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Cleopatra's Needle, Encounter

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In shapes of water, sparkling, ephemeral,
 Imitating the floating heaven of stone
 Built with money from assassins and dictators
 Who prayed beneath the dome in velvet tunics,
 Gold chains, soft leather boots, and ostrich feathers.

Philip St. Clair

Cleopatra's Needle

What has this obelisk to do with Cleopatra VII? Absolutely
 nothing,
 but nevertheless one must acknowledge
 the slightest of associations: Caesar Augustus (when he was
 Octavian)
 removed it from Heliopolis to Alexandria in 14 BC,
 and despite the fact that Octavian and Marc Antony (Cleopatra's
 lover
 and co-regent) were triumvirs who became
 sworn enemies (Battle of Actium, 31 BC), Antony's suicide after
 his defeat
 and Cleopatra's autotoxy that next year
 (after Octavian spurned her) leads one to doubt that a Tribune-
 For-Life
 would need to express his dominance
 sixteen years later by barging a huge piece of granite (two
 hundred tons,
 sixty feet high) down the Nile to the Mediterranean Sea.
 Our obelisk, in actual fact, was first erected by Tuthmosis III
 (c. 1450 BC),
 whose well-preserved body (discovered 1881

in the Deir el Bahri cache) was the prototype for Boris Karloff's
 makeup
 in *The Mummy* (Universal Pictures, 1932).
 Eventually (1878), the obelisk was presented by the Khedive of
 Egypt
 and installed on the banks of the Thames
 that same year. Wings of bronze clasp it to a contemporary base,
 and inside
 are three items to enlighten a curious posterity:
 a portrait of the Queen, a railway schedule, and a crisp,
 unruffled copy
 of *The Times*. It is flanked (both dexter and sinister)
 by two Victorian sphinxes – one of them has a curl of graffiti
 over its eye
 while the other displays a wound sustained
 in a Zeppelin raid during the Great War. Right now a smiling
 young man
 has nestled between a monumental set of paws
 to stare at clouds over Waterloo Bridge: is he someone who
 might rescue,
 as the millennium looms, ourselves from all our fabrications?

Encounter

The verse was painted in white across the bumper of a late-
 model car:
 the letters splayed
 and uneven, the sizes mixed – *NOW the Body is Not for Fornication*
 but for the Lord.
 At first I thought it was a dare, even in these latitudes, for what
 little I saw
 of the driver, before she sped

from the four-way stop at the crossroads to dart down a tar-and-chip road,
 seemed engaging:

high cheekbones under a flattering perm, a pair of designer sunglasses,
 slender hands that may have been
 unencumbered by a ring. But I did not doubt the sincerity of a message
 that would flatten a bluebook value,
 bring a laugh to the men who sell used cars under strings of plastic flags,
 cause a charismatic Baptist
 to pull over to the berm and dance before the Lord as did King David.

I thought about the first word
 she'd painted, that confident, capitalized *NOW* – just what had she seen
 before she broke the seal
 on a can of white enamel, took up a brush from a little girl's watercolors,
 strode out to her driveway?
 Was she, the night before, overcome with a wash of sudden knowledge
 that her body was a temple,
 that she had been bought by great price, that she might judge the world
 and all the angels hovering over it?
 Or was it one of the lesser revelations, born of romantic disappointment
 or relationship fatigue,
 that made her write that caveat above her license plate to keep me away,
 speak to my shame?