

Come Back to Us

A steady drip of ringtones filters down to us
Like a cup of Joe, a Keurig or Krups jolt
Of wakeup calls sprinting crosstown through telephone lines
With the urgency of Paul Revere.
Rousing the townsfolk. A gawping star squeezes out a tear,
Intelligence of your husband's death trampolining from yard to yard.

The grapevine surprises us with the sting of mouthwash,
The staleness of yesterday's coffee grinds.
We would spit out denial if we could, rinse and spit,
If it would help you get through it. For an hour. A minute.
Word of his massive stroke, a fuse box blowout,
Leaves us, your neighbors and friends, scratching our heads
As if crowned with thorns or ringworm.
Stretched, not for the first time nor likely for the last,
On Appian Way crosses of small-town empathy.
Determined to help you hold fast.

Our faces pregnant with reassurance,
We stumble like baby llamas
At a petting zoo,
Each one wanting to be the first to comfort you
And be comforted by you,
Offering cakes of commiseration,
Pies piled high with promissory notes of fruits and nuts.
Generous dollops of crème fraîche.
Home-baked analgesics
To serve as a balm against future loneliness.
The whole community of us
Reminding you that, however deep your loss cuts,
And however thankful we are
 that it wasn't ours,
You're not alone.

Though you put on the tough
And imperturbable demeanor
Of a walnut, closeting the Brechtian Sturm und Drang
Of a Pirate Jenny, practically daring
Kith or kin to crack you open
And fetch out from within
The fetal hurt that's curled there,
The only way you'll keep us,
Your mates, from sharing your pain,
Your sink-or-swim moment,
Is by killing us.

The safest bet, I suppose, would be
For us to avoid the Kool-Aid stand
In front of your house altogether,
On the off chance that grief might have driven you
To make of our hamlet by the sea the next Jonestown,
Having been warned by Mothers Against Drunk Driving
To go easy on the grape.

I picture you more as a grenade
With its pin pulled,
Ready to blow, seemingly
Oblivious to the fact
You'll take innocents with you when you go,
Your children, Kool-Aid vendors,
And friends who care for you,
Who depend on you. Almost as much as they do
On dependents qualified as tax deductible.

Come back to us, peeking out
From your den of immutable sorrow
To see and seize the rope ladder
Of our conjoined solicitude.
Pull yourself up from
Whatever depths you've sunk to.
Among us you will find enduring companionship
And, when you've cried yourself out,

Good wishes enough to fill a well bucket
With better luck.

Come back to us,
While there is still time
To push the pin back
Into the grenade. Survive
And let others who love you
Help you light the taper
Of memory, commemorative
Aromatherapy that somewhat masks
The stench of an untimely death.
The sound of grieving yourself
To sleep disrupts the sleep
Of the children, your cries,
Piercing as shrapnel, rendering those
Who most need your support
Collateral damage.

You dreamwalk through the carnage.
He's gone, their father
And your husband.
Nothing you can do
Will bring him back. No action
Taken by you or on your behalf.
Somehow you'll just have to learn
To live with it, so that those
Who daily rely upon your example
Can learn to live with it.

It is a rare bird
That just now perches on your windowsill,
One notably absent from your life list
Of documented sightings.
Smaller and less noirish than any messaging death's raven
Or hoopoe you might spot.
 A specimen
Of recreational observation

Your former birdwatcher self
Would have been thrilled to brag of.
Eager to capture both its likeness and information
In photograph and notebook. To upload these
To fellow Audubon enthusiasts.

Is this his soul, one might ask,
its last words

Stirring you to duty?

Go back to them

Go back to them

It sings and sings again, the remarkable insistence
Of its song a true love's kiss
That begins to wake in you a sleeping beauty.

High School Science

High school science, of the do-it-yourself kind,
Was composed mainly of me and my friend dissecting hoppers,
Frog princes no cheerleader had yet kissed.

Green, goggle-eyed Hamlets of the commoner sort
Croaked soliloquies under our scalpels, their indecisiveness
Proving fatal after we'd scooped them out of Triangle Pond,

Dangling each by a leg as it struggled to jerk away,
Bungee jumping up, down, captive yo-yo on a string,
Before finally failing, giving up the green ghost,

Elastic flesh pinned by thumbtacks to a ping pong table
Where we systematically tried to make sense of its circulatory system,
Blood spurting should one of us accidentally nick an artery.

I assure you these were death scenes of which John Wilkes Booth,
Noted actor and assassin, would have been proud; considering, to be fair,
That our act didn't quite rise to the level of a capital offense.

What of PETA, you ask:
What People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals
Would have called murder we called "experimentation,"
A heavy word, very sciencey, designed to give us cover

Like one of those lead blankets draped over a fellow's nuts
By radiologists before he submits himself to an MRI. Hospital
Risk Management not wanting to see gonads glowing in the dark.

Well, you'll be happy to know, we haven't been picketed by PETA yet
Nor has any execution date been set. No need, then, to explain our comings and goings,
Serial killings in the name of science, to snoopy relations or to beg them for an alibi.

