

Two Poems

by [Peter Lopatin](#) (February 2020)



Hartley, Alice Neel

The Shape of Things to Come

The doorbell rings. I am four years old.

An old man with dying eyes and no left leg

stands before the open door, balanced

on long wooden things that push his shoulders

strangely up and then go back and reach the floor.

There is something wrong here, something that

just cannot be. He wears a suit and tie, as all men do,

but the left trouser leg is folded high and pinned

back on itself. His leg ends at a place in empty space

well above where his knee should be. My mother wears

a dress wide enough to hide me from this thing at the door.

But I have to look, to be sure of what I see.

I haven't studied geometry yet, but I'm smart

and I think I know how the world is shaped.

There are shapes that just can't be and I don't know those.

(No one can.) It cannot be not to have a leg, to be

not whole, to be something that is not a person, but is,
to ring the doorbell of someone you don't know. The man
asks my mother: "May I have a glass of water?" She says
"Yes, of course," then leaves to fetch it and tells me as she
passes

that it's not polite to stare. But I cannot turn my eyes away
from the emptiness that no shape fills. He looks away.

I begin to see human geometry expand to include the negative
space where things have been subtracted or withheld.

The axioms and postulates are hard for me to see just yet
but soon enough I know I will. Now, my mother has returned
and hands the man his drink. I see his thirst, his stranger's
lips

pressing on our drinking glass, his throat pulsing with each
gulp,

his darkened eyes almost shut. I think I hear the sound of
sweat

dripping down his face. He empties the glass. I can't turn my
eyes

away. "Thank you very much," I hear him say. Then, in a queer
transformation of his arid geometry, he twists the wooden
things around

and lets his right leg take his body down, step
by strangest step. (There is nothing I can say.)
I watch him as he looks briefly back, and then, like no person
I have ever seen or known, he simply walks away.

Soft Tissue

All spasm and knotted pain, my neck is an
alien cord of nervous rebellion. Kelly, the
radiology tech, who smells of orchids, lavender,
viburnum, and of all the sweet extracts from the
pages of an old Botanical, tells me (in her
fragrant way) that everything will be fine.

Before she slides me into the tunnel of the MRI
she plugs my ears with foam so my delicate
tympanic membranes aren't shredded

by the clatter and buzz of the big machine.

She gives me headphones so we can
stay in touch and tells me not to swallow

while the machine is on. Then she sends me in.

I have confided to her (because I trust in her)
that I took a pill so my claustrophobia

would remain at bay, unlike my first time,
when I panicked and had to be released
before the world crushed and suffocated me.

But I didn't tell her why. I didn't tell her
how I'd been done in by thoughts of
soft tissue suspended on a fragile frame:

my infant daughter, dead now many years,
limp at birth with a malformed brain,
limp in my arms six months later.

I don't know if her eyes could see.

Now, I'm all sinew and strain, muscle and madness,

synapse and signal,

hungering for solidity and form, suspended
like an artist's canvas before it's stretched,
wanting to become the painting,

the painting in which, for all time,
the hero's muscles glisten and
dilate with power, prophets proclaim

the hour of imminent redemption,
and an unaccountable light lays
resplendent on a fair pastoral.

But this time I nearly sleep while
the neck that holds body to brain
is magnificently sliced and

sectioned by the machine,
soon to be spread out on
the radiologist's serving plate.

Kelly assures me that everything will be fine.

I thank her for her encouragement and feel
an odd assurance. She is too fragrant to lie.

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Peter Lopatin was born and raised in New York where he earned his JD degree and practiced corporate law for thirty years. Along the way, he studied philosophy as a graduate student at the New School for Social Research. After retiring from his legal practice, he obtained a Certificate from the New School in teaching English as a Second Language and has been an ESL teacher since then. He has taught at the University of Connecticut/Stamford, Norwalk Community College, Manhattanville College and, most recently, at the Stamford English Language Academy. Peter's short stories and book reviews have appeared in *Commentary*, *The Weekly Standard*, *The New Atlantis*, and *New English Review*. His poetry has appeared in *New Millennium Writings* and *Poetry East*.

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