

Robert B. Shaw

An Indoor Cyclist

Down in his basement, going nowhere fast,
pumping away at pedals, he's amassed
mileage, the sight of which would make you tired,
by putting in the modest time required
each day — say, twenty minutes, half an hour —
a set expenditure of muscle power.
Expenditure? He hopes his daily round
will be like savings interest, and compound.

His cycle's only one within a mob
that hum along, forever on the job.
For instance: spring resurfacing each spring;
the phases of the moon; the busy swing
of business alternating boom and bust;
lust cramped to apathy, then swelled to lust;
carbon transforming into other stuff
and back again — and if that's not enough,
the starry marchers of the zodiac
plodding in order on their astral track.
(And that's without including Wagner's Ring,
or other mythic round-ups following
fortunes of heroes proudly in contention
with grisly foes too numerous to mention,
recycling some archetype's convention.)

The world is wrapped (and rapt) in repetition.
Why shouldn't he make modeling that his mission?
His every stationary revolution
prolongs a flight from body's devolution.
Not a bad aim, but what's his destination?
He isn't given much to speculation.
Notions that might be poised to intervene,
jumbling up the course of his routine,
would not be welcome. While he sits and pedals,
he's not at home to any thought that meddles.
He likes his wheel, a squirrel-cage-type affair,
even if it won't take him anywhere.
His daily stint of sitting down to churn
dutifully celebrates the planet's turn. . . .

For some, however, periodicity
is not the acme of felicity —
in fact, as they regard it, anything but.
To them, his rote is just a deepening rut,
a trek on which he never tries to guess
what use there is in circling barrenness.
They chafe at all the intersecting rings
that drive us on our way as bonded things,
seeing in nets of circularity
a tender trap that most choose not to see.
They long to pierce that subtle whirling mesh
that snugs but also subjugates all flesh.
They even, in some moods, view utter stasis
as offering the only true oasis. . . .

Nothing he thinks of now. Perhaps he will,
though his first inklings may not come until,
panting and (“What,” he wonders, “*is this?*”) sweating,
he fumbles for a much less uphill setting.



Daily

Memory holds us hostage. Who needs proof?
In later years, with little worth recalling
about those mornings, sometimes she recalled them
exactly, as though she still was there,
a party to the fixed routine of breakfast,
musing as she had done so many times:
Why did she hate the newspaper so much?

Was it the everlasting sight of it
camouflaging her husband as he sat
taking it all in: fire, flood, and famine,
was simmering or flaring up in places
with names she had no clue how to pronounce?
Not to mention the latest hit-and-run
last night, only a block or so away,
or the city's Assistant Treasurer
being caught hand in till. Descending from
their 1950s datelines, the gray columns
every morning detailed the gray world's
latest abandonments of innocence.
She always wondered how a normal person
could want to riffle through all that while eating.
For him it seemed to get smoothly absorbed
on its own track, parallel to one
conveying bites of toast and sips of coffee.
The oblong table, each end occupied
as usual, stretched placidly between them.

After he marched himself away to work
she took her turn with it. She always went
first to a certain inside page which sometimes —
not every day, but reasonably often —
gave her what she thought of as good news,
which, truth to tell, was likely there in print
because the editor had space to fill.
Here were stories of homely miracles.
A woman's wedding ring, lost fifteen years,
found in the house that she no longer lived in,
pried out of the floor crack that had claimed it,
traced to her and returned — that sort of thing.

Animal stories held more charm for her:
 a family's wolfhound, mislaid on a road trip,
 nosing his own way home across state lines;
 a chimpanzee who gamely learned to count
 by sorting ping pong balls in someone's lab.
 Not only brain power but public service
 was given coverage: rescuers, Lassie-like,
 of accident-prone children trapped in spots
 they had no business in, were popular.
 (And once, along those lines, like a vignette
 cribbed from mythology, a pod of dolphins
 grouped themselves in a protective convoy
 around a couple's broken-masted boat
 for hours, till the human Coast Guard reached them.)
 Best of all, though, she reckoned as she grew
 into a connoisseur, were the occasional
 tales showcasing pet solidarity:
 a mother dog caring for orphaned rabbits;
 a cat guiding a blind dog round the house;
 a guinea pig whose best friend was a duck,
 bound by a common taste for salad greens.

