

The Busiest Street in Yonkers

I. Flying through the air everybody's as vulnerable as a baby.

Lines on Delivery Guy's wet forehead creased in angles of agony in shock on the ground on his hands and knees recovering—a ceremony of survival pressing his burned palms onto cool September South Broadway the busiest street in Yonkers. Lucky Dominican motorcycle club hombres hadn't been blaring by by the dozen like they do every summer Saturday night roaring recklessly to their dive bar or he'd've been done-for for sure. Delivery Guy's helmetless head hadn't hit the pavement somehow though something had hit something or else why the tears streaking why the ribs holding why the gasping to breathe when he wheezed why you didn't look you supposed to look but the man just stared at his dented driver's door which wouldn't close so he yelled why you ridin' so close to my car he never even asked are you okay never even listened never even looked at Delivery Guy he only ranted myopically it's not my fault you ride too close to parked cars bro that's so obvious do you know how much it's going to cost to get this fucking door fixed? Can't you even listen can you listen can you listen can you look at me man I'm in the street because of you—you did this—you but Tough Guy had his fancy Honda sedan to worry about he didn't care that it was his fault he'd sent Delivery Guy flying like a vulnerable baby or that he was the real reason a young man was in the road holding his ribs and trying not to cry.

II. A tall curvaceous gal across the street saw the whole thing and couldn't help herself yo bro quit yelling can't ya see he's hurt *parece que podría tener un pulmón perforado!* She'd seen it all on this dangerous road the punctured lungs broken ribs cracked skulls compound fractures blood gather in rivulets like teamwork and stream toward the gutter the gutter that had also seen it all. Tall Gal with her body-builder figure superior posture and self-esteem her father taught her witnessed the accident in front of Silvio's Italian with sidewalk tables full of hungry families eating breadsticks Caesar's salad large pies lasagna veal parmigiana chicken cacciatore and the old song sang *When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie that's amore*. Tall Gal saw it happen before it happened saw the man parked windows up saw him looking down at his lap saw the light from his phone on his face maybe sidetracked by a text from his ex maybe a UFC video maybe Facetime with his cousin. Not paying attention the man was lost in a daydream like people get. *He better be careful* she thought.

III. Delivery Guy contemplates safety issues he must in order to survive and wake up tomorrow alive it's the nature of the beast the calculated risk the humungous city bus the in-a-hurry yellow cab the black and white squad car the fire engine siren on the shrieking motorcycles the bigheaded muscle cars the brazen pickup trucks the side mirror of the twenty-foot U-Haul that hit him in the scapula last summer and the opened door of the parked cars—parked cars you sometimes get squeezed over into by erratic traffic.

IV. Tough Guy read the text in the car before crossing the street for a large take-out mushroom-pepperoni with anchovies from Silvio's it was another message about his daughter his ex-wife asking him why he didn't call more often a teenage girl needs her father how she gonna grow up tough as nails when men only want one thing if her father don't let her practice arguing with him practice standing up to men she needs to practice the give-n-take of debate so she can develop her self-esteem. Tough Guy felt bad that he hadn't been better as a father to his daughter hadn't taken her to Disney World hadn't taken her to Six Flags New Jersey hadn't taken her to Hershey Park Pennsylvania hadn't spent more time or told her more often *I love you. Why I'm not a different person? What in hell's wrong with me?* he thought but now that his daughter was a teenager a teenager who hated him he thought what was he supposed to do? So he texted his ex his go-to text: *I hear you. You're not wrong. I'll call her tomorrow.* He felt himself sweat the guilt of lying remorseful about his selfishness as a father. Would his daughter ever forgive him? *Tomorrow's a new day* he thought. *I can still change* he thought. *Not too late* he thought. He ached for an escape so he searched last week's UFC Saturday night Fight Island videos and after some of the punches and head kicks and sharp elbows and knees and starry-eyed chokeholds Tough Guy wasn't thinking about how to be a father to his daughter anymore he was thinking about the fun he was about to have at his cousin's watching UFC with a large mushroom-pepperoni and icy six-pack of Bud. He sniffed the Italian aroma from inside his beloved Honda. *I'll call her tomorrow* he thought. Then he opened the door.

Somebody Someday Somewhere

I heard a crash and its echo walking
on my first day of school, dreaming frogs
and strumming parallelograms along
a metal fence on a calm birdsong Monday
morning it was. A blind Thunderbird
speared a convertible VW beetle ejecting
a teenager on a trajectory twenty feet.

The first witness, I smelled the antifreeze
green dripping from a seared radiator
in the rubber air then a remarkable sound
like slow moaning sirens deep down
from a thirteen-year-old boy on the ground
a blond kid named Christian his lungs
droning warning me not to look only I did
and then I saw it, the blood cough mist.
Stepfather was crouched down on his knees
at Christian's side, a woman running
with towels yelled an ambulance on its way.

Other students gathered quiet as a choir
before the hymn and we listened to Christian's
labored breathing thrumming chamber
music, life longing to live. Stepfather weeping
held Christian's nose for mouth to mouth
only the sound subsided stopped and stared off.