Our Aristotelian vision quests for the meaning of life and death, our lives
And the deaths of frogs, occurred in a damp basement, with surgical terms like *stat*
Bouncing between us over the ping pong table covered with a sheet, Pooh characters

On a white rag that would otherwise have been thrown away.
Our surgical team routinely consisting of one Mack the Knife designee
And one attending—usually me, as resident non-resident: not my basement,
Not my ping pong table—to clean up the surgeon’s mess.

Despoiling our respective kitchens of Rubbermaid gloves
We came prepared, gauntleted in pink rubber filched from our mothers
As we boasted of employing, for sexier purposes, rubbers pinched from our fathers.

All in the name of scientific advancement. A PhD
In amphibian anatomy. The air in that basement,
Rendered almost uninhabitable through disuse and resections,

Its windows painted shut by repeated do-it-yourselfer applications of latex,
Was thick as a migration of butterflies
With the same smothering effect.

A mop-up pail in one corner ran red
As one of those ensorcelled in Disney’s *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*
With our subjects’ blood. We practiced frog-whispering, like horse-whispering,

In the absence of anesthesia, a naked 40W bulb scrubbing in for our dissections,
Fooling no one, certainly not the frogs, with our Shaolin monk musings
That this was going to hurt us more than it hurt them, purest bullfrog shit.

Just one word of advice for you, my opportunistic young tadpole,
Based on my experience:
If you want to live to be a prince, you’d better hop to it, get yourself
That transformational kiss, before high school science pins you down.

Conversation With an Apostrophe

Possessive, are you? Think you own this poem?
Well, you don't possess it – or me.
Sometimes my pen hand slips
And you appear uninvited on a page,
Just a smudge or blip, my slip showing.

Author to apostrophe: Most days
You fly under my radar
Much as a comma does or a speck of dust.
With nothing of what one might call punctuational gravitas.
I keep close at hand a bit of Grandma's Ink Remover
With your name headstoned on it, "RIP, apostrophe,"
You little swipe, you guttersnipe,
Should you push me too far.

If you're not careful
All my *don'ts* will hereafter
Be written as *do nots*,
My *shouldn'ts* as *should nots*.
My *can'ts* abolished to a gulag
For shortcuts no longer required.
Ask for a raise again, you're fired.

I've already killed your kind
Several times over with BIC's Wite-Out
And I'll reprise my Gilbert and Sullivan's
Lord High Executioner role, the very best
Of the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company's *Mikado*,
Each of us playing his part,
Until you learn, if ever you do,
Which one of us possesses the pen.
 You're thick as a Montblanc
If you think it's you.

More terse than an ellipsis,
Less puissant than an en dash
 or even an Auntie Em,
Your birthright is that of a stroke of ink
Vulnerable to extinction,
Vassal to any royal line of sonnets I might cook up,
A not so hollow crown
Sauced with a tasty Shakespearean ragu.

Meanwhile, you might want to act a skosh more
In keeping with your character, as writ.
Unobtrusive co-servitor
And first cousin once removed of the comma,
Whose example you might do well to follow.
Learn, for instance, when to bend the knee
And when to disappear entirely
Unless called for, like a good valet.
 You can do that, can't you?
Underbutlering being out of the question,
As above your station
As authorship is.

Don't think for a moment
That your threatening suicide—are you?—
Changes anything. It's not you
To whom the judges will be giving a perfect ten
When this poem is done. Both it and you are mine, my friend.

At most you might be thought of as an indentured servant,
No pension, no benefits,
 an unmarked grave waiting for you
In the grammarians' cemetery. Fealty, fi, fo, fum.
So go ahead, jump off the page, ride a dust mite
Into the vacuum's oblivion.
Your threats and implorations have no effect on me.
Get thee hence, apostrophe:
There's plenty more ink in the bottle where you came from.

*Lunching Where, According to the Signed Picture on the Wall,
Timothy Leary Once Lunched*

After a tab or two, high at a salad bar,
I fancy I can hear arugula howling.
A-roooo-goo-la! A-roooo-goo-la!

A pack of wolves circling a lone hiker
Armed only with a peace sign
Is less scary than these mixings are.

I have to wonder who has handled them before
And if they used the tongs provided or their hands.
How clean their hands were.

Even the baby corn are showing teeth.
It's eat or be eaten. Certain of my glands
Are warning me to leave while I can.

Chick peas, chubbies you'd never think could pose a threat,
Declare they want to mash me, Gangnam style,
Falafel my ass, serve it up on pita bread.

True, it could be the LSD kicking in.
What seemed like a good idea at the time
Has me tripping over my choice of dressings.

I go with a balsamic vinaigrette poured
From a bottle shapely as Sophia Loren,
Bleu cheese too sad for my liking.

The counter girl shakes her head, "It's your funeral,"
Spotting both dark and light matter in the mix,
Oil and vinegar with that extra kick.

Reflexively, I grab a soda, juggle it,
Determined to make it fizz
Like the Big Bang did.

Perhaps if I get something more substantial
Than arugula in my gut,
The good bacteria there clamoring for tribute,

Some sliced hardboiled egg on top or chicken cutlet,
I'll stop seeing faces of dead presidents
On the bills I check out with. Still stumping for my vote.

Only the ballast of salt and pepper packets in my pockets
Keeps me from drifting away like Jules Verne's Phileas Fogg
Through a world less packed with nutrition than my salad is.