The Death of Marat by Ira Schaeffer

Inspired by *The Death of Marat* by Jacques-Louis David

This crime scene has been compromised; an unseen hand has airbrushed the victim’s face, wiped it clean of its grimace, made it serene as a drowsy maiden’s waiting for a kiss. Look at this dying body; the way it curves languidly: the lilting head, the arms drooping. This man is nearly bloodless, immaculately posed in his bath like a wilting lily. Even Marat’s wound weeps its few red tears like one of Christ’s stigmata.

This is not reportage but propaganda, an altarpiece for the Jacobin faithful glowing with the sacred light of martyrdom. How tearful, how prayerful is their pitiful hero, cut down like a fragile flower, as Marat swoons into eternity. Oh, David, your brush has transfigured this butcher into a saint.

Read the painted words of Charlotte Corday feigning unhappiness, playing her mark for sympathy; how cold and cunning to prey upon Marat’s compassionate heart. And see where Corday left her knife like a bloody calling card, as if her blade had outplayed Marat’s virtuous quill. How audacious, how deluded that devil Corday, how saintly our Marat—stop!

David’s trompe l’oeil has painted over history. *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité,* they said. But didn’t David and Marat both feed Madame Guillotine, brimming baskets with the innocent? David has prettified The Terror with paint, hidden its corruption in flesh tones and pictorial tricks that make *The Death of Marat* (a subtle fusion of politics and art) deceptive, dangerous, transcendent: with stark beauty it caresses the eye, taking thought on a transport to Neverland.