

## At the Roman Port of Ostia

We turn back to take in yet another tomb. The Romans placed their necropoli beyond the city limits, a neighborhood for the living to visit, where memories might stay alive. Here's a man's memorial for his wife, with a mosaic made in the local fashion. A few scalloped lines suggest waves. A house on shore, two boats. Maybe he loved her, or maybe he wanted her family to help him out; maybe he didn't want to be forgotten himself. Life doesn't end well. A little faith goes a long way, I'm sure. The Romans didn't have an afterlife, unless you were a hero. Today everyone's a hero, and no one's a hero, and there are all kinds of afterlives to choose from. Romans were practical. They'd weigh the pros and cons before buying into any of it. The sun and wind make the tall grasses bend and bow. My group is on to the living, or the once living, starting with the bathhouses.

And there, coming around a corner, is the oldest tour group I've ever seen, too tall to be Romans, and in their comfortwear too softly clothed, but fascinated, in slow rotation, with the ruins around them. They're walking at the pace that always wins the race, some with helmet sized wrap-around sunglasses, and all of them plugged into the self-tour option of brief lectures for each vital site. My group moves on, but I'm still here, following these folks as they gingerly plod from site to site, attentive to what there is to learn and to where each foot will fall.

I shouldn't talk, I'm sixty-one. But these people are in another age; they've walked through a window and journeyed across the world. They are climbing the steps to the balcony that overlooks the largest bath house, they are climbing a mountain like Everest, slightly stooped, each step a few inches higher in altitude, closer to the summit. So many steps to go. A beautiful day, blue blinding sunlight, magnificent view

from the Death Zone. That's how I see it.  
They probably don't see it that way.  
Here they are, learning about the world, trying to understand  
something, a sense of what life was,  
is. The sun and breeze must feel good,  
the body not so good, but the mind  
presses onward, or is it the soul, or the ever vernal  
chemistry of genesis that reaches and reaches? Who knows.

These people inspire me, plugged in, with their sunglasses  
and their thick soled shoes. You have to wear these things  
at such an altitude. Maybe they've found  
the thread. Maybe they're following it to the source.  
If they're still seeking, don't they know  
they're near the end? They'll make it down  
from the balcony, but say they reach that other summit,  
the highest one, the one from which all things are visible . . .  
they'll never make it down. It's too high. The air is too thin.  
Doesn't matter.  
They're going like there's no tomorrow.

## Zone

The Emergency Zone is declared too late;  
the shooting over, gunman dead,  
wounded to care, corpses  
to the morgue. Silence. Sudden.  
Abandoned spirits linger,  
not sure if this is a mistake.  
Maybe they'll be going home. No one  
can go home, not even the living. Home  
is no longer home. Distant sirens howl.  
Too late. Too late. The red zone unfolds  
petals that spread under yellow street lights  
as dew begins to fall.

Before, and after, life seems possible  
in a country of peaceful gun owners, unless  
you live in Chicago, or Orlando,  
or Newtown, or Aurora. Prescriptions help  
you hardly notice it. Truce, inaction:  
an open ulcer that seeps. Sew  
Las Vegas to the list, then hardly notice it.

Holographs of comforting irrelevance,  
Colonel Sanders and Mickey Mouse  
share condolences. And life goes on,  
as it must. It is the way to honor  
the dead: to enjoy the sun every day,  
the moon every evening, and the yellow street lights.  
A very noisy silence blankets the senses.  
Facebook is youtube is snapchat is instagram  
that peoples the ark on night waves  
and distracts itself to sleep.

Those who are bereft return like ghosts  
unnoticed to the scene, search for warmth,  
for their loves. They drift through their lives,  
sometimes far away from what was home,  
and everywhere they go Emergency  
is declared, and everyone is in its Zone.

