

STAINED-GLASS MAN

Donald W. Catchings, Jr. on
Man's Own Image

I

Once upon a time, there was a Stained-glass Man
Who held a glass world in the palm of his hand.
Day in and day out, the Man caught the eye
Of each and every passerby.

In rain and in shine, in snow and in heat,
Stained-glass Man stood, with pilgrims at his feet,
Giving hope to the sick and joy to the old;
He was even known to humble the bold.

With an unending love, his glass smiled upon
The rich and the poor, the old and the young —
Those cascading hues of turquoise and blue,
Budding with lilies and rose bushes, too.

White-robed, transfigured in heralded beauty,
Stained-glass Man shone, refracting Light's purity.

Shining the mark for wanderers to find
What they had been seeking all of their life.

Unchanged by time, with stained-glass mercies,
The Man welcomed all who came broken and
hurting.

Year in and year out, raised high above,
Over arched doors, He led all to love.

In war and in peace, for friend and for foe,
Steady, yet fragile, guiding all who would go
Making amends with foes and with friends;
He bore redemption in his stained hands.

With an inviting breadth, his arms opened wide
Calling to pauper and prince, “Come inside!
Here you will find the Word that gives life.
Here you will find He who bore strife.
Here you will learn what it means to be man.
Here you will finally come to understand
Why quintessence of dust was shaped and molded,
Why Maker, from clay, with His own hand promoted
An image like His; and what that image was:
Eternal, beautiful — made to love.”

II

Once upon a time there was a man made of straw,
With mouth full of chaff — confusion, his drawl.
Day in and day out he would glare and cry
For he wished to pass Stained-glass Man by.

Neither rain nor shine, neither cold nor heat
Could straighten his back or sturdy his feet.
He hung — bitter, dejected — longing for something.
No. No. No. No. It was nothing. Yes, nothing.

With back-prodding pang, unrelenting and crude,
Straw-man stayed hanging while his heart rued
The day he was stuffed with his hollow life:
The day he began to grow weary of strife.

Month followed month and year followed year,
No pleasure could bring a morsel of cheer
For more than an hour or even a minute —
Straw-man's chest weaker than the fodder within it.

Poor wretched straw, watching seconds click on.
Deriding the minutes, the summers, the falls.
Perched among lilies, spurning their beauty;
Longing for love . . . longing so purely.

Robed in the shadows, rejecting all colors,
Save for the one trusted to blot out all others —
Blacker than pitch. No sun-shining grace
Could wipe the scowl from his burlapped face.

As life turned to death, Straw-man hung alone
In a field left unharvested, and not even sown.
Still, murders of doubt came pecking and pricking:
Those crows of confusion kept tearing and ripping.

After years of staring at Stained-glass Man's beauty,
Straw-man at last snapped that foul nail protruding
From the stake at his back, then fell to the ground
With a soft thud. He arose, turning himself round.

Once Straw-man came down from secluded perch,
He stumbled and hobbled, then bumbled and
lurched.
While leaned on the post, taking in a new strength,
Straw-man looked up and thought on at length:

He thought about how he'd been left to himself,
While scores of travelers beheld someone else;
He thought about how that Stained-glass man stood,
Steady and true, so beautiful and good.

With rancor in heart and greed-strengthened feet,
Straw-man pressed on, his mind set to meet
A Stained-glass man, whose presence was mocking,
A Stained-glass man, so certain and haughty.

The day finally came; He passed Stained-glass man,
With mouth full of hate and foul rock in his hand.
With burning lips, Straw-man raised clenched fists;
He had to say something — this moment was his.

Today was the day, final straw, the last time
As Stained-glass Man caught this straw-man's eye
He reared back and let his foul rock flash,
Cursing the heavens as his rock smashed:
“Who said you were beautiful, good, or true?
What gives you the right to speak for me, too?
How dare you stand proud, day in and day out,
Passing your judgment on innocent crowds?
You're nothing but glass, fashioned to shine
On poor scores of fools too lost in the rind
To see for themselves what they really need,
To see your invite as a gesture of greed,
To know they can fashion, solicit, promote
Themselves as they please, prefer, and want.
That is true love — the real image of man,
To hold his own world in the palm of his hand.”

III

Thus Straw-man gave his shattered speech,
Broken like the glass scattered at his feet:

“Look. There lies that Stained man.
Pfft . . . **His** glass is smashed.
Pick **Him** up; **He**’ll cut your hand.
Once upon a time, pilgrims passed
To be guided to goodness and sureness of mercies.
Now, AT LAST!
His mercy —
broken.
His guidance? —
It’s gone.
Reds, whites, and blues. In various hues.
He’ll cut your feet to pieces.
That’s who **He** really is (The purpose of **His** image)
Come one! Come all! TAKE
As you will...
Drink, **His** wine? Eat, **His** cake?
(No longer)
No need to buy
Or sell. That’s what **His** book says!
I say — Have your fill. Take what.
What you. What you will.
Will. Have your fill. Take!”

Then, the crowds rushed in:

“I saw it first. Give that to me.”

“No! That one’s mine. I’ll take what I want.”

“ . . . Take it! I dare you!”

“I will. Try and stop . . .”

Each stole a piece from the ground

Or tore it from another’s hand.

(Blood everywhere) As a souvenir.

(Spitting. Kicking. Cursing.)

To call it their truth and sneer:

“Now, that is what beauty is.”

“Aw. Yes. This is good.”

“Just a piece, a fragment . . .
good enough.”

“All of Him was too much.”

“I’ll take this shard . . .”

“I . . . this one.”

“Me. This is the perfect piece.”

“I can make it . . .”

“I can make Him what . . .”

“ . . . I want.”

Nevertheless, when the crowds
were gone

There were just as many pieces left
As there were when the chaos
had begun.
For no matter how many pieces were taken,
There was still more to give —
Even in shards, Stained-glass Man still would
give of himself.
Thus, Straw-man decided to do the gravest
thing (he decided to do his worst)
gluing Stained-glass Man back together.
Hours in and hours out
(Blood. Sweat. And Tears) Heap of broken glass.
Mingling death, spit, glue.
Mangling reds, whites, blues.
Slowly, it turned to something else.
Something grotesque.
Goya would be nauseated.
(de Kooning would be creeped out)

Once Straw-man was done gluing his foul artwork,
He perched on his soapbox and gave
his final word —

IV

Ecce Homo
There He stands:

Spit in His beard;
Blood in his eyes.

Ecce Homo
There He stands:
Robed in mockery —
Beaten; Humble; Alone.

Ecce Homo
There He stands:
A man? Yes, a new man.
The Man whose image
All men have made . . .
Straw-man has made.

Behold the Man:
Broken?
Fixed?
Is.
Whoever I am.
Whatever you desire.

V

Once upon a time, there *was*.