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Bones of the citizen

S G Collins

Under cover of dark, the box wagon with three men has crept up the rutted North Street to this point, having come all the way up through the Bronk's to this bleak fallow field. Trudging through stiff frosted weeds they have found the spot with their lanterns. Cobbett is of a mind that the wind covers the sound of their shovels. Two shovels for three men. The exertion feels good, the drink is wearing off. How long has it been, an hour yet? "Let me have a go, pa," says his son presently again, and Cobbett yields the shovel, stepping back away from the hole, sipping the air of crisping maples and far horse dung, and nearly trips over the old headstone. He looks down. The stone has been tipped, chipped, scratched, pissed on and overgrown with weeds, but there resting still in the moving lamp-shadows of the men, one can just discern the word *Sense*, and then nearby the word *Common*. He looks up again, through the fronds of weeping willow draping this spot like the hair of a passioned lover, and can see a bit of blue in the sky. The night is getting away from us, he thinks, and will say so to the others. But now there's a somber pausing.

"Pa."

"James."

"I've struck wood."

"On with ye then, 'less ye be winded."

The shoemaker then is just leaning on the end of his shovel, looking at him.

"You're quite certain of this, then, are you William?"

"How mean you, Mr Benbow?"

"There's still time to go back, I think."

Yes, and be mere desecrators rather than full-fledged robbers. The horror of leaving his gruesome task two-thirds done is far worse than the doing. Give up now, and the grave stays open in his dreams forever.

"I've no mind to change my mind again," says Cobbett. "Allow me," he says. And takes the shoemaker's shovel to add some haste, stepping down in amongst the bugs and naked nightcrawlers. And they dig on, and no one asks what he means by *again*.

Neither have they seen the candle in the window of the neighbor across the road, as Charity Badeaux passes and pauses en route to her chamber pot. Not again, she thinks, over the years having seen the several indecencies done to the grave in the field across the way. And she goes, and comes, and blowing out the candle, peers again. Though their action is obscured by trees, she can see — and hear as well, now, by the clank and clunk and the grunting of the men and the snorting of the horse — that these vandals are about something considerable more horrific. She could swear she sees them wrestling the very coffin from the earth. A shiver grabs her by shoulders. Abomination!

That hell-tortured soul, she thinks, why can men not just let him die? She knows nothing of the old scoundrel now ten years departed from those bones, but that he was deserving of all the opprobrium decent folk could pile upon his name. But for God's sake, and for the sake of us all, why can men not leave him disappeared?

Now she's on the path to Mr Seacord's next door, crying "You'll not get away with this!" aloud toward the marauders in the field. "You'll not succeed!"

But her voice, though detected, is but a warbling bird cry to the men heaving the casket.

"Make haste, men, we've been spied," says Cobbett, with nearly a smile in his voice.

They can hear the pounding on the neighbor's door over there, as they climb up onto the wagon. And soon they depart, wheeling about and down the path and onto the road again, with Benbow driving, James beside him on the seat, and Cobbett in back, sitting calmly erect astride the damp box — as the rising light makes men again, of what in darkness was but bold intent.

It is well, Cobbett thinks. I am no stranger to digging. I am a gardner after all. He hears the welcoming of birds, and lifts his eyes toward the sky, and is not afraid of God. And looking down again, he'll say not quite aloud, "It's well, Tom, it's well. You're going home."

Mr Seacord, once stirred and sufficiently roused by Mrs Badeaux, will dress, will fetch his weapon, and pursue them on his horse. The dawn will become full day. The cooper Mr Farnham will say he saw them take the Boston Road, and Seacord will fly down the Boston Road all the way to the bridge at Morrisania, but the bridge man will say that no such cart has come that way this morning. Seacord will shout, demanding to know how long since they passed.

"The truth, man, give me the truth, I care not what they paid ye for your silence!" But the truth will be that there are two Boston Roads, the old one and the new, and that Mr Seacord has taken the wrong one. And so the trail is cold. The bones and their robbers are gone. Back home, all that's left is perturbation, an empty hole in a dreary September field, and the air of calumny escaped its earthly jail.

In New York the shoemaker has been paid, and the casket lies hidden in a shed behind the stable for a month while Cobbett arranges his passge home. One captain refuses him with his offensive baggage. Another accepts. The *Hercules* sails on the thirtieth of October, and takes three weeks to Liverpool.

There's a bit of snickering at the customs house, even from Cobbett's old friends who've come out to greet him, when he forces open the box and displays his prize, a withered cadaver. Can this be a joke? Here again is Will Cobbett, prolific author and publisher, standing with the puff and pride of a parent boasting over a precocious child who's learned to tie his bootlaces. "There, gentlemen, are the mortal remains of the immortal Tom Paine." Raised eyebrows, feet shuffling, throats clearing. An account will appear in the *Times*. Cobbett intends to raise a monument to the man, who is an English man despite it all, and bury him home with due honor. He says he'll inaugurate an annual feast in the man's name, and write an account his life. And this from one of England's most eloquent Paine-smashers. Will Cobbett — radical this week, conservative the next, lover and hater of America, of whom Hazlitt says that "if nobody else can argue against him, he is a very good match for himself" — has always at least been an *honest* man. This fanatic grower of rutabagas on Long Island fervently believes everything he writes at every moment, which is why he writes so much. But he has perhaps gone too far now, has tacked into the wind once too often, and made himself an ass again, this time for good. And none of his old friends will lift a pen to defend him from ridicule.

