

At the Perryville Battlefield State Historic Site

When I asked him where the father of my father's mother's mother
Might have been fighting when he took one where it counts
For the Abolitionist cause, I couldn't have been happier
To see the long-haired librarian in his plaid shirt, sneakers,
And wrinkled khakis roll his considerable bulk,
In a three-wheeled swivel chair that served as a helpful
Extension of his body, first to the old desk-top computer
To look it up in his database and match the number
Of the Union troop that he was likely to have been in
(With other conscripted soldiers from the tiny rural farm town
Of Plain City, Ohio) with a battlefield map
That indicated which platoon was standing where—
And then, after that, and then, then and there, to see him roll
All the way from the computer, across the expanse
Of indoor-outdoor carpeting in the museum's basement library,
To a screen door that looked out on a pleasant summer day,
And to see him point up to a small gray goat barn in a corner
Of a pasture and say, without even turning to look at me
Or to appreciate the humorous beauty of the goats looking back, that
That's where the troop of conscripted farmers and carpenters,
Mechanics, handymen, coopers, clerks, teachers, and merchants
Who may never have seen a black person in their lives,
Unless on a trip to Columbus or outside of a church stop
On the Underground Railroad, were standing when a cannonball
From a Confederate artillery post down toward the road
Hit the split-rail hickory fence that in turn projected a splinter
In the exact direction, according to the photocopies
Of his annual pension papers, of my great-great-grandfather's groin—
An anecdote that finally got him, hearing me relate it
At the screen door while his back was still turned, to turn around
And look at me with a most quizzical expression.

Landmark

At 15 Lodge Road, around the corner from a long stretch
Of grim gray "council housing" apartment complexes
That shelter vulnerable refugees from places torn to pieces
By the nail-stuffed bombs of angry fundamentalist warriors,
At a crook in the lane where the rock 'n' roll celebrity star
Of his own reality television show, the notorious Ozzy Osbourne,
First conceived of those blasphemously loud Black Sabbath songs
Of an unintentionally funny, head-banging quality
That marked the heavy metal hey-day of the early 1970s,
We happen upon the loyal, long-time neighbors
Still holding out in their scruffy and contaminated
Working-class element, their urban-slum enclave,
The elderly white Anglican gal with the fresh blue hairdo
And the dreadlocked Jamaican dude on the blue sting-ray bike,
Cataloguing the changes that have come in recent years
To this very humble neighborhood where Ozzy came up
As a blue-collar Brummie, in the borough of Aston
On the north side of Birmingham, north of the mills
That William Blake derided, far from the Bournville hill
With the Cadbury chocolate plant and the complex of cottages
And sweet little townhouses on the south side of town
That the Quaker capitalist who owned that business
Had built to keep his workers productive and happy,
And complaining aloud that since the Pakistanis' arrival
It isn't any longer the peaceful mixture of dour Anglos
And mellow West Indians that it used to be,
That it no longer embodies the unlikely alliance of people
That made it a model of cross-cultural possibility,
Where an unexpected blend of black and white Marleys,
Those descended, like him, from the Bobs of Rastafarian fame
And those declined, like her, from the Jacobs of Dickens's
Christmas Carol acclaim, could treat each other with dignity
As they are doing now, these loyal, long-time neighbors,
At the door of the rock star's home, this bland gray
Cement-block townhouse from whose picture window comes,
As we are about to ask if they knew Ozzy in person,
The sound of a man in a rage screaming bloody murder,
In Urdu, Pashto, or Punjab, letting his frustration out
At someone in his family stuck with him in those close quarters
Whimpering behind a closed door, cowering in a corner,
Hiding behind the bathroom door, or standing ground
Before him in the kitchen. His rebellious son, maybe.
His longsuffering wife, perhaps. Or, if it has come to that,
His disappointed mother, who's been nagging him all summer
To get off his duff, get off the dole, and get some sort
Of job for a change. Whatever it takes to make him feel
Proud about *something*, for Allah's almighty sakes,
Like he did back home when he and his brother had
That successful little recycling business, back in big Islamabad.

