

The Tactical Importance of Beauty

By Michael Fine

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When that asshole circled low over our place in Pokrov, we figured the pilot had gotten lost, that he was just looking for a landmark and would soon be on his way. No one comes to our place. Penal Colony No 2. A number. Not even a name. Everyone but the state prosecutors and judges have forgotten we exist, and even they forget about us for months and years at a time. Want to forget about us, most likely. Out of sight, out of mind, as they say. Forget is too kind a word. They want us gone and have erased us, made us disappear from their memories.

Our mothers and women, our girlfriends and wives, sometimes they remember, write or try to phone or bring our children to see us when they can, but it is a long trip. A train and two buses. Only a few of us have mothers who come. Easier by car, but many of our mothers don't drive. Many mothers and girlfriends don't have a car and don't drive either – that was what we did for them. The girlfriends won't ask their new boyfriends to drive them here. Many of us have women who have moved on. Who can blame them? The woman have to eat. Etcetera. We all have needs. Etcetera. Some of the women are like dogs. We are all they know. They would follow us anywhere. Some, the crazy ones, say we make them burn inside when we are with them. Those are ones we beat or kill to get them to leave us alone. But we are useless to all of them now, useless in every way that matters.

Leonid was laying on his bunk, working on a new tattoo on his fingers. He already has the good ink, the eyes on his chest. Ivan did the eyes for him. Ivan is better than most. He is a forger. He can draw. The eyes on Leonid's chest were like Mona Lisa's eyes, like Modigliani's eyes, the eyes that follow you everywhere, the eyes you can never forget.

Yes, I am an art thief. How else would I know Modigliani and so forth? And I killed a woman. What of it?

But I know beauty when I see it. The eyes on Leonid's chest are knowing eyes, the kind that forgive and forget, even in a place like this, eyes that simmer with desire, even knowing what they know.

The eyes are not real, of course. They are just tattoos on another man's chest. Forgiveness and forgetting and simmering desire, none of that is real either, not here or anywhere. People make up stories. Everything is bullshit, everything other than what you have in your hands at the moment and how much you are willing to die to keep it.

Say what you want about our lives here. It is many things and is not many things but there is a certain kind of quiet. Not silence. Quiet. The sounds you hear are the sounds of men, talking, shouting at one another, of the guards shouting commands, shouting as if we are deaf. The gates clang shut. Their motors turn on and off, a crunching hum, the noise a dryer in a laundry makes, the sound of truck tires on gravel. Trucks blubber and fart as they come through the gate, delivering supplies or taking away what the men who are willing make: we, at No 2, make uniforms for cops, guards and soldiers. Socks. Gloves. Slippers. Slave labor, some call it, but it isn't that. Twelve to sixteen hours a day, for those who are the state's patsies, those who are willing. Six days a week. But not slave labor at all. Just something to do to occupy the hours for the weak ones, the ones that are afraid of the rest of us. And rightly so. Sometimes the grey buses come from the railhead, bringing new recruits. They shout as they come into the yard, happy to be off the buses. Happy for the last time.

The noise of the helicopter was deafening. An earthquake! As loud as a train engine! Whop whop whop whop WHOP. A man couldn't think.

That asshole wasn't looking to find his way back to Moscow. His pilot brought the helicopter down right in the yard.

The wind whipped up a dust-cloud in the yard. You couldn't breathe. The dust got in our eyes and lungs. We ran for cover, coughing our brains out as the damn thing landed, its engine whining as it shut down, the rotors flapping as they came too slowly to a stop.

We all rushed out of our barracks to see, all piled into the yard like no one could stop us. It never occurred to one of us that they wanted us to go.

He was a bald man who acted like he owned us. He came out of the helicopter bent double, although the rotor was barely turning by then. I thought he was a politician, coming to give a speech about Holy Mother Russia again. But no. He was a man. He talked like we talk. No BS. He had been in the street. You could tell from his talk. He had been inside. He knew our words. He had walked our walk. He was fierce, like we are. And he knew our truth – that you must give more than you get, that you must always be ready to fight and to die, that the only thing that's yours is what you are willing to die for. That you will never be alone. So you must always stay ready to fight and to die. That life and death are illusions. Because only weakness matters. That you don't own anything, but only hold it until someone stronger comes and takes it away. Not even your life. Not even your own mind. Not if someone wants what you have. Not if someone thinks he can beat you. Not if you ever show weakness, or worse, are in fact weak.

