

Three Poems by Victor Henry

The Politician

An incumbent politician takes PAC money from a couple of corporate giants. His opponents in the race don't consider this to be a serious issue. Nothing can be bought with other people's money, one candidate proclaims. Another entrant self-assuredly tells the press, this is the year the voters have finally spoken. A third office seeker thinks situational ethics will solve the problem. But the leading contender, the one with highest name recognition, doesn't concern himself at all, so positive he's a shoo-in for the position. The most qualified and incorruptible candidate of the field explains to the masses that term limits without campaign finance reform simply means politicians with the most money will win, regardless if those politicians are Republicans, Democrats, or Independents. The incumbent politician, however, knows the name of the game is power and, prior to the campaign, channels the maximum of legally permissible contributions into his re-election committee's swelling account. During subsequent weeks of fevered debate, he sanctimoniously declares, We should get rid of PACs at the national, state, and local levels. His constituents, disgusted about how powerless they have become, hold him up as a model of democratic virtue. His integrity is never questioned. He is re-elected in a landslide.

Beneath a Thin Layer of Life

Tet 1967

Incoming mail arrives, a barrage in the black hours of the night, messianic visitors from space. Meteoritic showers of mortar rounds, defying darkness, penetrate the perimeter, malignant in execution. I see Mace, our new point man, take a direct hit, a lob shot, landing on top of his steel pot. He vanishes. At the entrance of a corrugated iron bunker, a buddy lies frozen in the fetal position. Beneath a thin layer of life, he ruminates about the progeny of permanence, as Viet Cong, overseeing death and destruction, infiltrate the landscape like ghosts.

Vandalizing the People's Library

I hate books; they only teach us to talk about things we know nothing about.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, from *Emile* (1762)

The fortunate few are always looking down on the uninvited and undesirable from their Wall Street offices, drinking champagne and toasting one another in the midafternoon Manhattan light, laughing loudly amongst themselves, while below fellow citizens of Franklin's "A Republic, if you can keep it" protest against greed and financial corruption.

The favored are looking down through their collateral debt obligations and their collateral mortgage obligations as they play another round of casino capitalism, rewarding themselves with extravagant bonuses, believing they're entitled to certain privileges, devotee disciples of private ownership capitalism, anti-regulation reformers, dug-in defenders of the free market.

Some of the disenfranchised look up at them while reading Madison, Jefferson, Whitman, Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, and Naomi Klein, awakened from their thirty-year Rip Van Winkle sleep, aware wages have remained stagnant since the 1970s, aware credit card debt has been driving the middle class farther and farther into an economic black hole, aware of the American financial industry's inside job. Now, informed of the robbery, the theft, the heist of their savings, their retirement, their homes, they get the meaning of austerity and economic inequality.

Still, amongst the powerful, power corrupts absolutely. Mayor Bloomberg authorizes the raid on Zuccotti Park. In the middle of the night the NYPD, censors in riot gear, using shields, police batons, and tear gas, raid Liberty Plaza, demolish, destroy, level The People's Library, collar over 5,000 free books. A copy of *Bloomberg by Bloomberg* lies on the ground, spine broken, pages torn. The New York Sanitation Department fills dumpsters full of books, carting them off like prisoners on a chain gang, disappearing them like poor peasants in Third World countries, silencing their ideas like Nazis burning books in Opera Square.

Mayor Bloomberg, a Republican, 12th-richest person in the United States, recently honored last month for being one of the "distinguished individuals who have made significant cultural and educational achievements to increase our understanding of the world around us" at the New York Public Library Library's Lions gala, tells guests he woke up in a sweat during the middle of the night, worried he may have had some overdue library books.

Victor Henry