Stepfather pounded on his chest counting loudly
methodically as if the proclamation of numbers could
bring a reversal to the permanence of tragedy.
A jumping black dog barked at the despair from behind
a redwood fence then barked some more after
all hope for a next breath fell away and we found each
other's faces and lowered our eyes as a tribe.

One week later a little blond boy on a purple Schwinn Stingray
rode by no bigger'n a pollywog and circled back
his eyes on me as he rolled up, a striking version of his brother,
looking me up and down, he'd heard I was there
so was wondering if I'd seen his brother when he was still alive.
The burden of death swirled in gray-blue saucers
I didn't want to describe the siren sounds or blood cough mist.
He looked to the plum sky and after back to me.

Have any other brothers or sisters? Soon as I said it I regretted it
as he shook his head. We found each other's eyes
and shared a moment that can't be described in words on paper.
A wind of pomegranate and cherry ruffled his hair
like a playful uncle. With mournful charisma of all who grieve
he gave a two-finger Cub Scout salute and then rode
off toward Thorne Street. I tracked his path until he veered right
and vanished, pulled by magnet onto one of the roads
that killed his brother, heading for the intersection at Gettysburg
Ave. In the aftermath of a child's death survivors ask
the oh so profound yet rhetorical: But why him? And why now?

Family and friends ache for order in chaos, sensibility in the senseless,
answers to the unanswerable—nobody wants to hear that it
might all be random. What must he've thought when he reached the spot?
Did he smile at a memory and awaken to the horror of never
together again? Did he steer in little figure eights staring at circling spokes
clockwise from the right counterclockwise from left and want
to stay in the dreamworld of things going round, round and round forever?

Did he stop there to scrutinize the epicenter and listen
for the voice of his brother? It was likely he'd look to Christian's bed
every time he entered their room and that growing up
he'd look around corners and scan the streets. That he'd search crowds
for the back of his brother's blond head and think he saw
him a hundred times only to discover up close the different eyes and nose,
mouth and chin. That he'd search signs the rest of his life.
Perhaps he'd meet somebody someday somewhere who reminded him
of his brother—the voice, an expression, a joke, a gesture
or familiar chewing gum and find ways to spend time with that person
without ever saying why.

Teaching High School in the Bronx During Covid-19

You teach 136 students at a high school in the north Bronx. All remote learning families. You teach 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th grade ELA. It's impossible—you do it anyway. You teach ELA like the course title says but it's really communications skills it's really learning how to make money it's really the student determining every minute today how much money they will make tomorrow. Every move a student makes matters.

On the first day of school for fun you choose a story from Young Adult Fiction, the scene: a talent contest in a school auditorium a kid doing stand-up satirizing teachers and your student reads "...and then the whole audience broke into applesauce" and you and your Zoom scholars laugh because it was meant to be "broke into applause."

When you admit "Nick Kerr," a name you don't recognize, into the Zoom classroom late, he enters determined to do damage declaring "All y'all motherfuckers can suck my dick!" and so you calmly mute his mic but congratulate him on his energetic participation. You say "I'm going to forgive you on behalf of our class," and you invite him to stay. You've surprised him and he surprises you when he nods okay. Oh right, you look again – "Nick Kerr" – you get it now. Before moving on you inform him, "We're here to learn how to make money." He doesn't believe you, because he really thinks he knows how life works. He doesn't care, he feels with certitude his worldly intel. He doesn't need school, you see—so what math, science, English, history. He's an archetypal cult member in a Nike economy that sells mythological superstardom, million dollar payoffs that almost never work. "Look at Tupac" he smiles. "And look at Lebron" he smirks. The young man plays ball and because he is sometimes the best ballplayer on the playground he holds to his Nike notion he can go where LBJ the King has gone. Only problem: he's 5-7 and 130 pounds. You ask "Are you Lebron, 6-9 and 255 pounds? Do all of the colleges know your name, want you to attend, does Nike send reps to your games?"

One week later you say: In ELA there are things you should know. You tell them setting is the when and the where and the feeling in the air. You tell them the enemy of literary essay is excessive plot summary. You tell them third-person omniscient knows the hearts and minds of all. You tell them protagonist can be a bad guy antagonist the good guy. You tell them all letters for the word *against* are in the word *antagonist*. You tell them to remember, you were born at night but not last night.

Two weeks later you say: You better know how
to to two and too. You better know how to there their and they're.
You better not then for than or than for then.
You better not take a wild guess and throw a random apostrophe in.
There's no such thing as could of or should of.
There's no such thing as espresso—it's espresso an Italian word.
There's no such thing as perservere—it's persevere.
There's no such thing as my sister house or my cousin apartment.
You ask the difference between affect and effect.
You ask the difference between a simile, metaphor and symbol.
You ask the difference between tone and mood.
You ask the difference between literary element and literary tool.

