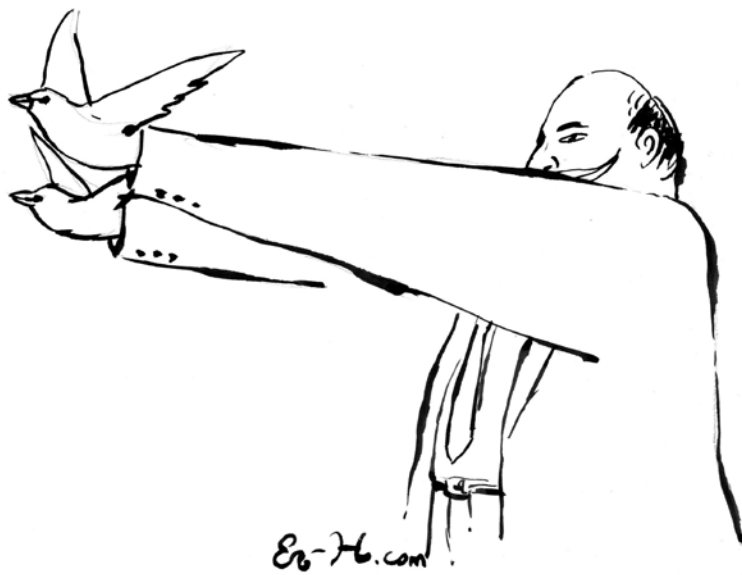


Five Dials



NUMBER 18B

A Spring Postcard

FIVE POEMS *by* MICHAEL ROBBINS

... plus Gaddafi, Galliano, and a very brief mention of Natalie Portman



CONTRIBUTORS

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MICHAEL ROBBINS's first book of poems, *Alien vs. Predator*, will be published by Penguin in spring 2012. His poems and criticism have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, *Harper's*, *London Review of Books*, *Village Voice*, and several other journals. He is currently a PhD candidate in the English Department at the University of Chicago.

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On Spring and Robbins

This is a short postcard of an issue sent to you from upstate New York, where the *Five Dials* operation has been holed up in a cabin of sorts not far from the town of Hudson. The trees are still bare but Canada geese are squawking overhead, shoots are opening, and just off Letter S Road, I stood around for a while yesterday watching piglets wiggle through a farmyard fence. They didn't seem to know what to do with their freedom. They seemed blinded by spring, so they wiggled back into the pen.

We're preparing an issue to launch in Brooklyn at the end of the month, but part of the reason we produce *Five Dials* is to react to the world around us, in this case to the emergence of tulips and

the discovery of a poet named Michael Robbins.

There are no *Five Dials* poetry scouts (yet) who spend long days reading the work of beginners and minor leaguers, so it sometimes takes us a while to discover for ourselves the work of someone new and exciting. Michael wrote a poem called 'Alien vs. Predator', which by title alone was enough for us to get in touch and ask for five poems, new and old, to help us usher in spring.

The artwork is by a new friend, Eric Hanson. Look at the cover and you'll see two birds shooting out of a man's sleeves. That certainly says 'spring' to us. Enjoy the postcard. More soon, as they say.

—CRAIG TAYLOR



Galliano and Gaddafi

Laurence Scott finds the connection

In 2008 I was living in Paris, and one evening I met a young hipster in La Perle café who confessed that, when Yves Saint Laurent died, he was so upset that he excused himself from work by telling his boss that his father had just had a heart attack. People take fashion seriously at La Perle, which gives it its air of impending violence. As a venue it is a sustained case of the Emperor's couture new clothes. Colonizing the corner of Rue Vieille du Temple and Rue de la Perle in the Marais, it consists of two perpendicular strips of pavement, supplied with drinks from a small bar area stripped of all possible comforts, and populated by the fat scarves and full lips of the Parisian hipperati.

