

Novel
Excerpt

NOTNAMEN (OR, THE LIFE OF THE RESTORER)

(allegory,
protest,
trousers,
skull)

by Hanta
Coufal

Braun was alone in the studio when the empty room filled with sirens once again. For a few brief moments, his very surroundings shaded blue – on and off and on and off and on and off – but then it was back to just him and the candlelight once more.

He didn't need to look out the window to imagine the scene: more protests, he had heard, and likely protesters fleeing the square in front of the Municipal Hall. The police, chasing them on foot with their batons drawn no doubt. And yet more police - in their blocky white and yellow cars, those stubby blue lights spinning round on top - following behind like wild boars. With any luck it was not the state police, but the regular city police, less likely to dish out anything more severe than a few loving beatings.

He had spent the day working on a Spanish allegory from the 1640s. The main figure was a pale-faced young man with blond ringlets wearing a rust-coloured tunic. His features were delicate, yet alert and plausibly modern. Braun felt he could have recognised him in the young border guards holding their rifles with trembling hands, or else in a troupe of gymnasts enduring trials. Either was plausible - at least if he were shorn of the enormous white-brown-feathered wings which sprouted from his back with palpable heft.

This *Vanitas* was still life as much as portrait, the angelic young man stood behind a wide table full of intricate, luxurious objects. The slab itself was covered in a red velvet drape edged in gold brocade. Displayed upon it: a telescope and eyeglasses, an hourglass draining sand, leather-bound books with Latin titles, bottles of wine in disarray and dripping even still, pearls and coins, golden candlesticks with squat remains of candles, playing cards with bleakly symbolic pictures, ornate stringed instruments, a globe full of inaccuracies, and a wobbling pile of milky human skulls.

Although many of the painting's colours had faded over the centuries, in the usual manner, every single object in it had been rendered with devotion and precision. Each of the contrasting surfaces, from the lustre of the glass to the umber ombre of the leather, were wondrous to him. This, for Braun, was as good as life got. Even the sensuous young man, notionally the subject of the painting yet very much in the background – both literally and figuratively for Braun – now captured his interest in a way that had never been the case before.

Braun loaded his brush with paint. Just the tip of it. Or, more accurately, the very last millimetre of the tip, that thrilling convergence: a sable-hair teardrop sharpened into a point so fine that it could pierce an icy lake.

DEGENERATE
ART



ISSUE A

As he dipped the brush-point into his Vermilion, judiciously tempered with the subtlest hues of green and blue, the fine black hairs of his brush became an extension of his own nervous system. He knew immediately that the weight of paint was just right. A glance down merely confirmed it.

NOTNAMEN

Then – as he ferried the paint to the canvas in those practiced, automatic movements, and set about laying it down in barely visible marks – he knew his additions were successful via the haptic as much as the optic. The delicate flex of the canvas, which led the sable hairs to bend just as he had anticipated they would, leaving a necessary curve of pigment in his wake.

There were no revelations in the life of the restorer, only increments. The centuries-old red velvet, faded brown down the years as Vermilion was wont to do, was brought back to life in this painstakingly familiar manner. Braun, absorbed in his work, received the change like blood flowing through his own veins. This magnificent painting, speaking to worlds beyond Braun's own, completed in a dusty studio in Valladolid, transported a few thousand miles east between mountains and over muddy rivers, wrapped in sheets, hung on walls, fading away into obsolescence across lifetimes, but now exhumed by his own mortal hand, by just three brushes, some oil and some ancient pigments, the same humble tools used by the artist himself three and a half centuries prior. This was the only transubstantiation which Braun recognised, the one which made him a true believer.

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By the time he left the Museum that evening, he had forgotten all about the snow and the protests.

Now Braun was confronted with hard, cold evidence of both.

What had been fresh white powder on his way in to work that morning, and lots of it, was suddenly grey slush, slick to the eye and perilous to the feet. Footprints, heavy and full or partial and swift, were visible everywhere – as if the city desired to preserve memories of a crime scene. In patches on the road, the snow had turned to black ice, indistinguishable from the asphalt in the darkness and as he crossed the street outside the Museum he slipped in slapstick fashion, arms flailing and legs uncontrollable until he finally grasped a lamp post and clung on hard, like it a mother's leg and he a small child. He snapped his head around rapidly, relieved to find no one was watching.

Having almost lost both his dignity and the sanctity of his trousers, Braun turned away from the dangers of the well-trodden paths leading towards his usual tram stop and off in the other direction instead. It was counter-intuitive, this walking away from home, but there was an earlier tram stop not much further from the Museum and, it seemed, heading away from the Municipal Hall offered him fresher and safer snow upon which to tread. His tram journey home would be a few minutes longer, no more.

When he got to the other stop, he marvelled at the difference a few blocks could make. On this side of the city, all remained calm and peaceful. Rooftops were dusted white. Footprints in the snow were crisp and few. Birds chirped and his breath rose up and away like white smoke. The only sign that anything was untoward was the large brown stain splashed in the snow next to him. Spilt coffee or chocolate, he thought, until he spotted the marks of a scuffle behind the shelter and conceded that it was likely blood. In the darkness, he had to accept, what appeared brown was red instead.

DEGENERATE
ART

He thought about the angry protests he had witnessed, also from a distance, during his teenage years. Those protests were more violent. Back then, more felt at stake and there was much more blood – darker days when there were actual tanks on the streets and life seemed so much more fragile.

Braun was a nervous and hurried young man then, acutely aware of danger and risk and easily able to avoid anything which threatened him harm. But he felt the precarious nature of life – of their collective lives – deep in his blood all the same.

Hanta Coufal

Early one morning he had come across a homeless man, not curled up in a doorway or flat out on a bench, but asleep right there, square across the pavement, lying with his back to Braun as he approached. It was obvious the man was under-dressed for winter and the young restorer felt he should rouse him, help him off to a warmer location or offer to buy him a hot meal. His plan was not fully-formed, but it was well-intentioned.

The sleeping man responded not to his calls, nor to gentle taps on the shoulder as he crouched down alongside him. Without thinking, Braun tried to revive the man by rocking him back towards him, but his weight proved stubborn and unmovable until suddenly it was not. Because when it did move, the whole body shifted with a dull thud, pivoting back onto the pavement, and the man's head, already bloody and inert, cracked sickeningly against the paving slabs.

Braun did not look, not knowingly, but even many years on he could not unsee... The man's mouth and nose which had turned blue through the twilight hours. His eyes which were clear and open and unmoving, still fixated on whatever had been there the night before. His thick black hair soaked in blood and frosted with ice. And a deep, deep furrow in the man's hairline which revealed two pink folds and, between them, the creamy white of a skull breaking through, gleaming in the sunlight for the first time in its existence. Braun had stood up, trying not to vomit, and ran away with tears in his eyes.

How futile, he thought to himself now, to be a doctor. Because Braun knew that you could restore a human body, you could patch up any gaping wound more than adequately, and it all still be for nothing. He knew that you could repair an injured carcass, re-seal it and make it look perfect and whole again, better than before perhaps, but the soul (if that was what it was) could still not be forced back inside it.

How could any job be so ineffectual? How feeble must that feel?

There was no mystery, he thought, in the materials of human life, all of them were tangible and replicable and mimicable, and yet still the body refused to live on. He was happy, as he always was, that his paintings were so much less fragile than people.