We came out of our workplaces and our barracks and gathered in the yard, expecting a speech. But the asshole began yelling at us right from the start. That was good. He talked to us in our words. Nothing fancy. Nothing finessed. We aren't political prisoners, most of us. We are petty criminals, sneak thieves, car thieves, drug dealers, rapists, and murderers. We don't take anything for granted, are easily bored, and never take no for an answer. We know little but we can smell bullshit a hundred miles away, because we are all bullshitters, each and every one of us. We bullshit ourselves. If we didn't do that, we wouldn't be here, the buried alive, the discarded citizens of Penal Colony No. 2.

He wasn't bullshitting. Some of it was crap, of course. Some of it, well, most of us would never live to see it anyway, so who cared? Right away he put on the table the one thing any of us cared about, and that was freedom, that was busting out of this joint. We are dead and buried, buried in Penal Colony No. 2. Out of sight, out of mind. Except for the crazy ones, and we are out of their sight and out of their minds even when we are with them.

You cost the Russian people too much to feed and house, he said. You are a millstone on the neck of the Russian state. The reds work and make things we use – uniforms, gloves and slippers, work in our lumber mills and foundries. But not you blacks. You want it your way. To sit and rot, just so no one tells you what to do. So you can tell yourselves that you are something, which you are not. You are stuck here in this pit and everyone has forgotten you. Nothing more. But probably less.

You are just cowards and cheats; men of whom mothers are ashamed. But I am a man. I was where you are, once. I fought my way out and fought my way to the top. You there, I am going to do for you what you were unable to do for yourself, but only if you will be a man, only if you stand up like me.

It is simple, he said. You leave here and go south to the Donbas. Special military operation. You carry a gun. And shoot the Nazi bastards who will shoot at you. You might die. You will probably die. Your death doesn't matter. Now, as you are, you are only a mouth to feed, a body whose shit and piss must be cleaned up. On the battlefield you can be a man, a man who can survive by killing before he is killed, or not. No one cares either way. But if you beat the odds, if you kill those Nazis and survive six months, then I will give you your freedom. I and no one else. Vladimir Putin himself will pardon you. If and when I tell him to. And you walk away a free man. Six months. And then freedom. Otherwise you spend the rest of your best years living in this pit, in this dungeon, in this hellhole, in this latrine, not even a sewer rat. Not even a cockroach. The rats and the roaches, they come and go as they please.

The men listened because this man at least knew how to talk, but we eyed him with suspicion none the less.

Why should we believe you? one shouted. Why should we believe anything you say?

Believe or don't believe. I don't care, the bald man said. I flew here in a helicopter. You, miserable sewer rats, you cockroaches, you slugs, you worms who grovel in the dirt and eat shit, go hide in your barracks, where the showers don't even work. Hide from the world. You think you are convicts? Who have nothing to lose? Conniving evildoers of whom the world is afraid? You got caught! Losers! You are nothing but animals in a zoo, a zoo no one comes to visit because no one cares to see you as you are. What kind of men are you? Alive or dead? Something or nothing? Stay where you are if you want. Or chose freedom. Chose to live, even if only for a little while. Or die every day in this sewer until your miserable lives seep away like the piss of an old man who has lost control of his bladder, like wastewater going down the drain.

We lined up for him. The choice was clear. It is still better to live on your feet than die on your knees. Or live on your knees. There was no escaping the men we are. He understood what we denied: That there is a hierarchy among men. Strength matters. The winner takes all. History is written by the strong. Weak men think they can band together. But weak men spend their time thinking while strong men act. Weak men don't follow or lead. They talk. We follow the strong.

Everything else is an illusion.

They came at us in waves. Human waves. Flesh to absorb our bullets. Bodies to be mowed down as we mow the grass. Lilith, there to suck out and waste our sperm. Targets set on bales of straw. Sponges to suck up our ammunition. Dishtowels to wipe away the hot lead we spilled all over them. All we could throw at them.

