

## Waiting for Goya

*(Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin)*

And so, as you see, quite a journey, and now here I am, doodling postcards and zapping text in the crush of the blockbuster queue snaking slowly over that antique bridge and past those colonnades, past the iron Kaiser riding high on his horse, to arrive at the neo-Roman temple, those massive steps, with still time – we hope – to see the show before the doors are closed. *What a circus! What ever for?* I hear you, mate, even from this distance. And yes, the books, catalogues, probably tell me all I need to know; and yet, call me romantic if you like, (you will! you will!), I'm still curious to find out what – if anything – the originals might have to say. Yes, I know, a fine copy often does the job (and your latest on the simulacra just blew me right away), with no need for the fetish of the great artist's mark. And, what today could be gained from viewing an old etching – itself a print? Though just writing this flares a Goya work long-branded in my brain: those men, mutilated, and that body hacked to bits, stuck on branches of the dead tree. *So why look at the original? To admire the artistry? Obscene!* Yes, point taken. And yet. And yet the paintings ... and the rest ... it's not only me (look at the queue!) who thinks they might find something vital in the presence of the thing itself. More than pure aesthetics. *(Or is it?)* All I know is – for me this looking comes close to word of mouth, the personal voice, direct. In the age of copies, this still touches, speaks: here is this piece of paper bearing the human

imprint, its moving signs, its imperfections.  
*Old ground*, you say, and yes, mate, I'll now pause  
to shuffle with the queue past this classic building  
to our next stop. We're in a battleground here,  
of course. The bullet holes are real. Odd to stand  
in a quiet line for art where men have screamed  
and died. Years of rain have washed the blood  
away but, I ask you, what form of art could touch  
as the pocks on these stone walls? (And if I frame  
the silent hollows and call it art – what loss?)  
Small pits with no plaques, they hold more power  
for the lack of naming and yet – without words –  
seem overlooked. In this busy queue from every  
elsewhere, most pass by unknowing, though we  
all admire the sensational artistry of that statue –  
the giant commander, his beautiful war horse.  
*It was ever thus. Fool. What the hell do you expect?*  
OK. You're right. And I'm not against heroics,  
large or small; nor against the just war. But  
today I'm thinking simply – why not some  
thanks – why not plant statues thick as traffic  
lights on all corners, witness to those who tried  
to bring light into the world – not through war  
but thought: altruists, thinkers, doers who go  
beyond the self. *You're off your head! It'll never fly.*  
Maybe. But since I'm here, I'll start with those  
near to Goya. For, as they tell it, until mid-life  
Goya was more or less court lackey. Interior  
decorator with ambition. Tapestries to please.  
Dazzling portraits for the rich and famous.  
Yet his private work moved on. Fired by new  
ideas. Ill health. War. And men, like Jovellanos,  
whose thoughtful painted face looks out – alive –  
to us: reformer, writer, doer. (The Inquisition  
banned his book on economics.) Man of his time,  
he's history now. Will words like his ever turn up  
in art – or are their unlovely syllables too heavy,  
too Latinate for our tastes? CRIMINAL LAW REFORM?  
INSTITUTE OF AGRICULTURE? TECHNICAL EDUCATION?  
POLITICAL ECONOMICS? *Stop! It's sinking! Keep to*

*the poetic diction!* Not yet. MINSITER OF GRACE AND JUSTICE. Poet too. Prison. Exile. What do we, in our comfort, know of that? Easy to take potshots from the safe remove. So, friend, I will insist on this: our great legacy – reason, (*crazy! against the tide!*) joined with compassion, ethics. Yes, today I'm leaving the carping pomo to their pottage. (The DO NOWT species, I mean, of course.) I'm moving on. Taking a small step along with this marvel of civilised patience, the queue, toward the first age of, shall we say, enlightenment, (*goodbye career and publication!*). Or at least a higher aim and a bit more common sense. Yes, I know, tracking truth through reason is hard work along muddy trails – and dangerous in a mad age of faith and war. Jovellanos knew. Goya too. And in our time, the brave souls you speak of – Shaima Raazi, Safia Amajan, Zakia Zaki, Shakiba Sanga Omaaj, public servants, journalists, educators, gunned down by the zealots for being women. I keep their names close by. Humanity slaughtered by those raging forces that forever fight to destroy all questions. It sits on my desk, a copy of that famous etching, *the sleep of reason brings forth monsters*, the writer slumped asleep, darkness exploding its creatures across the page.