"He belongs to England," Cobbett says of his prize, and nobody cares. There is no great monument, no annual feast.

Three years on, down at Normandy Farm in Surrey, his son James is standing in the doorway of the shop. "Will you come to dinner, pa?" Cobbett looks up from the skull on the workbench, into which he's been etching marks with an awl. There is a note of anger in his eye, a twinge of shame. He knows he should be upstairs in his study, finishing his *History of the Protestant Reformation*.

"I'll be along presently," says he.

Ten years more, and Cobbett's a member of Parliament. Three more yet and he's dead.

"It's no meet lot for public bidding and I'll not offer it," Mr Piggot declares, his tone not admitting of revision. James appeals to the Lord Chancellor, but in vain. The box from the attic, *found to contain human bones wrapped up in separate papers,* would never be put up for auction.

Tom opens his eyes. Seems to be morning. Just a taste of light from the window filters in, and precious little air. He wonders where he is, and carefully draws breath to speak.

"Where am I?" he inquires of the two clergymen hovering at his bedside.

"You're in a rooming house, on Fulton Street," says the one nearest to him, who, by his expression seems displeased with the odor of the place. "Mr Paine, have you heard anything of what I've been saying to you?"

Tom sees his left hand idly reaching toward the bedside table. Why? he wonders. There are papers there. He has written something. Perhaps his hand wants to give it to these men, once again the handing off of manuscript just before a voyage. But the vicar has already given the papers a glance, and found there no confession, nor any hint of remorse — just the infidel's desire to be buried in a twelve foot square plot on his farm, and instructions for what to inscribe on his stone.

"There is time to redeem yourself, if you pray with us this moment," says the other, the one with the pimples.

Tom stares into the blackness of the older one's coat. Then lifts his eyes to meet his eyes. Then looks into the blackness again.

"The Lord will take you back in an instant, Mr Paine. Think now of the many thousands of words with which you've assailed God and man, and think with but a few words more you can escape the everlasting fires and torments of hell."

"We beseech you, Mr Paine, to reconsider," says the younger.

Something like a grimace comes to old Tom's face, as he takes a deep breath, then another.

"Let me alone, gentlemen," he says. "Good morning."

No one's sure who withdraws first, they, or he.

"Let us give thanks to the Lord," the older one says in the stairwell as they leave, loudly enough for the boarders to hear.

"Sir?" the younger one turns before him, squinting.

"The apostate has recanted and confessed, and been redeemed in the eyes of God."

"Sir, I did not hear it," says the younger.

"How could you not have heard it?" says the elder, which puts an end to the conversation. And bidding farewell to the landlady they step out the front door. Tom is feeling a bit lighter now. He has drifted past the men in the narrow foyer, and on out into the street. At which moment old Madame de Bonneville is approaching, turning the corner — and holding her skirts now, she hastens toward the rooming house. Tom turns.

Madame de Bonneville, then younger and still beautiful, turns swiftly to glare at him over one bare shoulder. Her English is magnificently clear.

"There are some things, Thomas, of which one does not speak even if they be true. But that is not your way, is it?"

She will not raise her voice, nor jab her finger at him, but in her eyes, and in the way she nearly spits those words, he reads clearly the text she does not speak. *You wretched son of a bitch. I love you.* The candle-glow makes the light of her fury even more strange and beautiful.

He is the ruin of her. She sees him plainly now. There are many men on earth who, whatever their faults, are born with the mere capacity of knowing when to leave well enough alone. She sees now. It's not that Tom has ever been especially gifted, but that he lacks this one simple virtue. Not satisfied with tearing down the idea of monarchy, or later with besmirching the name of George Washington, indeed no, Tom would not be sated till he had ripped apart the Bible from top to toe, and brought down Jesus Christ himself. Those who befriended him have become fools. She sees him plainly now. And seeing her seeing him, he feels abruptly naked as a babe.

Where are they then? Philadelphia, Baltimore, or still at Monroe's place in Paris? Is she then the wife, or the widow, of his friend and publisher in France? Tom can't remember.

But then turning for a moment he is back with Monroe, and Monroe is reading.

Tom has been carried out of the French prison near the point of death, and has hovered near that point for much of a year. He recovers at the home of Monroe, whose intervention it was that sprung him. Immediately upon regaining sufficient strength to moisten a pen, Tom writes — and sends — a letter excoriating Washington for his betrayal. Later he'll learn it wasn't Washington at all who let him rot in prison, but rather Monroe's predecessor, that Federalist Morris. But by then the letter has become public knowledge. It would seem he has few friends in the new America now. Part one of *The Age of Reason* is already in print. It's time to publish part two.

Monroe is smiling, in disbelief, at the pages of manuscript in his hand.

"I've said nothing that hasn't been said before by more learned men," says Tom.

