

Five from the Time of Covid

Spring Passing

A mystery of frogs green but flat
silhouetted action-figures
all eight legs spread leaping
on slate edging the water;
dispatched carefully into
earliest spring still-sere grasses,
their bier a small shovel.

Ceremony:

wash the stone and rinse
tang of decay, scrape skin bits
so no trace remains, only a
shroud of pond water.

Hoping for frog eggs.

Waiting at a busy intersection
directed by high-vis vested policeman
flashing lights and firetrucks
then line of lights-on cars
hearse escorted onto the highway
vanishing into noon's glow.

Clearly one of their own fallen.

Ritual:

somber prayers for the heroic corpse.
Way back – clear road, no sign
that death ever passed.

Traffic flow wipes procession clean.

Hoping for peace.

That night, the moon waxes gibbous.
First peepers' thready trills
ascend in delight.

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{Errata}

for Tony Hoagland

Where it says delete
read small bird footprints.
Where it says dream read
small wooden benches painted in
bright gloss like hard candies.
Where it says message read pebble.
Where it says: "cough now," read lighthouse.
Trees should remain trees until further notice.
Where we read misery it should say
fresh baked bread and a cool fountain.
For fingernails read sand
nesting slate stepping-stones,
and, for dried oregano, read memory
trailing along the heart.

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What Part Does the Storyteller Play?

You know how stories go:
the princess must suffer or sleep,
the prince goes on a quest or is put under a spell.
Lovers must be separated and reunited.
Birds can speak, and trees can sing. Good souls
may be saved from evil or catastrophe.
People, transfigured, must turn
into rocks or horses or fish.
Loose ends snipped off, plots hemmed up
as if by the most skilled seamstress.

Once upon a time, in the middle of a story,
a jarring kh-thump! of glass striking feather and bone.
Atop its icy mattress, feet in the air,
black eye blinking intermittently
in disoriented code: *picoides villosus*,
black and white striped stylish perfection,
long beak faintly opening and closing.
Rushing out with a small towel,
I wrapped up the woodpecker and turned it over,
weight imperceptible in my hands.
Later it stood and soared, my heart reveling after
high into the snow-dusted maple.

One long ago night, a muffled thump, a crumple,
car overturned in the road below.
On the sloping bank in dry leaves, a young man trembling
sat with his knees up, arms wrapped like wings.
I hunkered next to him, pulling him to me while we waited.
He couldn't speak, he just sat blinking, transfixed.
The paramedics strapped him in,
took him away, and asked me nothing.

Neat stitches with my sharp needle:
bird to sky, man to home, bird to man.
The end comes with a blink,
a denouement of branch and ambulance.

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Abortion Clinic Waiting Room

The goddess Demeter welcomes them to her field:
faded festivity cocooned by wheat-sheaf wallpaper
forest green carpet marked out with a grid
asbestos ceiling tiles ringed by a rose-spangled border
sunny illumination from fluorescent panels,
while "Save the Last Dance" plays quietly on a wall-mounted screen
providing the choral *parados*.

A man in Yankees cap and shirt, his pigeon-toed mate in sneakers,
her long blond hair *so many shades of sorrow* over her lip-biting;
another, waiting for his girl Maggie in his Mustang tee shirt
nervously picks his pant legs, thinking there's *nowhere left to fall*.
Two buxom, big silver jewelry, gum-chewing teary-eyed women,
maybe sisters – *Ooh, say what? Say what? Say what?*
Yankee guy gets on his cell phone,
the rest thrilled by filmed catharsis
where despite challenges and death, dance generates love,
and love triumphs over adversity.
So many different reasons, but are they really true?

Some say the soul has no desire, only memory.
Some say the soul has no movement, only recognition.
Perhaps the soul is purely *pneuma*, breath of the cosmos
animating ferns, heroes, horses and olive trees.

The soul infuses into cells at the moment
of conception. Or does it arrive later?
At quickening? When the microcosm has begun
to build muscles and dance about the womb?
Just as the feather cannot fly without the wing
just so the soul inhabits the body.

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Blood is Heavier than Time

“What does blood do?” he asked.
We looked at each other
wondering how to explain to a four year old.

I tried to conjure up
that film that had fascinated me
in middle school: “Hemo the Magnificent”
animating the hidden mysteries of the body
through a stylish superhero.
I’d love to see that again,
but I wouldn’t want to be back in gym class
where I endured the agony of public showers,
the new hair on my body
like sphagnum patches on a moor,
and where only the fifth grade girls
got to watch the Kotex film on menstruation
as the boys snickered in the hall
rattling the locked cafeteria doors
in their excitement at being excluded from
“the natural processes.”

You say: “Blood is a system
that carries oxygen through the body,”
as I try to shush you, panicked that we
are somehow introducing blight into
the bud of unknowingness.
He looks up at us, a small frown appearing
beneath his curls as we all fall quiet.

“Blood is full of air that we need,” I try,
but I see that even the mere mention of air
in his body makes his eyes glaze over.
“Blood is like a river,” I say. “It travels
where we need it to go. It helps our whole body.”

Oxygen, veins, systems, flow –
none of these words have meaning to him.
We take a breath and decide what to have for snack:
toast with butter, or cashews and raisins
on the special blue and white plate?
As I push his chair close to the table,
I feel his earnest heart thrumming steadily,
another light on the strand of our bloodline.