I was visiting Paris again last month, when La Perle found itself in the global news. The fear in a place like that of

being slighted by someone cooler than you reached a deranged apotheosis when designer John Galliano allegedly launched a racist and anti-Semitic tirade on an unsuspecting couple. Simultaneously, a video appeared on YouTube of Galliano holding court a few months before, once again on the pavement of La Perle, this time professing his love for Hitler and telling some off-screen interlocutors that 'people like you would be dead'. Galliano was subsequently fired as head designer at Christian Dior, and recent Oscar-winner Natalie Portman, who is also the face of the perfume Miss Dior Chérie, said in a press release, 'I will not be associated with Mr Galliano in any way.'

What Portman doesn't acknowledge is that disassociation was *always* the point of her contract with Dior; she was

employed to be associated with nothing but glamour. In one of the posters for the eau de toilette, Portman folds her naked breasts in her arms and regards a world of consumers over her shoulder with a look that is the only look available to her in such a context: lips three millimetres apart and irises slid to one side so that the eyes become two semi-eclipsed moons. It is the look of *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, but with the added ocular intensity of someone desperate to sell you something. Galliano famously said, 'My role is to seduce,' and his strategy often involves the moony mystery of seducers such as Portman. Her horror, beyond revulsion at the content of his remarks, is born from her waking to the fact that, in agreeing to this lucrative campaign, she has been possessed, via the Dior label, by Galliano.

This possession is tolerable for Portman as long as it is obscured and then forgotten entirely in the glare of her commodified allure. She called his rant 'the opposite of all that is beautiful', but there has long been the sense, heightened in critiques of the market, that aesthetic beauty often cavorts with its moral opposite. In her book *The Radical Aesthetic*, Isobel Armstrong interprets Terry Eagleton's conceptualisation of the aesthetic as being:

... always on hand to become a kind of phantom proxy for whatever manoeuvre hegemony conducts. Indeed it is ideology. And because ideology requires a scene of seduction in which the fierceness of power and the brutality of capital can be disguised, hegemony brings on the dancing girls.

Armstrong goes on to question this gendering of the aesthetic, which goes back at least to Hume's notion of it as logic's little sister. But the point is that here the dancing girl has been caught out mid-seduction by a bursting forth of the ugly realities that her performance is designed to conceal. Thus the Dior scandal can be read as a Goethean cautionary tale about the irrepressibility of that which lies behind any brand's obverse smile. Fierceness and brutality are grotesquely personified in the video images from La Perle, with Galliano, in black coat, black cap and groomed black moustache, arriving like Mephisto in the midst



of Portman's glory. He functions as a pantomime avatar of this notion of capitalist ideology: fascist, indifferent and cruel. He is the obscene genius who refuses to remain off-stage, the disguiser who insists on revealing himself, and whose appearance causes a breach in the reified image of Portman, a fissure through which history and memory comes flowing. As a cracked commodity, she can no longer maintain the coherent illusion of the fetish as self-contained object of sheer desire and aspiration.

In Marxist thought, reification describes the process through which our consciousness replaces actual social relations between people with illusory relations between commodities. Galliano's outburst and Portman's response jolt us from this amnesia by revealing these forgotten relations between individuals within a corporate structure. Strangely, however, the Faustian broken home of Dior is also like the Shakespearean subplot, microcosmic and thematically resonant, to a larger drama. Indeed, we seem to be moving through a period of

cutting ties and keeping your distance. British economist Howard Davies and Canadian singer Nelly Furtado are not normally associated, and yet in the same week both were in the news atoning for their involvement with the Gaddafis. Davies's resignation as director of the LSE was prompted by his acceptance of donations and his role as envoy to Libya, while Furtado admitted to receiving a million dollars from the 'Qaddafi clan' in 2007, for a forty-five-minute private show in an Italian hotel. Furtado, along with fellow musicians Mariah Carey and Usher (dancing girls, of course, are regularly boys), have been offloading the proceeds from these gigs into the absolving hands of charity.

