Poem: "High to Low"

By David Yezzi '95SOA

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It's cringe-worthy yet also pleasing when our host at lunch — someone I don't know and whom I'm only meeting the first time — sends back a bottle of expensive wine, for no real reason. It's not just to show his seasoned taste, a hard-won cultivation taken shape over a lifetime studiously teasing savors from the grape.

A total creep, in fact, this guy, a boor — he clearly doesn't give a rat's who gets burned. (The waiter seems amused, since after all these years he's gotten used to jerks like this, and every bottle that's returned he sips in secret at the back station.)

This guy won't stand for it: when life offends his nose or eye, he takes the upper hand.

His victories are mostly Pyrrhic, but so what? Sure, he's obtuse but not blind to the ways his huffy, prima-donna poise is oddly winning, even as it annoys. Decorum is a thankless double bind, a game for schmucks, an over-complication. Who ever bothers, when no one cares for him (so goes the lyric), caring about others?

And would it make a difference if he did? Not terribly. So, after lunch he strolls down 43rd Street to Times Square. A crane shot pulls back till he's barely there amid the horn-blasts and the traffic-crunch, a worker ant lost in an anthill nation.

And from a window ten stories high, another man makes sense of all the to-and-fro.

In his lofty, godlike view, the city assumes a manageable scope.

The air conditioning hums. Pressed to the glass, his forehead feels the cool as people pass beneath him, each one with a private hope of getting his, by market calculation or avid reach.

He, too, will do whatever he must do, each self for each.

Pull back again and there is me and you, watching this guy as his eyes light on the man just come from lunch. His mild disdain for something — jacket, hat — is what remains, after he casually blinks him out of sight. And who, by further ghostly iteration,

takes stock of us, is gauging us? And can they see us only from above?

This poem appears in David Yezzi's 2013 poetry collection, Birds of the Air.



Guide to school abbreviations

