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Jesse Ball

Author of Samedi the Deafness

The Curfew

Jesse Ball (1978–) is a poet and novelist. His novels include *The Way Through Doors* (2006) and *Samedi the Deafness* (2007), which was a finalist for the Believer Book Award. He has published books of poetry and prose: *The Village on Horseback* (2010), *Vera & Linus* (2006) and *March Book* (2004). A book of his drawings, *Og svo kom nottin*, appeared in Iceland in 2006. He won the *Paris Review's* Plimpton Prize in 2008 for *The Early Deaths of Lubec Brennan, Harp & Carr*. His poetry has appeared in the Best American Poetry series. He is an assistant professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and teaches classes on lyricism, lucid dreaming, and general practice.

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The Way Through Doors

Samedi the Deafness

THE CURFEW

Jesse Ball

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We are born in this cemetery, but must not despair.

—Piet Soron, 1847

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There was a great deal of shouting and then a shot. The window was wide open, for the weather was often quite fine and delicate during late summers in the city of C. Yes, the window was wide open and so the noise of the shot was loud, almost as though it had been fired in the room itself, as though one of the two people in the room had decided to shoot a gun into the body of the other.

This was not the case, however. And because no one in the room itself had been shot, the man, William Drysdale, twenty-nine, once-violinist, at present, epitaphorist, and his daughter Molly, eight, schoolchild, slept on.

Those were their methods of employment. Daily, Drysdale went about to appointments which Molly went to school and was told repeatedly to repeat things. She could not, and didn't.

In the street beyond the window, it was very shady and pleasant. An old woman was bleeding, hunched over a bench. Two men were standing fifty feet away, one holding a gun. Some ten feet from the bench, a man was lying underneath the wheels of a truck, which seemed to have injured him, perhaps irreparably. The driver was kneeling and saying something. He stood up and waved to the two men. The one with the pistol was putting it away. Another, smaller truck arrived for the bodies. The man who had had the pistol, but no longer showed it—he was directing people to go away. People were going away.

One minute after the gunshot, the street was empty. This was often the case. I shall introduce this city to you as a city of empty streets—empty only when something occurred momentarily empty and soon full again, but empty nonetheless.

I shall introduce this city and its occupants as a series of objects whose relationship cannot be told with any certainty. Though violence may connect them, though pity, compassion, hope may marry one thing to another, still all that is in process cannot be judged, and that which has passed has gone beyond judgment, which leaves us again, with lives and belonging places, shuttling here and there, hapless, benighted, discordant.

It was a school day and so, after a while, the two in the room began to stir. Molly woke first and dressed herself. She was an able child, although mute.

—We will get something on the way, said William.

Molly nodded to herself. She stood by her folding pallet in the corner of the room and held up before her the two dresses that were hers. One was blue and the other yellow. Which to wear?

And then they were in line at the bakery, and she had on the yellow, which matched her somewhat torn yellow dancing slippers, although she did not dance. She did not have a bag with books because it was not that sort of school.

—Two of those, said William. And one of those.

—Do you want one now? he asked.

Molly signed, *Not yet.

Well, what sort of school was it, then? It was one of the schools where you sat in rows on benches and the teachers told you what to think. You recited things and wrote things repeatedly. You read from books that were held on little chains to the tables. Examinations were given, and often sticks were employed to instill discipline. There was a little area of dirt where they could play at lunchtime. Play was encouraged, as was snitching.

*Here we are, said Molly.

—Goodbye! said William, and caught her up for a moment.

She ran inside the building. Other children pushed past him as he stood there watching after her.

—Drysdale, did you hear?

A coarse man of advancing years was there with wife. One might confuse either for a banker.

—Latreau's dead. Shot this morning.

—The old woman? For what?

—Pushed someone in front of a bus.

—I heard it was a truck, said the wife. She thought the man was a cop, so she pushed him in front of a truck. But they caught her before she could get away.

—I'm sorry to hear that, said William absently. I truly am.

His lips hardly moved.

William walked away without looking at either of them. He hadn't looked at them once the whole time. If one had been watching, one might even have thought that the couple had just been speaking to each other. William was that cautious.



