

She Caught His Arm - Philip Rösler Baker

She was shooting on location.
A chemical plant would be ideal, the magazine
had said - a maze of piping, valves and meters,
complex relations between men and machines.
A world not normally seen by readers. His arm
intervened. Reached without warning into the scene
that her eye had framed for a different subject.
He was holding a cold matt alloy pole,
a green glow splashed from its sensor dial
across the warm skin of his outstretched arm,
an arm with the feel of an open smile.
In a flash she saw it, transmuted to silver,
the image emerging and fixing on paper.
Walked over to talk to him - quickly,
before the idea could escape her.

It was a practical hand that gripped the tube
in the darker cube made by fingers and thumb.
A hand that relied on an eye for precision,
a hand that avoided hasty decisions.
An arm, accustomed to grease and grit,
accustomed to aiming spinning drill bits,
aware unsecured machines could lay traps
- the vicious snap of steel on skin.

She saw all this, when she caught his arm
in the frame, walked over and asked to take it
in close-up, saw the tease in his eyes,
when he asked - *What for? - What's the harm?*
she replied. - *Only my arm?* he said,
- *Why not the rest of me?* She shook her head,
smiled and readied the camera.

He rolled his sleeve, businesslike, halfway up.
Slid the cover silently back on the pole,
to show wires, transistors - the whole
nervous system laid bare to the light.
She gasped in surprise, checked her depth of field
and noticed the full dark veins, revealed
beneath the paler skin under his forearm.
Pressing too close, she thought, to the surface,
like conduits carelessly laid in a hurry.

A momentary worry crossed her mind
- afraid for him, for his vulnerability.
Then, amused at herself, she grinned wryly
and returned her eye to the viewfinder.

His hand lay gently on the curve of her thigh.
The half-light in his bedroom could change a hand,
make it look like an oyster, beached high and dry,
its inmate sleeping, waiting for the deepening
lap of the welcome returning tide.

He didn't own a camera - never
taken a picture in his life, but shutter speed
and focal length didn't need very much explanation
- he was used to careful calibration, to equilibrium
equations, to getting a balance right.

And mood was something he understood
- how excessive colour saturation could make
a thing natural as a carnation look gross, overblown
- except in the hair of a ghostly dancer,
where she'd taken a chance with monochrome,
and superimposed the scent of flamenco.

Composition, he found more difficult.
She tried to explain - where you place a subject
in the frame can change the shot's whole meaning.
But in life, he objected, what you see has no frame,
yet meanings still come and go. They played
a game. Look at me, she said, then look away
and close your eyes. Hold the image in your mind.
Your memory of what you saw is framed
by your peripheral vision and the clarity of the *me*
you see, depends on where you placed me.
Near the border, I'm less sharply defined
- I become less important.

It was true, that while they were together,
images composed themselves, fell apart
and reassembled, trembled, fell apart again.
She felt less need to fix the moment.

But the magazine sent her far
to track down subjects - Kandahar,
a boy's lined face, aged by hunger. Bogotá,
drugs changing hands. Bombed-out homes

in Yemen. She felt her days become over-exposed,
thin as the skin of a grated lemon.
Increasingly, she took shots in wide angle,
trying to untangle herself from her subjects,
only to find distortions, issues arising
on the periphery. Their phone-calls became
somehow cautious, constrained,
each not wanting to wrong-foot the other.
He was slipping out of focus. She
stayed away for longer.

Flicking this evening through a book of her work
- an early collection, now out of print - her fingers
stop. A hint of sadness drains the sharpness
from her eyes. That tube, his rolled up sleeve.
Remembers how she caught his arm,
as he got up slowly, ready to leave. Then let go
without a word.