

AN ALPHABET OF MY DEAD



Robert Pinsky

In the dark bed, against the insomnia and its tedium, I have told them over many times: a game not morbid but reassuring. Different names each time, but with recurrences. I tell them, over not as a memorial comfort, and not for the souls of the dead, but evidence that I may be real. Inside the little deerskin medicine pouch flapping at my saddle, these tokens of who I have been. Therefore I exist, sleepless.

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Harry Antonucci, who used to play basketball at the Jewish Community Center, as many Italian kids did, paying five dollars to join the same way a Jewish boy might find it convenient to join the YMCA.

He was a year ahead of me in school, tall, a good ballplayer although the colored part of one eye was milky dull, skewed away from where his good eye was looking. A sourpuss, swinging his head in an irritable way and too ready to call fouls against himself. In contrast, his graceful, soft jump shot.

The scowl and his swaying walk seemed to express anger at having a bad eye. We made fun of him for being grouchy and for being half blind.

But as we got older he became part of the crowd known as "popular." The night he was killed the car he was in and the one right behind it were both full of kids from the senior class: football players, class officers, a blonde girl named Cornelia Woolley who was Harry's date. She was bruised and scarred; he was the only one killed.

At first it surprised me that Harry Antonucci would be taking out Neil Woolley. She seemed too popular to be linked with a grumpy, one-eyed Italian who swayed sideways when he walked. But trying to remember him I saw that he had been handsome: fine features, white skin, dark curly hair.

And years after that I realized that a girl could be attracted by that wounded manner, the shadow of a lost eye.

*

B, C, D. Some poets. Elizabeth Bishop. The last time she was in public was at the Grolier Book Shop, at the afternoon signing party for my second book of poetry. Then afterwards, getting ready for dinner, the sudden stroke.

A “good death”, fortunate, people called it, but she didn’t get to witness the upsurge in her reputation. Nor Cummings the decline in his. Even before I learned about his rightwing politics, the Red-baiting and anti-Semitism, I had come to dislike the person behind the poems that once attracted me. The reliance on charm came to seem grim, unrelenting.

*

My college friend Henry Dumas shot dead by a cop in a subway car a few years after graduation. Smart, talented, feckless, a bit of a phony, the first person my age to have a wife and child.

I knew just enough to like him for refusing the Negro stereotypes of the time: communications-major frat boy, street tough, jock. His knit cap, his knowledge of the Bible, his fear as he once explained to me that his wife’s father saw through him. His beautiful little boy, a man somewhere now.

*

Becky Eisenberg, my mother’s mother. When she was a teenager she married an older man, a distant cousin, also an Eisenberg. They lived in Arkansas in a settlement of Jews who had all taken the same last name, that of the rich man from their village in Russia who had succeeded as an American businessman. In that village of Eisenbergs outside Little Rock, Becky gave birth to the older man’s daughter, Pearl. Then another cousin, Morris Eisenberg, her own age, came to town on his motorcycle—my grandfather.

When my mother was crazy, Becky, my Nana, took care of me. She was afraid of everything: cars, the mailman, electricity, dogs. Were Nana’s terror and her shame rooted in shame she felt for divorcing the first Eisenberg? Or was there no divorce at all?

Morris and Becky left Arkansas together with the child Pearl. My mother, Sylvia, remembers her half-sister. She remembers Pearl teaching her how to brush her teeth. Then one day they took Pearl to the station in Baltimore and put her on the train, and that was the last Sylvia saw or heard of her.

It must have been 1922 or 1923, Becky and Morris are dead, probably Pearl too, and for the story I depend on Sylvia, my mother, who is the spirit of confusion and darkness incarnate. Except for what she says, the story is locked away among the dead forever.

*

Souls, all vaporous mirrors, registers for me of my deference from them. Robert Fitzgerald and Mason Gross, my philosophy teacher—learned gentlemen, with the gift of study I have never had. As unlike me as they

were, in a different way, Lynda Hull, almost as young when she died as Henry was. Her recklessness of a kind as different from me as FitzGerald's and Gross's scholarship, the difference producing an oddly similar note of constraint, a cordial awkwardness, when I was with her or one of them.

Drugs, drink. The wistfully lurid movies of her poetry, neon and rain and facepaint, the books and languages of Fitzgerald and Gross. Neighbours to my soul, maybe, but not like my soul.

And another alien mirror, Army Ippolito, football coach and Spanish teacher. When he didn't know what else to do, which was several times a week, he had us sing, *Ya las gravioras tien' sus alas abren, sus alas parabolar. Miles de conchas tien' las 'renas, y perlas tien' la mar.* Or something like that. We used to make fun of Army saying, "It doesn't make sense."

One day in need of a digression he told the class how when he was young my grandfather, Dave Pinsky, took him to Yankee Stadium. Army got claustrophobia on the subway, became sweaty and panicky and as Army told it my grandfather was amused and callous, he showed no mercy.

This hardness was a quality Army admired. He considered it a funny story, and I took reflected glory from that, as I believe he intended, which was generous of him. This out-of-it skinny ineffectual Jewish boy: I knew his grandfather, said Army, he was a tough guy and my benefactor.

And I did learn a little Spanish, one of the few things of the kind I have ever mastered. So in college I read Cervantes and Gongora. Armand, Hippolytus, thank you for that and for your kindness.