The town was called a town, but it was a city. This is a convention of the very largest cities. It had districts: old districts, new districts, poor districts, trading districts, guard districts. There had been a jail once, but now there was no need for a jail. The system was much too efficient for that. Punishments were either greater or they did not occur at all. An ordinary nation, full of ordinary citizens, their concerns, difficulties, cruelties, injustices, had gone to sleep one night and woken the next morning to find in the place of the old government an invisible state, with its own concerns, difficulties, cruelties, injustices. Everything was strictly controlled and maintained, so much so that it was possible, within certain bounds, to pretend that nothing had changed at all.

Who had overthrown it? Why? Such things weren't clear at all, just as it wasn't entirely clear that anything had been overthrown. It was as if a curtain had been drawn and one could see only to that curtain but not beyond. One remembered that the world had been different, and not so long ago. But how? This was the question that nagged at those who could not avoid asking such questions.



The nothing that had changed at all was really beyond bearing. Houses and buildings were full of desperate people who deeply misunderstood their desperation. This was due to artificial explanation on the part of the government. It is impossible to tell, many said out of the corners of their mouths, if the ministry is thinking well of us—if they are acting on our behalf. Yet still there were acorns falling from trees, fish breaking the surfaces of ponds, etc. In a long life, said many an old man, this is but one more thing. Yet there were others who were young and knew nothing about the helplessness of life's condition. Did they glow with light? They did, but of course, it could not be seen. And all the while, the grinding of bone-like machinery, and the light step of tightrope walkers out beyond the windows.

But recently, only recently, those who could not bear to be governed in this way had taken steps. It was impossible to say exactly what had altered, but clashes between the two sides were now common, and the people of the city had grown used to the finding of bodies without explanation.

Such explanations, of course, may only be offered later, when one side has won.



William headed to his first appointment. He pictured himself as he would be seen, a man in a long tweed coat, with a stick under his arm, with a bowler hat and a pair of sturdy black shoes. Then, he inserted himself into that image, as an actor would.

In such made and imagined clothing, he arrived.

—Mrs. Monroe is in the garden.

A servant led him down a tiled passage. The tiles had pastoral scenes: cows, gypsies, birds of different sorts, wattle buildings, haystacks. No two of them were the same. This had a disquieting effect. You would obviously never have time to sit and look at all of them, even were it possible, and so it gave an elusive impression. William wouldn't like to be forced to give an opinion about it.

The passage opened onto a shady porch that overlooked a stand of trees and a lawn. The whole thing was walled in. An elderly woman with straight gray hair and a mauve housecoat was seated on a wicker divan.

—You are the mason?

—No, I work for him. I am helpful in finding the best way of putting things, a way that everyone can be happy with. The epitaph, you understand.

—It isn't particularly important who is happy, other than myself. I'm the one buying the gravestone. I'm the one who knows the wishes of my husband, who'll lie underneath it.

The woman coughed violently, covering her mouth with a pillow from the divan.

William began patiently:

—There is the cemetery to be thought of: they don't permit just anything. And, of course, the state has been known to remove memorials of one sort or another. We would not want for such a thing to happen.

—I see.

William sat in a chair that the servant provided. He took a small leather notebook out of his pocket, and a pencil. While the woman was watching him, he brought out a knife with a very small blade and sharpened the pencil. Then he opened the notebook to a new page, wrote on it:

MONROE +

—Well, he said, what do you think, to begin with?

—Paul Sargent Monroe, said the woman. Died before his time.

—That's it?

—That's it.

—He was quite old, however, that's true, no?

The woman gave him a very serious look.

—Ninety-two.

—Well, are you sure you want it to say, Died before his time, on the gravestone? I don't mean to say that we can't do that, because, of course, we can, if you like. It just seems a bit well, just not exactly right.

—I see what you mean, said the woman.

They thought for a minute. Finally, she broke the silence.

—Well, we could change the date.

—The date?

—Have it say: Paul Sargent Monroe. Died before his time. And change the birth date to twenty-five years ago.

William shuffled his feet.

—I suppose that's possible, but ...

—You see, said the woman, when people are in a cemetery, and they see the grave of a young man, they stop and feel sadness. If someone lived for ninety-two years, the throne passes on by. They don't stop for even a moment. I want to be sure of, well ...

—I see what you mean.

A few more minutes passed. William looked occasionally down at his notebook. He had written there:

MONROE +

and then a line, and then:

PAUL SARGENT MONROE

He took a deep breath.

