

Alan Gillis

SCAPEGOAT



Gallery Books

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Zeitgeist

I look for you behind retail parks,
ghost-lit showrooms, in dark
scrubland where plastics flutter on coils
of barbed wire; where, through mean soil
strewn with pipes, cartons, slugged condoms,
streams a steep-edged brook. Drawn
to its burble and splurge
I slip on the verge, fall and splunge
stretching for the banks, reeds, not catching hold
of anything sound, my hands ice-cube cold.
And past megastores, waste yards, the suburbs' borders,
carried along on colourless waters
ever gushing on, with no smile, no frown,
I call you down, I call you down.



City limits are fine but I spend most
days hemmed in, meshed and lost
up a tower — in front of a screen,
black plastic keyboard, black plastic machine
on a laminate desk — where the windows
don't open much in case I throw
myself out. Dust gathers on the phone,
empty plant pots. I am alone
much of the time to the extent
that a vague itch of harassment
prickles my contact with people.
And vacuumed through the non-soul
of blank matter, with no smile, no frown,
I call you down, I call you down.



Outside on shopped streets swarm mothers,
 alpha males, screenagers, old, young, lovers,
 the homeless, the bewildered, ill, unique,
 the beautiful with their self-as-boutique —
 so many, thronged into one body,
 surrounding me, squishing, cumbering me
 with sucken hair and grey breath,
 a cracked open swallowing mouth.
 And looking through a million eyes,
 slouching upon a million thighs
 compelled by the shackles
 of meat-headed instinct to slowly circle
 around and around, with no smile, no frown,
 I call you down, I call you down.



Inside the machine or, at least, on the screen
 I discover everything that has been,
 will be, or might never be has a place.
 You can search for God, your name, any face
 and reconfigure. You can hurt someone
 and they won't know it was you. There's a room
 for all things, the wall of each room an exit
 to all that's possible, all interconnected
 with, as they say, no edge and no centre.
 I press enter and enter and enter,
 not knowing where to go, what I might find
 in this flat expanding surveillant mind,
 weightless, free floating, with no smile, no frown,
 I commune. Then the machine powers down.

Instagrammatic

The camera went snap and the moment
 was captured. It was a glorious day.
 But when I picked up the photograph
 weeks later the image was skew-whiff,
 like a cover version of the scene
 I remembered. The sky, I'm sure,

was picture-book azure, not pasty duck-
 egg and mackerel. The trees were *Vogue*
 magazine green but, in our photo, dull
 as a self-printed Plymouth Argyle fanzine.
 And we were not like ourselves. Life-
 sized cardboard cut-outs of Mario and Luigi

in a shop window Nintendo display
 look more true to life. It was as if look-
 alike actors had taken our place
 and I imagined a set-up where we pay
 stand-ins to replicate scenes of our life
 while we work overtime in grey rooms

to pay them. I wondered, what chance
 have words, if even in a photograph
 from a Sony Cyber-Shot DSC-RX 100
 the living moment is caged, held off-stage?
 All that we might see or say is half-wrong.
 We approximate one another. Then we're gone.

And so, though I've been with you now
 for donkey's years, if I were to speak of how
 I want to lick your eyebrows, but don't dare risk it,
 or say your ears are biscuits,
 your teeth scream,
 your lips are the crystal violet contours of a recurring dream,

your hair cries,
your nipples are eyes,
your tongue is a lizard,
your passing youth is melting lard,
and when you tilt your head at nothing much to surprise
 me with a grin
I'm a forest of fir trees shoogled in the wind,

and your sense of humour is a ferret,
your nose is a white-sided jackrabbit,
the sweat on the curve of your neck is the dew on a tulip's calyx,
your irises are the aurora borealis
(and if these are windows to your soul, then you're a
 chameleonic shimmering megaton
of colliding electric particles blown by the sun),

and your stomach is a sand dune,
your dress is a lambent field of wheat blown gently in June,
your legs are identical twins,
your chin is a dove or, at least, you have a bar of Dove soap
 for a chin,
and when I reach for you I press against a windowpane,
scattered, dripping, splattered drops of shivered rain,

and your heart is an ocean liner that has sunk,
your fingers are a crack team of commandos, but your toes
 are drunk,
your laughter is a round of applause,
your bank balance is that scene where Robert Shaw gets eaten
 in *Jaws*,
and I'm sorry I'm a banjaxed replica backstreet device,
all wind and spleen, no fire nor ice,

and your backside is a birthday cake,
your memories are a rainbow cloud of dragonflies above
 a darkening lake,
your frown is a gun,
your happiness is summer grass bleaching in the sun,
and your remaining days are shorebirds swooping through an
 almond-streaked sky over the vast Atlantic's oncoming night,
then remember, my love, I might not be half-right.