

Solzhenitsyn in Vermont

for Jeremy Howe

Unfettered potentate in another's kingdom,
Your eyes parse sharpened conifer oceans
Searching for parentheses. In each undulation
Of this landscape, a letter, a word: a letter
From the past, importing more than culture,
Each word an insect, teeming frantic
Primal commotion. This country half formed,
Born before its time, incubating under axe,
Spade and saw – yours a world lost, of double crosses,
Europe's secret language, tea with lemon and sugar
And civility.

 In some truck stop diner, a *starak*
Enters, erect his broad-shouldered frame, beard
A tableau of too many winters spent
Where warmth is a reward, comfort a chimera.
His hands clutch the waxed cup (room
For cream? A shaken head) while on TV
A Black Hawk spirals downwards in the desert,
That face deadpans to camera *I did not
Have sexual relations with that woman*
And ten centuries of culture crumble into green
Facsimiles of Presidential achievement –
The talking dead. *For man has forgotten God*
(your words): why your homeland's gyroscope
Spun out of control in nineteen-seventeen
And ours now wobbles perilously. Already pear-shaped
(As the English have it), we oscillate
Between the veiled and all-too naked,
From cesspit to minaret and every stage
Amongst these. Who am I to argue? No-one
Could have foreseen this tragedy of permission,
That *God is dead: do what thou wilt*
Might end in gnashing, wailing and did they
Do it for the cameras on live TV? Last
Sentinel of the old ways, testifying for the *disparus*
Or *disparaissants*, hierophant
Of orthodoxy's heterogeneity: rest now,
Your prophecy fulfilled.

 Cobwebs collude

Across the thirty-volume *Collected Works*;
A red wheel spins somewhere still in space
And your archipelago's wires work their way

Around the world, every typed utterance
A brick in Facebook's gulag. I turn to my shelved
One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, for
We are all Ivan, all in the *Cancer Ward*,
We are that red wheel, forever spinning,
Going nowhere unless we select
Some path of most resistance destined
To take us to safety. This truth
You swallowed, hirsute and silent
Among Vermont's pines and splintered ice: home,
This landscape *vide* you longed to leave
To find your own, void in every sense,
Not so much changed as deflated, like this sphere
That promises much, but seems tiny compared
To the heavy tech you fought against
And foresaw would be our dissolution.
Sleep, old artificer, stand by us as we slide
Into dark-lit knowing, everything
Available at and for all time, not the stuff
Of fresh-spined books thick with dust, or
An old man alone in a truck-stop diner
Half a world away from his people's soul.