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In the Public Square (after de Chirico)

by Steven Frattali

I sit here watching the light and shadows
In the empty square this evening.
The concrete wall across the way
Is tinted to an ochre warmth.

The old brick storefronts, the courthouse,
The library and bank,
Are caught in dusty laterals of copper light;
The edges of their roofs blur in the translucent orange.

Gold and peach colors like the moons of Jupiter
Glow in a puddle
By the municipal parking garage;
Steel edges and glass panels flare and spark.

In the square, the shadow of the Civil War memorial
Is long and startlingly precise.
Black cannon balls are stacked in pyramids
On two sides of the granite obelisk,

With tar-black siege mortars presiding
On the other two. Beyond,
The courthouse dome is charred
Against the evening sky.

Its tiles look like weathered copper,
Green as the stain
Left by a cheap gold ring,
Or possibly the color of old bills.

A color near to these
Is on the boot, waistcoat, and cheek
Of the distinguished Reconstruction era
Senator who guards the steps.

A greenish patina has covered him;
His brow is streaked and caked
Much like an old corroded cent.
Mounted on his granite pedestal,

He stands with one hand inside his jacket
As though nursing a cracked rib.
The illusory plane
Of his imaginary Senate floor

Extends from this point
To the north, south, east and west--
Outward indefinitely,
Perhaps eight feet above the ground.

Caught in the sun, the granite
Of the pedestal's near side
Twinkles
With bright flecks of light.

The stone turns pink,
Then orange with roseate gold
Which cools
To deeper gold. Suddenly

The shadow of a man is there. It lengthens,
Reaches out across both pedestal and sidewalk,
Broken like a stick half-way in water,
Then it slides away.

The air itself turns faintly pink,
The atmosphere unreal; the light
Is compromised, auroral--full of loneliness
In the encroaching dusk.

In the iodine light of sunset,
Shadows tilt out far across the disembodied world;
If you stand, your silhouette reaches
To the far side of the square.

Momentarily the dusty space
Is haunted as with vanished lives,
Past time, presentiment, fatality.
The time is charged; the atmosphere is poised.

The moment bears the weight
Of something piled high and teetering.
The cataclysmic change which never came
Is echoing and echoing

In the silence, everywhere.
Soon in the amber twilight
The buildings will be old daguerreotypes,
Old drawings, weightless tinted diagrams.

Generations of shadows move
Among the pillars of the darkened courthouse,
From pediments and from the corners
Near the walls; ranks of shadows

Advancing, retreating--they move as with
A sound of whispers without words and without sense,
Their mounting silence muffled
By the tap and scrape

Of one stray paper blown along,
Or by the echo of my feet.
Day after day I've sat here in the square
For half the afternoon

And into dusk, the long-awaited moment--
Unexpected, curious--establishes itself,
Then lengthens, lengthens further,
Darkens, and becomes the night.