The challenge to overthrow Gaddafi has meant that the history of money, so easily elided by the flow of capital, is being remembered. As with Galliano, we are witnessing an undoing of reification such that the relations between people rather than between commodities are being restored to public consciousness, exposing the inevitable compromises

made in the accumulation of disproportionate amounts of capital. The music world's gestures of atonement certainly reflect the scale and pressures of the Libyan uprising, but the extrapolation of their logic has interesting implications for the entire capitalist model. That is to ask, should we only sell our services to the virtuous, thereby excluding the immoral from any sort of economy of exchange? Would a waiter, if the dubious pasts of his diners were revealed, be obliged to donate his tips? In his reading of Goethe's *Faust*, Marshall Berman describes 'a characteristically modern style of evil: indirect, impersonal, mediated by complex organizations and institutional roles'. The crisis in Libya has produced a rupture in the circuitry of capital that is forcing us to personalize and interrogate institutional systems, to examine the faces on our banknotes for signs of wrongdoing. If the cascade of revolutions in the Middle East brings stable democracy to the region, it may also catalyse in the West a new ethics of commodity-scrutiny, an era of the blood diamond and the tarnished pearl.



Five Poems

by Michael Robbins

I Did This to My Vocabulary

The moon is my alibi. My tenders throw hissy fits.
My scalp's at the foot of the precipice.
My *lume* is *spento*, there's a creep in my cellar.
You can stand under my umbrella, Ella.

Who put pubic hair on my headphones?
Who put the ram in Ramallah?
I'm just sitting here spinning my spinning wheels –
where are the snow tires of tomorrow?

The llama is burning! My heart is an ovary!
Let's chase dawn's tail across state lines,
sing 'Crimson and Clover' over and over,
till wonders are taken for road signs.

My fish, fast and loose, shoot fish in a kettle.
The boys like the girls who like heavy metal.
On Sabbath, on Slayer, on Maiden and Venom,
on Motörhead, Leppard, and Zeppelin, and Mayhem . . .



Mission Creep

If hell, like soylent green, is people,
every little hermit is the one true God.
The Easter Mass begins, *Don't put that
in your mouth, you don't know where it's been.*

I climb. I mean your skull. Its walls.
It's roomy, a man can stretch his legs.
This is the sea, that is a mountain. Now let us say
the prayer for discarded dolls.

A bunch of weird precepts about war –
you call that a religion? I'm fixing
a hole where my mind gets in.

Tonight the locusts ride. The fields are theirs.
Step out into the flensing swarm
if you want to make like a tree and buzz.

Enjoy My Symptom

I spit on any fresh green breast.
It's a misdemeanor. You can build the rest
from airplane parts and Listerine.
I get my news from *Meerkat Manor*.
Every Cylon is a mystery.

I get my news from Al Jazeera
and the American Apparel catalog.
Dick Grayson stole my lady friend.
Her muzzle was like yellow fog,
a post-consumer fiber blend.

I wake to Auto-Tune, and take my waking
out into an orchard, where I traipse.
I killed so many bulls the young males went
insane to meet another elephant.
They raped a rhino. They raped some apes.

Mother Mary ploughs the deep remotely.
She guides the Rover to its red thought.
I can't live with or without me.
I etch the speckled cybernaut.
I rape the earth. It's not my fault.

[Things I may no longer bring on airplanes:]

Things I may no longer bring on airplanes:

1. Box cutters
2. Airplanes

All that is sullied melts into flesh.

Hebrew, the original HTML.

How will I open my box on the airplane??

I saw a bat another bat
& two batlike swifts
that might've been bats.



Bubbling Under

I live by the alien logic we impose on children.
Whoever smelt it dealt it. I'm glazed with K-Y
beside the Goth girls gone haywire.
Talk about cathexis!

You were probably saving them for breakfast.
I stabbed a whale, I freed Tibet. Played
Solo to your Boba Fett.
The rapist they caught's a total sexist.

Very little, perhaps nothing, is known about boats.
It's an ill fish lives in a beehive. The authorities
want you to say it, not spray it. But I'm all,
Whatever floats your goat. Frog got your throat?

And now the Ghanaian poets weep in Guitar Center.
I didn't come on this show to make friends.
Here, hold my drink a sec, I'll teach you
how to know the anteater from the ants.