She would peruse these, then flick back quickly
 past the headlines, soon folding the paper.
 Stilled, eyeing her husband's egg-stained plate,
 she would think, "We're all animals, aren't we?
 Then why can't we do better?" Getting up,
 collecting dishes, heading for the sink —
 all this comprised a choreography
 she fell into mechanically each day.
 Now she would wash the newsprint off her hands.



MRI

Posing for Mama's Christmas card:
 to think I once thought *that* was hard.
 At least I'm not required to smile,
 pinned down in focus all this while.
 Parted from wallet, watch, and rings —
 in fact, from inorganic things —
 I'm slid within this white, magnetic,
 resonant tube whose energetic
 poundings and beeps mean close inspection
 goes on regarding my midsection.

Like a train halted in a tunnel
 or, in the small end of a funnel,
 something that can't quite make it through,
 I do what I'm supposed to do:
 holding my breath each time I'm told
 (not hard: it's all there is to hold),
 and, amid hubbub, lying still
 by an extended act of will.
 Patience is all a patient can
 provide in aid of this deep scan.

The tech whose fingers power each widget
 compliments me: I didn't fidget.
 It will be interesting to see
 just what is going on in me.
 Some few unhurried days will crawl
 onward before I get a call.
 The news may carry reassurance,
 giving a nod to more endurance.
 Or the news may be not so great.
 Patience again: it's time to wait.



The Absentminded

There was something endearing — don't you recall —
in the sight of the pink dry cleaner's label
stapled on the Professor's Harris tweed cuff,
carried along for the ride through his lecture
by a host of impresario arm waves,
his unawareness intact, his students charmed.

And you could feel the same fondness for the way
Grandmother, sharp as a tack, would even so
call you by one or another brother's name
(or even, once, the name of one of the cats)
until, by trial and error, yours came up.

Entertaining to witness in others, slips,
stumbles, detours, momentary derailments,
intermittent oblivion, whatever
you want to call them, such gaps in cognition
leave you fuming, inwardly at loggerheads.
Turned inquisitorial, you plague yourself
with questions targeting each snafu with scorn.
Why was milk left out of the fridge overnight?
Why is that jacket not where it's always hung?
What became of the tax form that used to be
in plain sight on top of that pile — and aren't there
more piles now than whenever last you noticed?
How did the extra car keys get put away
in a drawer only other things belong in?
Any answer you try is self-accusing.

Lucky for you, the doctors, when you ask them,
will tell you it's distraction, not dementia,
attention swerved to things not of this moment,
or yielding to diversion or dispersal.
Woolgathering, or more grandly, reverie.
Time to seek solace from your inner sophist.
Listen, the soothing whisper:

*"Calm yourself.
That book's not gone, just on a different shelf.
Why cram your bandwidth, fretting at the mess
of paltry, everyday forgetfulness?
Be glad that when in fact you concentrate,*

*trifles mislaid no longer irritate.
 How overstuffed the mind of God must be,
 docketing everything, omnisciently!
 Nothing to covet. No, your transient blanks
 merit your tolerance, if not your thanks."*

All true, no doubt, but not much help to you, balked,
 standing vacantly in a room you entered
 a moment ago to get some simple thing
 that must have heard you coming and has darted
 behind some shifty curtain in consciousness,
 perversely now determined not to be named.
 Annoying, yes; maybe more than annoying
 if you (if we) sense how this encapsulates
 an impasse too familiar, all too human:
 life at a standstill, snagged by a hiatus
 in which we find it dawning on us that we
 don't know, and couldn't say, what it is we want.

