

G U A R D E D



S T E P H E N K A M P A

As intricate
As cellular division or a set
Of astrophysicists' equations,
The escape plot these prisoners of war
Have whittled to a point in patience
And spotted rage, and one dependent for
Its least success on each man's calculations
And careful execution of the part
Impartially assigned him from the start —

Thus it's with ease
That we extend to each our sympathies
When, shot by shot, they one by one
Fall facedown in the yard's dust, having failed
To do what needed to be done,
Delivering those comrades who've prevailed
Into their own belated brace of gun-
fire till the one remaining runner knows
He's seen the last of all the exits close

(Too many missed
Steps, blown contingencies), yet he'll persist
In running, climbing up the fence,
And then it's over. How much easier
To ache for them in their immense
Anguished ambition than it would be were
They merely victims in the usual sense:
Saps with receding hairlines and bad breath
Who wage their wars with boredom, time, and death.

These, too, have watched
 Their finest plans go haywire, and they've botched
 Every escape attempt they've made:
 Still married, still a father, still employed
 From nine to five. Fears: unallayed.
 The boss's secretary: unenjoyed.
 They banked on comfort; now grown staid, they've stayed –
 They don't know why – to do they don't know what,
 And they, too, hear doors one by one clang shut.

Yes, we're on guard
 Against those needy chumps whose lives are hard,
 But not *too* hard, who half remind us
 Of who we aren't, and half of who we are,
 Who prove at parties when they find us
 That cornered pity only goes so far;
 But if we long to put those runts behind us
 Whose lives are led in ever deepening ruts –
 Whole lifetimes leaden failures in their guts –

The worst of all
 Are those who seem to live beyond the pall
 Of average daily degradations:
 By fate, luck, work, wits, or a relative
 Complacence in their fluctuations,
 They're happy. *Happy*. Them, we can't forgive.
 We pace the bird's-eye turrets of our stations.
 We watch them running, free of fear or shame.
 We're leveling our scopes. We're taking aim.