

A Personal Note on the Word “Remains”

A mid-nineteen-sixties summer college job,
third-trick Baggage Agent—the midnight shift
smoking Camels and reading Dickens
at a battered wooden desk in a cage waiting
in the vast sub-basement, the roots of
the Cleveland Union Terminal Tower
full of shadows of the glory days, darkness punctured
by bulbs barely illuminating random empty spaces,
laced with vague smells of diesel fumes, exhaust, oily dust, and decay
—waiting to sign my name to attest to the truth of a manifest.

At times

when the baggage manifest contained “Remains,”
someone delivered underground nearby at the loading dock
would ride the passenger train as their own baggage.
As the hearse backed in, I would rise up from my chair
to aid the undertaker unloading his load,
briefly bearing the unpalled casket to the grimy worn boards
of the big-wheeled baggage wagon, on which it sat waiting,
gaudy with florets and shiny brass tube handles,
clean and sparkling like nothing else in the slovenly gray gloom.
Distracted by the tip that came with the remains,
I never got into the casket
as I did into the book with the writer
dead 100 years.

Elm Street, Amesbury, Massachusetts

i: 2020

Dutch Elm Street
 disease in walking,
 sidewalk gone—
 a narrow foot path around
 mounds of dirt, round erupted rocks.
 Without concrete,
 The walker cannot walk abstracted,
 nothing to curb the cars
 bouncing awkward by,
 not even a line to cross.
 The order that was Elm Street
 has been scraped up
 and hauled away in
 exaggerated trucks
 roaring with the effort,
 quaking our side-street
 with their exits.

But, brand new,
 like a street in a development
 with stainless steel kitchens,
 An Elm Street
 will arise,
 amid old houses
 that have,
 with wood-fired cookstoves,
 faced other
 Elm Streets.

ii: 1907

A picture of a picture postcard,
 of an Elm Street unseen by living eyes:
 grayscale trees, interleaved overhead,

trunk	trunk
trunk	trunk
trunk	trunk
to out of sight,	

the cliché longed-for, but seldom seen—
 the road embraced by trees.
 The old photo's gray foliage greens, and
 you can almost hear it rustle, see
 dappled sunlight shifting on the street surface.
 But,
 mid-street, slicing through the center

t	t
r	r
o	a
ll	c
e	k
y	s

parallel lines that never meet.

Just then,
 no streetcar full of desire
 headed for the beach,
 no whine of whirring armatures,
 no low heavy rumble of moving dense metal
 vibrating brick street and its walkway
 no wail of wheel against steel.

On this quiet summer day, then,
 a silence.

iii: 1917

That year
 in Massachusetts
 auto license plates
 consecutively numbered
 one to
 one hundred, twenty-seven thousand.
 Not all of them
 drove on Elm Street.
 No way to know
 how many—
 people went
 where they wanted to
 and when—

as we can.
The flu pandemic
would be
the next year.

Valentine's Day 2016

Unlike pond ice that we can clearly see
Uncertain ice of walks and roads appears
Like the Virgin Mary,
Unpredictably and in lowly places.
It upends careful logic,
And gravity waves goodbye.
As with Mary too, it may involve a hospital
With crutches against the wall,
Though cures are not certain.

We could go somewhere
The ice can't follow
(Though we would not escape
The Virgin Mary who likes warm places
And could still appear, if so inclined).
Hurricanes prefer such places too,
But unlike Mary they appear
Predictably enough to have a season.
So we would get uncertain safety
And with no snow, dying would be
Less complex and surprising.

Even as we slide away from events
Over time's slick downhill surface
Trying to balance on our cleatless feet,
Resisting the urge to flail
With arms raised in the air,
I would not have us become
Statues rooted in place
Like those plaster Virgin Marys
In all those little alcoves.

Something in the way you move
Makes me willing to risk falling.
Not that you are like Eve,
Who does dress better than the Virgin Mary.
Well, in some way you are like Eve
But then, every comparison limps,
Perhaps from slipping on the ice.

Harping

When I sneeze in my study here in Massachusetts
in Amesbury, namesake of the city nearest Stonehenge,
the banjo and guitar vibrate, hanging on the wall
as if they were alive, like an orchestra tuning—
wind and percussion and strings—so the
air is in the music and the music in the air.

Coleridge began his poem “Eolian Harp,”
in Clevedon, Somerset in seventeen-ninety-five.
Just engaged to Sara, with the now euphemistic
last name Fricker, Coleridge was twenty-three.
The poem begins with her “soft cheek reclined”
upon his arm. He speaks of how the wind
caresses the loose gut strings of the harp,
a long box balanced on the open window sill,
“Like some coy maid half yielding to her lover”
As if sensing some reluctance in her soul.
He speculates to her we’re but “organic Harps”
played upon by nature, but with a glance she shows
good Christian as she is, such sentiment won’t do.
Infatuated, Coleridge demurs to her damnation
of his pantheistic musing, and with an ironic dash
admits that such philosophy falls short,
where awe of nature points more clearly to the god
he calls “The Incomprehensible” and thanks
for giving him “Peace, and this Cot, and thee,
heart-honored Maid!” Discord will arise,
and often absent, at thirty-six he will finally leave her.

But I am the Aeolus of my study,
and my stormy winds play my instruments,
and like the box on the cottage window sill,
they do not doubt their god
but sing me hymns to bless me.

The Body Mechanical

What flows through our gyroscopic ear canals
to steady our plugged-in eyes,
to level the binocular world we bipedal into,
all nodes and switches flashing
in the darkness of our brain pan,
neck-mounted, swiveling a hundred and eighty degrees?
We glide through hallway and forest—
walls, rugs, ceilings, rocks, roots, fallen branches—
balancing through the air.

If all the world but our footprints, past and future,
fell away, leaving us a landscape of hundred-foot stalagmites
descending into a darkness of faint drips,
looking below, behind, ahead, within,
could we keep walking,
each day lined up ahead of us, each step,
as we drift off and wake up to oncoming traffic?

We are so approximate, gummed up
with uncertainty, chewing off
more than we can bite with what we gnaw
and absorb.

Absorption is the curse.

Everything becomes us.
Our fuel blends with us, is us.
Our exhaust is what we were.
Molecules that were our blood
become our breath and float away
until some oak tree sucks them up.

We are unstable,
not bolted together
so our wings will not fall off.
We are the gas we pass through.
Our machine delusion gives us
unsubstantiated insubstantial substance:
we don't die like an engine;

we become dead, living all the way there,
right up until the last instant of us.

But hospitals, full of machines,
sometimes scavenge us for parts.
Metaphors die hard.