*

A drowsy spell: it is working. Plural dead in categories like counting sheep, the exterminated Jews of Europe, the obliterated Kallikaks of New Jersey, the dead Laborers who framed and plastered these bedroom walls threaded by other dead hands with snaking electrical wires and the dendritic systems of pipes and ducts, audible.

*

Nan M., my high school girlfriend, dead of lung cancer in her thirties. Bill Nestrick, Mrs. Olmstead, Dave Pinsky, the tough guy who took Army Ippolito to Yankee Stadium, and who died of heart failure at my present age—last week, my Aunt Thelma told me that Sylvia, my mother, used to prevent Dave from seeing me. Why?

*

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, in the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, 1900, rev. 1939, omitted the stanza of George Gascoigne's "Lullaby of a Lover" in which the sixteenth-century poet refers to his penis. Yvor Winters told me about this omission with great amusement, in 1963. All dead, Quiller-

Couch, Winters, Gascoigne, who in his poem does something like what I am doing now:

Sing lullaby, as women do,
 Wherewith they bring their babes to rest:
And lullaby can I sing too,
 As womanly as can the best.
With lullaby, they still the child;
And if I be not much beguiled,
Full many wanton babes have I,
Which must be still'd with lullaby.

Quiller-Couch prints the stanzas in which Gascoigne puts to sleep his eyes, his youth, his will, but omits the last:

Eke lullaby my loving boy,
 My little Robin take thy rest;
Since age is cold and nothing coy,
 Keep close thy coin, for so is best;
With lullaby be thou content,
With lullaby thy lusts relent,
Let others pay which hath mo pence,
Thou art too poor for such expense.

It pleased and amused me to have Winters share this joke on the prudery of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch. Now, Quiller-Couch has something like a last laugh on us as the opprobrious term “phallogentric” rises on the great wheel turned by the engine of death, always churning, as Gascoigne reminds himself:

Thus lullaby, my youth, mine eyes,
 My will, my ware, and all that was.
I can no mo delays devise,
 But welcome pain, let pleasure pass;
With lullaby now take your leave,
With lullaby your dreams deceive;
And when you rise with waking eye,
Remember then this lullaby.

*

Self-destroyers. Carl R, in the eighth grade, the big inoffensive pudgy blond boy who drowned. Jed S, the MIT student who took my poetry class at Wellesley so long ago and presented his poems on long scrolls of

computer paper, the all-capitals dot matrix lines nearly unreadable. The first computer printouts I'd ever seen.

They found Jed in his room with a plastic bag over his head, possibly to enhance some drug he had taken. In the MIT literary magazine he published a dialogue between "Socrates" and "S." At the end of this piece, Socrates says, "S, your arguments have refuted me completely—there is nothing more I can say."

*

U the completely unknown, all the millions like dry leaves whose lives, rounded or cut off in themselves, touched mine not at all.

*

Butch Voorhies, the middle son of the only family that lived in the rooming house next door to us. That miserable neighborhood was stratified: my building housed only families, both buildings allowed only white people, Butch and his two brothers and his drunken father and the mother lived in one large room over the *porte-cochère* of a house full of hard-drinking housepainters, laborers, restaurant workers.

He died in the Navy, some kind of accident. When the father, all but a derelict by then, recognized me in a bar years after Butch died, he asked me to buy him a drink. Maudlin, sentimental, extravagantly dirty. Huck Finn's father.

"*Porte-cochère*" was my mother's word. Once she saw me helping Butch carry home a can of kerosene for their heating stove. He lugged it for ten steps, then I did my ten steps, taking turns all the way from Burroughs' Hardware.

Sylvia scolded me for the friendship. She said the kerosene was to kill the lice on their heads. Keep away from them, said Sylvia, or you'll be covered with vermin.

Then I told her I had seen the stove in that room carpeted everywhere with bedding and clothes, a double hot plate and tiny sink in one corner: the kerosene was for the stove. Now I realize that it wasn't the vermin she feared, precisely, but some worse contagion of poverty or doom.

Mr Ronald Voorhies, Sr., drunkard, poor provider, surely you too are long dead. I offer you, too, as a sacrifice to sleep.

*

Old Mr and Mrs Williams who lived in a velvet shingle house behind those houses on Rockwell Avenue, I thought they had no electricity because the iceman delivered ice for their icebox. With tongs and a rubber pad on his shoulder. He gave us children splinters of ice from the truckbed. Their house, a phantom from another century.

*

X the unknown ancestors of my eight great-grandparents, unseen multitudes who have created my body, thousands of them reaching back into time, tens of thousands, kings and slaves, savages and sages, warriors and rapists, victims and perpetrators.

And also the time-obscured ancestors of this language I write in, the anonymous creators of the music I hear and the machines I use and the musics and machines that made this music, this machine I type at, all the dead fanning back from the apex of this moment to the unthinkably wide fishtail wake of causes.

*

Not YAHWEH but Yetta of *Yetta's Market* on Rockwell Avenue, at the railroad crossing, the little frame storefront tacked onto the frame house. Jerry Lewis invented a song, "Yetta, I'll never forget huh."

*

Zagreus, ancient god of the past, dead one, give me my honey measure of sleep.

ABC

Anybody can die, evidently. Few
Go happily, irradiating joy,

Knowledge, love. Most
Need oblivion, painkillers,
Quickest respite.

Sweet time unafflicted,
Various world:

X=your zenith.