

chris hall

a Romanesque

This poem was inspired by having come across an old lithograph in an antique shop in Hastings back in the early 70s, the image later recollected as portraying a Roman garden with a colonnade in front of which a figure is running. There was no information as to who he might be, where he was going, or what he was doing. The absence of a title led me to surmise as to what both setting and events may or may not be represented, along with conjecturing the identity of the central character.

lithograf:
(lithograf with touch v added drypoint)
on it on it n in it :
depiction:

th man running past Doric columns
behind them
 th garden

th man running his face in shadow

n behind th columns
 th viney garden

we
 in passing
linger nd look
play awhile
n as our games
 as all games do

reach either
 collapse
 hiatus
 or epiphany

we cast our eyes
towards th backdrop
nd ask ourselves
why runs he
this running man?
who flees he from
his face in shadow?

n we tell each other
cautious as we are
so close t catastrophe
that there is no-one who can tell
tell us there in th vicinity v th colonnade
n th garden v vines
who it is
stalks him?

there will be some
v that we can be sure
quick t claim acquaintance

"We saw him
just th other day"

they will say

"he looked
well enough
given th circumstances"

speaking thus

they spit on th ground
n trample their froth
underfoot
smiling nd swearing that
he always had that look

that haunted look
that haunted look about him
n shift about amongst th saliva

there are others
(you know th ones)
th others who say

something quite different:
 them that assert he runs in terror v th torture-chamber

that man
that running man

so be it:
in their own way
they are so entitled;
entitled to say
what it is that they say
about this man
this man with the fertile tongue

who runs in front v th Doric columns his face in shadow

and who are we to contradict them
after all is said n done?

there is another tale:
a tale they tell in th inns n th outhouses
 those places
 where wicks are lit nd pheasants are hung

(though who
in all honesty
would believe them

their reputation
being what it is?)

you perhaps... maybe you would believe
what they have t say;

you would not be the first
 o no oh nonono
 not the first to give credence
 to their loose-lipped diatribes
 their slanders

t you especially
it would make sense
given your fertile fancy
your salacious eye
n your ear for scandal

t you it would
make perfect sense
that we are
spectators t
th flight v th downcast Patrician
desperate to escape
th wrath v th plebeians
n th reprisals v th peasantry

but wait:

wasn't it you
or one v your cohorts
told me quite recently
told me
he was
no Patrician

merely an upstart
a ne'er-do-well
a renegade
a creature v sedition?

isn't that what you heard
in th hexagonal piazza
where th poets give verse nd th soothsayer grabs at your arm?

wasn't it there
in that place
in th piazza by th palazzo
 that you heard at last
 at long long last
th game was up?

muse on it;
think awhile
seek out th clues

for clues there are
in th line v th lithograf
 th hint in th drypoint

there have been
other proposals
other explanations

(v course there have been)

th most alarming and
in th circumstances th most credible
proclaims him to be
making good his escape as well he might
from th Mercantile Phoenicians
whom he swindled so mercilessly
in th marketplace at Ephesus
nd in th babble n bustle
 th bustle nd th babble
v th Carthaginian Bazaar

o foolish man!
if that be so...

o foolish
 foolish man (given th precedents)
to cross th path
v those Mercantile Phoenicians!

and at Carthage too I ask you!
at Carthage!

o that man!
that foolish
 running man!

no matter...
forget it...
cast it from your mind I beg v you...

it is mostly conjecture...

nd we
v all people
must not fall prey
to conjecture...

have you lately talked
to th Centurion?
and if you have
have you discussed
th present whereabouts
v th People v th Catacombs?

their influence
despite current reports
is not on th wane

far from it

they have
as you may have surmised
a strong base v support
among th common people

stronger than is safe
to publicly declare

so strong
that they
are beginning
to emerge
into th daylight

that this be so
I have th word
v th Centurion himself
having as he has
grave fears

v so open an assembly;
v acts v combination
that could well precipitate
an inflammatory situation

v course
he may well be wrong

(it would not be
th first time)

or perhaps he is
merely misguided

or else
seizing his opportunity

(I wouldn't put it past him
you are all too aware
v his leanings)

yet for all you
or I
or th Centurion knows
he could well prove
one v them

that man
that running man
so fleet v foot
n persuasive v manna

that be th case
then heaven help him!