Three weeks later you say: You in it to win it every minute?
Some students are while others head the wrong way on a one-way.
In a Zoom room some things are different some the same.
When the teenagers turn in essays it's like the African Serengeti
in southwest Kenya during the ancient annual migration
of one-and-a-half million wildebeests where the herd splashes
and struggles across the murky Mara River in search of
lush grazing grounds, only the teenagers aren't the wildebeests
you are—you are every one of the bedraggled creatures
fighting to keep your head above water as you search for correct
spelling and grammar, for a mind at work at midnight.
The procrastination, frustration and sleep deprivation are the same.

Four weeks later you notice: half of the students haven't turned in gradable work.
In Google Classroom you write comments to one young man:
“Please complete assignment. Re-submit to Google Classroom for a higher score.
Students need to attend remote class every ding-dang day
with their camera ON, produce thoughtful academic-intellectual work and submit
assignments to Google Classroom in order to participate
in their education and earn passing grades. I hope to see you and your sincere
effort soon. Thank you. Where is the Lesson 2 Assignment?
That's what you need to turn in. Where's your Reading-Thinking-Writing work?”

He responds: “the things i didn't do is because i dont know what to do
i just follow you in class but im going to do it and trust me the work is hard for me
some things is just hard for me but i will do it and i will do everything

the right way i just need help in some work i will have the camera on all that stuff dont think im not trying because i am please mister dont call my mother.”

You reply: “I absolutely believe that you can do this work. But don’t clown around. If all’s true above then decide which close-reading topics to ask questions on during class. You need to engage in the learning process and not be looking down at your phone each time I see you on Zoom. Time for excuses is long gone.”

He writes: “ok i will.” But unless you think out of the box he’ll be stuck in paralysis so you plan a 1-on-1 Zoom though you don’t have time and you write as a team: topic sentence, introduce the evidence, the evidence and finally the insightful analysis. It’s impossible—you do it anyway. You teach ELA in the Bronx during Covid-19.

Disappearing Locomotive

I write to hide because my father's dying.
Going, going—which means closer than ever
to death myself. Time accelerates every day
every day the golden sunset seconds sooner.
Think of his death and mine all day long.
The gape-mouth breathless pose of just-after
the still-warm forehead even though he's dead
the blood only now realizing its own death
and duty to turn cold and stop in place, to coagulate.
In his death will come some strange confidence
to be able to untether and float above myself
into and onto the staggering what happens next.

Perhaps Leon and Roy will have *my* corpse
delivered to Neptune Cremation Services
over by the famous Elbow Room Bar & Grill,
their prime rib roast is the Central Valley's best.
He loved their icy Margarita with Blue Agave Tequila.
Perhaps a week later the boys will pick me up
in a football size charcoal box with its clear
plastic container of my earthly cremains.
Perhaps they'll stop in at the Elbow for two
Jameson Black Barrel Irish Whiskey rocks.
The three of us don't drink but it's fun to imagine.

What about a decorative urn from the catalogue
a classy polished brass mother-of-pearl job
or engraved cherry wood with succinct epitaph
~ *He sacrificed friendships to write stories* ~

The relentless pendulum of trips to the doctor
prescription pick-ups tests at Quest Diagnostics
physical therapy Pete's Splendid Barber Shop
and toenail-cutting appointments occasionally puts me
under hypnosis but not as a bird, more so to fly away.
So close to the end he's consistently hard to help
he cares too much about how much things cost he wants
to find the cheaper Visiting Angels
so we tell him they all cost about the same.

One day he denies his promise to hire more help.
That's it. *Fuck it! FUCK it! FUCK IT!*
It's Scorpio versus Leo. I sting, he cries. Too bad.
How is it rage takes over so fast?
Why is it that the insane guy feels so justified?
Good. I'm glad. Let's leave and never come back.
Talking to myself hustling to the car. *To hell with him.*
To hell with everyone around here. Get me out!
In the car fast, forcing my lungs to take a big breath
then driving east on San Jose Avenue on a bee-line to the Bronx
past the yellow *Not A Through Street* and now Country Waffles
Restaurant parking, my thinking lot this long summer.
Target Store with its bright red bullseye blocks my view west
but the fuchsia streaks above state clearly: the sun has nearly set.
One-hundred feet from the San Joaquin Valley Railroad tracks
drawn to where trains roll by and disappear all day and night
he's a disappearing locomotive himself.

Facing the tracks just in case a black behemoth glides by
a chance to observe it up close and smell the oil-stained ties
the grease in spinning metal wheels, the diesel driving the engine.
Sitting there steaming is when it hits me
invisible fingers close on the throat and brittle vertebrae break.
The whole cerulean blue Hyundai Tucson SUV convulses.
And here is the child again. Someday soon to be changed forever
like any child losing a parent, terrified at being abandoned.
Bawling and wanting no one to notice
while desperately hoping someone will.

Dad is going, going and almost gone.
I might not see him alive and breathing ever again.
He no longer cares he isn't sharp as a tack anymore
his getting old reminds me of my own pending doom
how I look in the mirror in the morning and ask
Dad what are you doing here?
Every day he shrinks. Like a Union Pacific caboose
that rumbles by, its image diminishing down the tracks
north to Sacramento or south to Los Angeles.