One Autumn Day Last Year

*I think I cherish most, as the archaic language of letters
Displayed in glass cases at battleground museums
In the American South would have it, and to my breast
Hold dearest, the moment at the Harvard Art Museum, here
In Cambridge, Massachusetts, one autumn day last year,
When Arielle Jiang, a classical musician and education
Student from China, whose first name in Mandarin
Is supposed to be pronounced more or less as "Schweer,"
In a gallery of prints and paintings by Winslow Homer,
Studying snippets of sheet music from some of those songs
That he illustrated for an issue of *Harper's Weekly*
During the Civil War, at my request put her soft porcelain face
As close as she was allowed to the frame on the wall,
Inspected the measures between the graphic vignettes
Which Homer had drawn with maudlin grace in the margins,
And sight-read effortlessly, in a melodious whisper
That was sure not to attract the attention of the guards,
The melody not to *The men will cheer, the boys will shout,*
The ladies they will all turn out, with that lyric about
All of us feeling *gay* again, in the original meaning of a word
I would have been happy to define for her, if she was aware
Only of the connotation for "homosexual" or "queer,"
Not the rousing, doubly exclamatory shout of
"When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again, Hurrah,
Hurrah!", but—with a quiet gusto she might have given it
Had it been a special song from the patriotic repertoire
Of Genghis Khan's soldiers marching the Silk Road
In the thirteenth century, or of Mao's Red Army
Conquering Chiang Kai-shek less than a century before—
The refrain of another song, "Battle Hymn of the Republic,"
By Julia Ward Howe, with lyrics written over those
Of the popular "John Brown's Body," that I'd learned way back
In elementary school, in Westerville, Ohio, in 1962 or so,
That was known to be a favorite of Abraham Lincoln's
And the source of Martin Luther King's claim, in that speech
To the Memphis sanitation workers the night before he died,
That he had seen "the glory of the coming of the Lord,"
All without a trace of irony, the way it was meant to be,
Glory Glory Hallelujah! His truth is marching on! more movingly
Than I had heard it sung before, with a sense that Xueer,
Arielle, I mean, really understood the tragedy of that war.*

Rain Dance

On the other side of San Juan Chamula, beyond the simple
Cathedral on the *zócalo*, the town square, where priests in white tunics
Bless pregnant women with bottles of Coca Cola, at an open-air café
With a picturesque view of a churchyard where his revered
Elders are buried, while a raucous parrot chattered bold accusations
From a cage in the corner of the patio, we treated Roberto,

Our self-appointed guide, within the space of an hour,
Not just to the house special (grilled meats on pasta) on his day off
From busing dishes at a four-star hotel in San Cristóbal de las Casas,
But also to four small bottles of Victoria *cerveza*
And three additional shots of *pox*, that Mexican moonshine
Pronounced to rhyme with *slosh*, on top of those that he'd been pulling

All afternoon from a repurposed Fanta bottle as we walked
Up the mountain highway, all of which conspired to make him rise
With a shout from his chair at our table near the bar, not far
From a television broadcasting a Mexico City soccer game,
To dance in ecstasy to the sound of recorded marimba music
That the mild-mannered manager was playing for our pleasure

On the overhead sound system, while his assistants tried
To keep Roberto from making a scene, which only egged him on
And abetted his inebriation and his ability to sing, enthralled
By his solo bacchanalia, ¡Bailemos! ¡bailemos! ¡bailemos!,
While we continued quietly to share a plate of *chile verde enchilada*
At our table near the bar, with rice, cole slaw, lime, *trucha*, slices

Of *aquacate*, two ears of grilled *elote*, and two bottles of Victoria
Beer for ourselves, as a tropical storm that Roberto himself,
For all we knew, calling forth primeval atavistic Maya shaman power,
Had summoned for us, roared up the valley from San
Cristóbal to greet us, with his rain dance making it drum
A contrapuntal marimba beat on the corrugated fiberglass roof.

Bicentennial

Before she did the deed, before she took the rope
And slung it over the pipe in the basement of her building
In Salt Lake City, before she climbed onto the chair,
Slipped the noose around her neck, and kicked
The chair out from under her, she was so incredibly sick
Of the manic depression and the medication she took
To keep the episodes away, that it gave her some relief,
I realize now, twenty years after her death during Y2K,
If she had called at an unexpected hour to say
That the FBI, or the CIA, was gassing her apartment again,
To hear me do my *a cappella* versions of songs we'd heard
At concerts that summer, in June, July, and August, 1976,
When we worked together on the nut-butter line
At the natural foods factory and shared an apartment
In a barrio of Boston—my mock-soulful shout-outs
To Ray Charles rhapsodizing "America the Beautiful"
And the Four Tops choreographing "Bernadette"
In harmony at the stadium in Lynn; my heavy-lidded riff
On the Grateful Dead doing "Brokedown Palace"
And "Box of Rain" at the Orpheum by the Common;
My Caribbean-inflected impersonation of Taj Mahal
Singing "Take a Giant Step" at the Opera House;
Even my take on Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*
By Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops at the bicentennial
Concert on the Charles River Esplanade, which,
Given its rhythmic crescendo, its bombastic celebration
Of military might, the absence of a lip-synch-able libretto,
And the possible confusion that might be caused
By the coincidence of the Russian defense against Napoleon
And the resistance to British aggression led by Oliver Perry
On Lake Erie in the War of 1812, I always saved
For the climactic *ka-boom* of crackling cannonballs
And exploding fireworks from my chest at the end,
Before wishing her a calm evening and signing quietly off.