th Centurion would have no qualms
running him down - running him down n running him in:

given his approach
to articles v faith

or relics

or Second-comers

no qualms
no qualms at all

believe me

who knows?
it might even be
he was forced to take flight
by th very sect
v which he could have been
a member...

it has been conjectured
(quietly v course;
quietly nd behind closed doors)
that they
have arranged a new concord
are prepared
to entreat

those who command th State
n th followers v th Nazarene

indeed it is rumoured

th Emperor himself
is preparing to receive
th Graceful Waters

an expedient no doubt
but a substantial one

this would hardly gratify
th bold Centurion

son v Mithras
lover v th Bullfight

he would be
well displeased

nd in his
divine intolerance
he would
never realise
there are those within th Catacombs
who would themselves oppose
any institutionalisation
v their creed nd v their tenets

would indeed
oppose it to th death

so doing
they would need to run
run to take refuge

run in shadow
down th centuries
fleeing from

beyond Doric columns
n th walled garden

warlords nd witchfinders
prelates
pastors
n all inquisitors

seeking out
places v haven nd v hope
even if they be
beyond th portals v Time itself

n that man
running before columns
in th shade v th lithograf vines
could be perhaps
one v their number
a fugitive borne onward
by faith
rather than by fear;

and yet
why should we
deem him to be
fugitive at all?

why do we
offer our gaze
so quizzically
in his direction
crying out

"Behold that man!
That running man!
That frightened
fleeing man!"?

what if
it were to transpire
he is not *fleeing*
after all?

what if
he is running

towards
not *from*?

let me make
a simple suggestion
let me suggest
he is running
towards the Great Gate of the city
there to greet
the splendid progress
of slaves in revolt
who have reached the perimeter wall
and lifted
the long siege

that he is indeed
 rushing headlong
 to embrace his freedom
th freedom he
n all v th enslaved
have so lately
nd so dearly won

you don't agree?
as you wish...
have it your own way...
shake your head
 if you like
shake it n exclaim
if that is

"Impossible!"

what pleases you;

these years v bitterness
they have made
but cynics v us all

very well then!
he is *not* running
to greet these
 latterday Sparticists:

you could be right
he may have priorities
 other than liberation

vengeance
he may be
hell bent on vengeance

on retribution...

who can blame him
seeing what they
have done to him

for example...

and all their tribe

"Vengeance is mine!"
he hollers from the shadows
"Vengeance...Sweet vengeance is mine!"

not a pretty thought
but surely there can be
no cause for alarm?
what have we
to fear from him?
we have
no quarrel with him
nor he with us

I agree

our consciences are clear
our hands are clean

at least
mine are

no doubt
yours are also

Wait! Stop right there!
let us tarry
let us
 peer beneath those shadows

what if
there we find
instead of
 th baleful scowl v vengeance
 he wore a smile?

a smile v joyful expectancy...

remember those who said
he was last seen
in th casino
talking to
th woman given to outrage?
she v th free-flown spirit, indeed
(though not I suspect
 one to your liking)

who is there still to say
she is not waiting for him
behind th wall
beneath th vines?

waiting n longing
gleeful nd impatient

delightful delighted
with th foretaste v deceit...

n if not her
then maybe some other...

Ligeia perhaps?

did I say Ligeia?

Never Ligeia!

Now:

Now then !...

if
v a sudden
we were to ask *him*:
if
without browbeat or ambush
we were to venture
venture out
from our tight
n thorny thicket
to demand an explanation
v th man himself he might well tell us;
tell us what we yearn to know
yet do not wish to hear

tell us that

there is

no Ligeia

no rising v slaves

no Centurion

nor haunt v lamplighters n dangling pheasants

no garment-tuggers nor silent spitters

no square v soothsayers

no Phoenicians

mercantile or otherwise

"No!" he might

quietly inform us

as much to enlighten

as t deride

"I run

nether t flee

nor t find

nor t follow after

here in front v th Doric columns

th walled garden nd th profusion v vines

not I

depicted here

in this printed picture

lithograf with a touch v dry point

he may suggest

I run
just for th Hell v lt!
th sheer
madcap
Hell v it!"

And so he runs
unnamed nd unannotated
in that garden
that viney garden
getting from
running from
running to

somewhere t nowhere
nowhere t somewhere

look I tell you

look at that man that running man

coming
going

going
coming

Watch him...

Watch him come:

See him go;