They kept coming. These weren't men with lives and families. They were convicts, not really men, human offal, the waste of society, and we were there to be their executioners, to save the Russian state the bother of killing them. Expendable, like the dirty water in a pail left over

from washing a floor. They were only there to make sure our ammunition would run out, so those behind them could follow when we ran out and overrun us. Or so their masters thought.

You steel yourself to war, to killing a man at hundred yards, a man you've never met and know only how he looks in the scope of your gun. We pick them off one at a time. They try to do the same to us. You keep down so you don't get shot. The sounds of war are overwhelming, the constant fizz of bullets and the plunk or pop as the bullets slam into a wall above you or penetrate the earth or a tree nearby; the more furious sizzle of an artillery shell before it lands and then the boom and hot flame, the heat of its explosion, the shower of dirt and concrete, of metal and glass and blood and the flash when it lands. The whop of bombs falling far away and then closer and closer to you, the whizz and scream of missile fire coming in, the whizz, scream, boom, and splatter of that missile as it strikes the ground of that house nearby, demolishing it, leaving fire and dense smoke in its wake, the smell of cordite, like burnt almonds followed by the stink of burning wood and burning plastic, burning tar and burning flesh, all mixed together. Barbeque. Mixed grill.

But none of that prepares you for mowing down waves of men, who come at you and die, in mounds, one on top of the other, needlessly. Human sacrifices, lives just thrown away, for no purpose, with no meaning, like coffee grounds dropped on the floor, like kitchen garbage emptied out once a week.

That one somehow survived. He moved only after lying still for a long time, lying there in the pile of ten or twenty bodies, until the Russians shifted their strategy a bit, and sent another little wave of bodies from the north, to our left, for us to mow down the way we had mowed down the last bunch. Or so they thought. But we are always ready. We were ready for them and machine gunned them before they machine gunned us. So simple. Sitting ducks. Like shooting fish in a barrel. Like shooting cows standing in a field. Like flicking over dominos someone stood up in a line. Mowing the grass.

They yell at the top of their voices as they charge, trying to sound fierce, trying to be frightening.. But no human voice is fierce compared to the scream of a missile, compared to the whistle and then boom of falling mortar shells.

We have learned to be strong. So we mow down. It isn't dangerous. It isn't difficult. It's loud, the chatter of our guns which make our ears ring. The kick of the guns make our shoulders ache after a time. But it isn't even a little hard. No harder than rowing a boat or walking uphill. Easier, because you get to stand still. We feel somehow diminished by mowing them down, by killing each and every one, even though we know it must be done.

Better to kill a man in a firefight, a man with an equal chance to you. To kill a man who has no chance of survival is like being an accomplice in a suicide, an accessory to murder, even if you are the one who is pulling the trigger and are the murderer yourself. It makes us feel dirty, just workers on an assembly line, not warriors.

They sent a barrage of mortar shells like they always do. We are ready for them and fire back, taking out their mortar positions as we mow down these stupid, innocent, self-deluded bodies attached to souls that were once called men.

He must have come a few inches at a time, slowly enough so that no one saw him move. Our attention was elsewhere, of course. Then it was night and the shooting quieted for a time. Then the mortars began landing anew and we knew there would be another wave. This wave came from the south though the incoming mortars were from the north. It was like a tennis match, the ball hit from one side to the next, trying to land a shot out of reach of the other player.

But we are just better at this than they are. We are defending our homeland, so there is no choice for us: we must prevail.

We saw him in the morning as the sun rose in the northeast, the red sky of dawn, the magic light of early morning. There are still a few birds, somehow, the little tits and wrens, the chaffinches and dunnocks that overwinter here. They skitter and rustle just after dawn like they

always did, cheeping and fluttering in what remains of the brush near the wrecked houses and burned out stores, as if no one told them that there was a war on.

It was tempting to put a bullet in him and end it right there.

He wasn't crawling with his gun. He was groveling in the dirt, pulling himself forward, his hands clawing the ground, his knees in the mud but pushing forward, his head barely raised. He was covered in mud, his fatigues were dark brown and drenched with blood, and there was blood streaked on his face. A tiny bit of his skull had been blown off. You could see the white flesh there, the arteries and the veins, the dull white edge of skull, the glistening grey-brown brain matter beneath.

"Say comrade, have you lost your way?" Oleg said, when he was a few yards from our trench. In Ukrainian. Let him listen and learn. Fuck them all. Slava Ukraini!