"What's said among scholars is of little danger," says Monroe, setting down his spectacles. "But Tom, you write plainly for the common man, and for that you'll not be forgiven. Jefferson will befriend you of course. I think it will be you, Jefferson, and the devil." And his smile is genuine admiration.

And turning, bowing to the applause of the members of the National Assembly in Paris. And taking up pen against that idiot Burke in defence of the Revolution in France. And turning again in Philadelphia, and recklessly giving a thousand dollars to support the Revolution in America, hoping to shame the rich into following suit. And how many thousand leaves did he pen throughout that crisis, to sway and steer and move the public mind, so that the day might dawn when men like Washington could ever be remembered at all? He can turn the leaves back all the way to the moment of first setting sail for America, a young man stepping aboard in the gray chill, with nothing but a letter of introduction from Franklin tucked between his heart and the cold.

And at every turn, there is always at least one tipped eyebrow. At least one figure there to secretly sniff his breath, to ask with words or glances *are you sure you mean to do this?*

The questioner has taken on so many faces along the way, keeping so many appointments with him in so many different cities and circumstances, that it will be hard to part ways with him now. But looking about him there on Fulton street this kind afternoon, Tom knows he can do no more to steer the minds of men. He can no longer set pen to paper, nor can he even speak English any more. The questioner — faceless now for once — takes leave of him there and then, fondly enough, and goes on his way, perhaps to prick and nettle the next iconoclast coming round the bend.

For a long moment Tom stays there alone, awaiting the demons from hell, but they do not come. He looks up and only sees the sky.

He could evanesce now, slowly, a shell dissolving in a glass of vinegar. Or he could turn again and step forward in time. Maybe stop off at the pub on the way.

What wretchedness and wonder will be this world's due?

One can only chuckle at these contraptions of men, these mad devices rendering them what they imagine to be power and knowledge. He was once such a man himself, helplessly toting hither and thither his models of a new type of bridge, passionate over its most reasonable merits, craving someone to believe him enough build the damned thing. The world is alternately a dream of machines, and a broad wasteland of famine and peril. Flipping through sunrises and observing mankind, he comes to see that madness is man's primary condition. The myths and superstitions do never fade away, they only slosh around. They take new forms, they foam and froth and whip themselves up into tempests each to their own season, then ebb, but never vanish. Even Reason itself, his so manly prize, eventually shows itself to be nothing more than another religion. It too can be used to sanction the slaughter of millions, and so it will be, and so it is.

And long after the bones have been fashioned into buttons, sewn onto shirtwaists and vests, and after those same garments have at length been discarded and dissolved among the rubbish, and the buttons remain nameless pebbles to the earth, he will still be drifting between the points of interest. And will soon encounter an interesting pilgrim.

The courier — coming from Australia in the service of a wealthy businessman, summons Tom to mind in a fanciful conversation, the yesses and nos of which she assumes to be merely the product of her own dreaming. She is then dozing with her head against the tiny window of the machine in which she travels. As they move together eastward, the dawn comes up a bit fast, illumining the waters and vapors below.

"Are you there, Tom? Are you listening?"

"Yes I'm still listening," Tom says.

"You know I'm supposed to have the last vestige of you in a box, in the overhead luggage compartment."

"I know."

"I'm bound for a place of learning, in America," the courier explains, "where the scientists of our day will compare tiny bits of it with other known samples of your physical essence."

"Yes."

"And thereby, we hope, confirm or deny its authenticity."

"And what is that to me?" Tom wonders.

"Well, that's my question for you. Is it real? Is it yours? I'd like to know."

The dreamer wants a yes or no from Tom, who can only smile, and must disappoint. He has had neither time nor desire to keep track of what's in this courier's box, enough to verify its reality one way or the other.

"Why do you think I would know that?" Tom asks the dreamer, with uncommon patience.

"Tom. You'll be the ruin of me yet," the dreamer smiles.

And she's right of course. Sometime between the moment when she stops for a Coke at LAX, and the moment when she checks into her hotel, the box will have inexplicably vanished. She's sure, almost completely sure, that she had it when she climbed into the taxi. She's less sure how she could ever have stepped out of the taxi without it, and even less sure of the number of the taxi. A hundred telephone calls later, she will begin to lose hope. Her once-bright mind will be numbed, and she will start to descend, and at length become just another nameless victim of mystery.

Two nights later George Washington's girlfriend complains.

"I can't watch TV with that thing staring at me."

"So move it, Emmy, I don't care," says George.

Emmy gets up, peeling herself like a nicotine patch from the sweaty leather of the couch. Loath to touch the thing with her bare hands, she drapes the skull with one of his old T-shirts, then lifts it from where it sits on top of the cable box. Tossing her boyfriend a glance of pure disgust, she goes into the kitchen and hides it under the sink.

A month later, convinced that the skull has been bringing them bad luck, she waits till George Washington is out driving the cab — and then, summoning all her fleshly might, hurls the offending object out into the darkness. She turns away. She doesn't hear the crack as it falls

— cleaving into several chunks— amid the rubble of the vacant lot behind the apartment building. The pieces lie there for a long time.

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