—Well, he said. If you're going to do it that way, maybe it's better to have him die as a child. It could be that he was six when he died, and the inscription could read, Paul Sarge Monroe, Friend of cats. It would evoke his personality a bit, and certainly people would pause there.

A sort of ragged quiet was broken by another fit of coughing.

Happy tears were in the woman's eyes.

—I see why they send you, she said. You're right, just exactly right. That's just what we'll do. After all, it doesn't matter what the truth of it was, does it? It's just to have people stop, and be quiet for a moment. Maybe it's late in the afternoon and they're on their way somewhere to a restaurant. They stopped at the cemetery briefly, and then they pass his grave, and, oh, now they'll stop a moment. Now they will.

She took his hand in both of hers.

—I do wish you could have met Paul. You would have liked him, and he would have liked you.

—I believe it, said William. I feel sure of that.

He got to his feet, closed his notebook, put it in his pocket. The pencil he snapped in half and put in the other pocket. He used each pencil exactly once, for one epitaph. He brought as many pencils as there were appointments, and he sharpened each one as he began.

—Goodbye, he said. We will send you a proof of what the stone will look like, and you can initial it.

—Thank you so much. Goodbye.

He stood and headed for the tile passage.

She called after him:

—And do you know what? He *was* a friend of cats. He really was. He really was.

He looked back at the woman, but she was now occupied with something in her lap, a box of some sort and its contents. She did not look up.

Next he came to a gate. A man he knew, Oscar, was there. He stood next to Oscar for a minute.

A crowd of schoolchildren went through Oscar's gate, shepherded by a matron in a severe smock.

Oscar laughed.

—When I was a kid, you know, I had a tremendous fear of horses. I felt very uncomfortable about their shape, and I was horrified that I was completely alone in this. Once, I read about a war a long time ago where thousands and thousands of horses were killed by machine-gun fire. I felt very comfortable about that. There was a black and white photograph in the book of a field of dead men and dead horses. The perspective of the book was that the horses were not to be blamed.

—But you felt differently.

—I felt differently.

An old man drove up in a car with a rattling engine. His car was licensed to a different city. It was stuffed with belongings. He looked very tired, and slowed down very little. He came very near to running someone over as his car emerged on the other side.

The man who had been nearly run over had fallen. He got to his feet and came through the gate.

—That man has something in his pocket that looks like a gun but is probably a piece of fruit. If he should be shot for a piece of fruit it would be very unfortunate.

—How do you think they know, the secret police, who else is or is not secret police? For instance, this man with the fruit—if it was a gun, how would they know to shoot or not shoot him?

—But it is a piece of fruit.

—And if he was shot for it?

—It is a good idea to eat fruit when you buy it and not carry it around, my friend. Anyway—it is far nicer to stand nearby a fruit stand and eat the fruit than to carry it home and put it on a counter.

—I disagree.

—With this, William Drysdale, you cannot disagree. It is the way of things. I have never seen you carrying fruit in your pocket.

—Because I am afraid of being shot.

—Well, we will all be shot for something. I have a gold nose that I bought once, do you know that? This was many years ago. Apparently people used to lose their noses from syphilis and then they would sometimes have gold noses.

—This is a very clumsy way of changing the subject, Oscar. There is not even a single gold nose in sight to act as a segue.

—Well, I thought I saw one. A man is coming now with a very shiny nose. He should be careful, with such a shiny nose. It could mean trouble for him.



On then to the next appointment. This was a row house where houses were all slate-roofed. Every window in the street had bars across it. At that moment the sky was tremendous blue. For the first time in a long while, William looked down and saw his hands. If you have had this experience, you'll know just what I mean.

He knocked on the door.

After a minute, he could hear footsteps. The door opened. A man and woman were standing there. They appeared to be husband and wife.

—I'm from the mason.

—Yes, we've been expecting you. Won't you come in?

They brought him through the dark low-slung house to the back, where a long narrow window with many clear square panes afforded some measure of light. It was a room of three chairs.

—This is where we thought we'd talk, said the woman.

—We thought it would be all right in here, added the man.

—That's fine, said William.

He sat in one of the chairs and took his notebook out. This he set on one knee. From his pocket he took an unsharpened pencil.

Then, out with the knife, and he began his sharpening.

