of the time.

"This is what an apple feels like, Helen."

"This is what an apple smells like, Helen."

"This is what, Helen, an apple tastes like...."

There's saliva all over the apple now, like her tongue, the wallpaper she's wrapped around her waist like a wedding lehnga, its train like a red carpet, the labrador chewing on its tuareg patterns. These pictures too would speak magenta parables for Helen, figural, scrungy hyperbole unloosed.

Repeating a name doesn't make it ring true, a troika sans Russian horses, triune but its menorah flames never meeting.

Repeating a name doesn't dwarf the metaphors that already glut her mind, excessive, cataractal.

In an instant, she'll know knowledge, what it looks like, and the differences that exist within it, room against room, pane watching pane, the air before and after the honeymoon rain.

"But I wanted the apple on the table," she says, dealing her cards, her mannish hands, her three of hearts. "I wanted it as it always was."

Raymond Carver's *Cathedral*
(understudying Charles Baudelaire)

Writers – seeing, sighted writers, that is – have the bad habit of making their blind protagonists wise.

Every blind bat is a bloody savant!

With mysterious “seeing” powers that look into the souls of the sighted.... we are inevitably myopic and damaged. They are the ones consecrated, sacrosanct, inviolable. They are the ones divinely consigned mysterious hands and mysteriously faultless morals and such discernment, and mastery of all senses except of course, the one cardinal sense they ultimately crave but must never ever have... could there be any other more banal analogue, so amplified and overworked, to shore up humanity's lack of vision?

So every blind man's story becomes a speculative fiction, every magically realist tale asking us, the sighted, questions about insight, about what it means to truly agonisingly bitingly “see”. In the way apostrophes seem to accent specific ironies, give them high diction like a series of invocations, Gordian knots piled into this Persian.

How they stump, how they weigh in heavy, deep.

Hell, if I wanted patronising, I'd rent the movie about that blind massage therapist, going Swedish and Shiatsu, falling in love with Mira Sorvino, our trusty vapid Mighty Aphrodite suddenly stupendously turned Delphic caretaking oracle. And who can resist Val Kilmer as the Man with the Hands, his big, handsome hands? Never to live down the Blind-as-Batman batty jokes that ensued....

Now there's a character with real super-heroic sensibilities, replete with all its wounded sensitivities, obsessive compulsions, no compunctions, what with not really having any bona fide suprapowers but one more cloak-and-daggering Gothamite nonetheless.

A high, unseen gargoyle looking like the devil precisely to scare the devil, away and out from under.

If I wanted to know blindness, I'd sneak right up next to that numinous father decked out in his resplendent chasuble, aquamarine-beryl green, sequinned like catty emerald eyes.

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I'd see him praying and listen in, precious and primal.
Has he reconciled himself with himself, and with God?
And what of our little venial encounter all those years ago....

"Herein my act of contrition burning, burning, burning!"

Alas, I am Blind! I am but Blind to the world!
Blind to myself! Blind to every fuckin' penitent moment
when I thought I could not think for myself!

C. S. Lewis' *Man Born Blind*
(understudying Walter Benjamin)

It's not nice to lead a blind man to the edge of a cliff, it's just
not nice. But the painter was far enough away, and only telling the truth:
He had come to catch the light, trapped at morning like a flammable water,
sparkles, flares in a baptismal font.

Did the Man Born Blind die in the fall?
Did he too catch the light?
And did he fly? Did he fly high, riffs, not knowing why?

The cliff indicts itself: it is the ending of all stories. It leaves all
our ideas to hang, a more persistent ambit of all we glisten heuristic to
disclose. It fringes all our loud, bawdy dialects, banded round and about,
everything we see plainly corralled, with posts and stakes and knives.

Whither the man on the cliff who institutionalises himself?
I institutionalise myself, manacle around muscle, forever beholden.
You institutionalise yourself thus, forever incumbent.

He is mad, a madman made pointless, strangely larger than life
like all our monuments, all our life-long moments. He too has been
deprived of his senses, blinded, hopefully but momentarily,
like the towns beneath him. In the towns, there are smaller plazas
bigger than towns, the houses more ratty and thereby begrudging,
the markets seedier, the corners darker, all the children smaller
but more alarming.

Hungry, hostile. Absent.

"Is this light? These bulbs?" His fingers run across the chandelier.

"What about this? This flame? Is this what light is?"

"And why call this lightning? Why the sound, its continuance?"

Who can blame the Man Born Blind? Who can blame his wife for never knowing, never knowing what to say, or not to say?

At least he knows his way now, around what he calls "home and mother country", the nave of it with its small cottages, where the newspaper man sets up and talks shop, the pawnier behind his iron grills, the park benches with their wrought iron curves. Every town has the peculiar-familiar of birthplaces and the high-wire disequilibrium of the city.

To The Man Born Blind, this town is like every other town: it's Headroom. It apprehends, with its own Doric columns, north aisles, south aisles, the transept that separates, the transept that always separates.

It gets preachy no matter which way you wing this arc.

An institution remains watchful, it knows how to watch like a gatekeeper. Then a harbinger. So you are reminded of the dooms. Of your bitter ends, our never making it beyond our own gullies, our own sad fears. The way we all never take that extra step, to say this is our courage, this is what we do together in this panopticon, this is what it means to be visionary, this is what it means to be a town.

I wish we could look at what surveys us with the gaze of institutions, such a sovereign state, what it's like to be cruciform in it.

But he is a cathedral, caked, as am I.

He is even his wife, his acolyte; he is her cohesion and tenacity.

He has his hands too, and they table him his unanswered questions.

He is rained in, homily in a stoup, but he is what we will remember our likely death by, anima christi a near friend, and at hand.

Next to another unholy puddle.