"Don't be an idiot, Oleg," Bantu, our lieutenant said. 'He's an enemy combatant. Keep him covered. You don't know if he's armed. He could be wearing a suicide vest. Stay where you are," Bantu said, to the Russian. "Don't move. If you move I will put another bullet into you,"

"Those guys aren't smart enough to use suicide vests," Sasha said. "That takes organization and planning."

The man stopped when Bantu said stop. He went loose and dropped his head into the mud.

"Sanctuary," the man said, in Russian. His voice was weak. You would think he'd try to speak Ukrainian. They all know some. But no. Russian. They are all like that.

"Beware of Nazis. You know we are all Nazis here," Oleg said.

"Shut up, Oleg," Bantu said. "Can't you see the man is hurt?"

"Okay, Mr. Officer. What do we do with him?" Sasha said.

"I'll go get him," Oleg said.

"You will do nothing of the sort," Bantu said. "Stay in the damned trench."

“Surrender,” the man said. “Unconditional surrender,” he said, in Russian again.

“Take off your clothes,” Bantu said. “All your clothes. Now. Then you can come forward. When all your clothes are off. Only then. When we see you are unarmed, we will pull you into the trench and get you medical help. But you must take off your clothes and come forward on your own. I cannot risk exposing my men to come get you.” He spoke Ukrainian, of course. And of course the Russian bastard understood him.

The man grunted. And then he collapsed into the mud

“OK. Now what, great leader?” Oleg said. “How about I go after him? If he dies there it will really start to stink around here in a few days. Not that you assholes don’t smell enough now, of course.” He looked toward the end of the trench, where the latrine was, so called. Where the hole in the mud was.

“How about you wait until after dark, asshole,” Sasha said.

“By after dark he’ll be all stiff,” Oleg said.

The man in the mud shuttered. He rolled over, lifted his bloody head out of the mud and started pulling at the zipper holding his anorak. He twisted out of the anorak. Then he pushed his thorax out of the mud, bending at the waist, and squirmed out of the black sweater he wore under the anorak as he rolled onto his knees and straightened his thorax.

It was painful to watch the man struggle, to just stand there and watch, while he writhed about, while he pulled the sweater off so slowly, trying as best he could to steer around the open place in his skull. His back was toward us, so we couldn’t see his eyes, thanks God. How painful it was to watch a human being struggle like that, watch as though we were helpless ourselves, unable to go to help him. He was a man after all. We’d mowed down fifty or a hundred men with out a thought over those last few days. Killing those men caused us no pain. But seeing this Russian struggle was mortifying.

He peeled the sweater off himself at last and threw it over his shoulder. It flew through the air and landed in the trench.

Then the man began pulling at the buttons of his shirt, picking at them as if they were insects or berries, as if they were hot or on fire. He peeled the shirt away from his chest,

wriggled one arm out and then the next, and threw the shirt over his shoulder again in a bizarre striptease. The shirt also landed in the trench.

Under his shirt was a blue and white striped undershirt. The shirt was mostly grey now, soaked through. He bent over as he peeled that shirt slowly over his head and tossed it aside. It landed in the mud.

Then he stood and turned.

As he staggered toward us we saw the tattoos on his arms and chest. We saw that one of his eyeballs was hanging loose on its stalk. We saw how haggard he looked, how the grey skin on his unshaven face hung down.

The eyes tattooed on his chest are what I'll always remember. They were a woman's eyes, knowing, languid, wanting, the kind that forgive and forget, even in a place like this, the kind that simmer with desire, the eyes that follow you everywhere, the eyes you can never forget.

He staggered toward us.

"Hey, you haven't taken your pants off yet," Bantu said. "Your boots. You have to take your boots off. Halt! Now! He could have a knife in his boot!"

Bantu raised his Kalashnikova.

There was a burst from the other side. The man fell forward into our arms.

Those bastards. They shot their own man.

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The title comes from a question and remarks made by a Brown University MFA student whose name I don't know at a screening and lecture -presentation by on the life of Frederick Douglas on February 2, 2023 at the Congdon Street Baptist Church, organized by Stage of Freedom and sponsored by WSBE. I hope they identify themselves so they can be appropriately acknowledged.

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