He looked at the couple.

—The stone is for your daughter, I believe?

—Yes.

—She was, nine years old?

—Just nine.

—I'm sorry to hear it.

The couple looked then the one at the other.

William continued,

—You see, I have a daughter who is nine.

The woman flinched as if hit.

—Be careful with her, she said. Our Lisa seemed indestructible, fearless, invincible. But all takes, all it takes is ...

Her voice was drowned out by her own crying. Her husband put his arms around her.

—It was a roof slate that did it. Right here in the street. The wind blew it. She had gone out to play and an hour passed, two hours, three. We just thought she was with a friend, or, well, I don't know what we thought. Anyway, Joan went out front to see if Lisa was coming and ...

The room was empty except for the three chairs. There weren't any pictures, there wasn't a table, just bare walls and this long narrow window of exactly square panes. Each of the panes was square, William observed for the third time. He looked at them in turn, yes, all square leaded glass.

The man was trying to continue, but it took him a little while.

—You see, she was just there, right in front of the house, on the ground. The rest of her was fine, it was her head that, well, it had sailed down, the slate, and, the wind must have really sent it. I guess it didn't make any noise as it came.

—I'm sorry, said William. It is a terrible thing.

—We want it to mean something, said the woman. We thought about it, and this is a place where it can be made to mean something, don't you think?

—I'm sure of it.

—We thought it would begin with the name, that's how they go, and then,

—So ... Lisa Epstein. Did you want the name in capital letters?

—Yes, clear large lettering.

The man broke in,

—Perhaps, perhaps, She was walking in the street by our house, and it was almost evening.

—We thought of it, you know, several different ways. What do you think?

They looked at him then, very intently.

—I think, perhaps, well, let's look at it. How old, exactly?

—Nine years, twenty-four days.

He leaned over his little book.

Lisa Epstein.

She was walking in the street by our house,
and it was almost evening.

He took a deep breath and leaned back in the chair. He closed his eyes, opened them, looked at it again. He looked up and around the room, avoiding the eyes of the couple. Wherever he tried to look, his eyes were drawn to this narrow ledge of light, this eighteen-paned window. It was the room's nature, and the three chairs were the expression of that nature. That wasn't right, though, not exactly. There weren't three chairs. There were two chairs, and then one that wouldn't be used. He wondered if he was sitting in the chair that the girl used to sit in. It could even be that the room had changed completely, that the girl had never entered the room under these conditions.

—Do you sit here often?

—We sit here in the evening.

He looked again at his book. Lisa Epstein. Lisa Epstein.

He went to a new page.

LISA EPSTEIN
9 years, 24 days.

In the street by our house, it was almost evening.

He showed it to them.



A thing that develops in a child—that which must occur particularly, precisely, if great success is to be had in some field—is not the prefiguring of that excellence, no! It is not the ability to produce great things of a lesser sort leading upwards like a ladder. It is rather a vague listlessness that infects other matters, leaving the single matter clear.

But then, of course, there is the matter of RIDDLES which must be learned by hand or with great violence of tutelage. Why, I shouldn't mind being beaten with a stick if it meant I could solve all riddles without exception. Yes, William had been whipped until he had the whole Exeter book by heart. No wonder then, the rise of this second profession, epitaphorist.

There is a theory that the sun is made up of thousands of suns arranged in a war each against the others. It is a discredited theory, but it has never been disproven.



He took an oblique route to the next place, and passed through several alleys, which were themselves connected to other alleys. Here, the backs of things could be seen, unrepaired, unconstructed, unrepentant. Still, one was not unwatched. Faces could be seen beneath ruined stairwells and from the mouths of makeshift tents.

Down the first side-alley he saw a man running, and several men in pursuit. The man who was running ran in an odd way, the way one runs only if one's hands are tied. Of those who chased him, one had a catch pole with a wire on the end. It ducked towards the first man's head again and again, but he kept ahead and shot around a corner. The others raced on relentlessly, and all were gone from sight.

How could the government's people know one another? The simple answer, and the truth of it, as far as William could tell, is they did not. Government men were often caught by other government men and taken into the huge death cell rumored to be in the city center (no one had ever seen it). Once captured, the truth or falsehood of their claims could be decided. There was a small difficulty that permitted them to go at large without uniforms, operating with impunity.

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