

OLQM

Not one of the lapsed Catholics I fell for later
could guess what those letters stood for.
Most knew "Our Lady," a few got "Queen,"
but the "M" escaped even the most canonical.
"Mother," they might say, "Miracles" or "Mercy,"
just not the true punch line to an orange code stitched
in the lime-green ties of the schoolboys on Arden Street
and in their sisters' plaid wool skirts hemmed below the knees,
knees that nonetheless saw daylight furled on the A train,
saw us public school spuds dazed
by their doughy blush and the rumbling heat,
knees that, like all long-clenched things,
might go anywhere from there, and with anyone.
So praise the boys and girls with the monograms,
praise their fathers who believed in labor and country
and that college was for the Jews,
praise their mothers slipping through the back door
of the Kosher butcher for the lean corned beef,
praise Joe Duffy reading Joyce on the ballyard stoop
and Kevin Simmons with his parboiled face
carving a hooked cross in the library door,
praise the land those boys flew off to
and the red-bandanaed men who killed them both,
praise the jade torrents of the Mekong Delta
and the emerald mists of the Celtic Sea,
the olive body bags, mossy unmarked graves,
orange hair and flaming hair,
praise, too, Maggie Conlon
who crossed herself before she crossed the line,
praise all who've had faith
and those who've had enough of it,
praise Our Lady Queen of Martyrs.

LOTTERY DAY, 1970

We're taking infield practice and shagging flies,
Jersey heat dripping from the bills of our caps,
"Black Magic Woman" on a distant transistor,
kids splashing and shouting in the public pool.
The ribbing and the girl talk are on low.
Someone hits a ball into the tennis courts.
A man in white shorts throws it back gently.
Today the war is coming home.

In an hour my mother will meet me at the door,
still in her nightgown, having watched TV all day
as blue plastic capsules
were drawn from two separate drums,
one of which was full of birthdays.
A Winston in her hand, her eyes will be red,
but she'll be smiling.
All she will say is, "316."

I backhand a grounder near second.
The shortstop turns two.
Crickets are out at noon.
We're all friends—we're all nineteen—
our moms at home,
glued to flickering screens,
while we're out playing the game we know.

SANCTUARY

My grandfather thought he was a German,
dashing in his Pickelhaube, iron cross
and bullet from Verdun, until they told him,
“No, you are not one of us,”
and a clothier named Stern in North Dakota,
who didn't know him, signed some papers,
which sailed him elsewhere, so twenty years later
he could watch *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*
with me on a black and white box in the Bronx.
Quasimodo was an ugly wreck. I remember
the gap tooth, pig nose and seesaw eyes.
The townsfolk teased and menaced him.
My grandfather said, “He is one of us.”
Esmeralda was Maureen O'Hara,
who had curls, breasts and a tambourine
that could make a boy forget he was six.
Hounded as a gypsy, she was set to be hanged.
My grandfather said, “She is one of us.”
I asked, “But how do I know?”
And he said the same way Stern knew
two half-continents and an ocean away,
without a speck of ash on the hood of his car.
At which precise moment the hunchback
swung down on a rope to scoop up the gypsy,
fly her to the belfry and shout, over and over,
a solitary word,
in a splendid voice that belied his brokenness.
It's not often that you know exactly
what a word means the first time you hear it.
Or that every time you hear it after
someone nothing like you
is sailing for your shore.

WAR

When the archivist at Ellis Island met my father a few years before his death and asked what was the most memorable time of his life, he said it was the War but wouldn't embellish.

And when he got sick, the family gathered, waiting for the aneurysm to burst, with hospice nurses in eight-hour shifts to catheterize him, give him shots of hydromorphone for the pain. They were professionally attentive, sidetracked only once in a while by a magazine, a cell phone, the food Mom couldn't stop cooking.

Except for nurse Carlos, back two years from a tour in Iraq, who never for a second took his eyes off Dad, soaked up his accounts of Okinawa, sat with him in the bathroom, watched him gaze out the window, eased the coffee cup from his hand when he dozed in his chair.

Nurse Carlos—a rock from East Newark, buzz-cut, laconic, *Keep Watch* burned in black on his neck.

Dad—his tired tales and the soul we doubted, laced with the prayers of the battlefield dead.

So it was surely as the old Seabee had dreamed a thousand times: After he went in for a nap, Carlos in tow, the rest of us joking, reminiscing, making plans in the living room, a soldier was the last one to see him alive.

ON BEING SLAPPED BY A WOMAN I DON'T KNOW

Intermission at the Opera. Saturday night.
All I know about her is the pageboy cut
of raven red hair. She stands abruptly
then uses the full arc of her body turn
to imprint the left side of my face.
One contact lens now lodged up under its eyelid,
a bicuspid stuck to the inside of my mouth,
my cheek like a pup tent smacked by lightning.
I had never been slapped by a woman before,
though there was something about it I missed.
Bacall giving it to Bogie. Crawford to Gable.
Deserved. Delivered. On to the next scene.
Black and white. Mine seemed technicolor.
Turns out, she had been twirling one tip
of her reading glasses between her front teeth
while the other tip was tickling her ear.
Which she thought was me, from the row behind,
flirting, or trying to filch one of her diamond studs.
Probably some other guy had earned it.
Or I had earned it elsewhere.
Edging my hand under Faye Brown's iron bra,
her dad glued to *Gunsmoke* downstairs.
Teasing my ex-wife for airballing a foul shot
in front of 20,000 fans during halftime
at the Oakland Coliseum on taco night.
Asking my mom, just before heading off to college,
why she let her kids be strapped
and what she got out of watching.
I was a good boy once.
May have been an okay man.
Though the heart never believes this.
Needs a sharp reset. A briskly wiped slate.
That's what I missed. The clarity.

And the wakeup doesn't hurt much,
requires no response.
Just blink a few times, wiggle the jaw.
Welcome rough justice.
The curtain is rising.
Carmen is taking her mark.

THE SCIENTIST

Ponce was on to something. The magic of youth.
Though South Florida, it turns out, not the place to search.

My love, whom the world needs more than it needs me,
needs a bone marrow transplant—the collection of stem cells
from her blood for re-introduction after extreme chemo.
They are looking for the youngest cells, the uncorrupted.

But on Tuesday, her count of these, per the hemocytometer,
is six, too low to even start the process. Twenty-five,
they say, is the goal, forty would be fabulous.
They will search again Wednesday.
A Filipino nurse named Teo tells her as she leaves
that the young cells will come out of hiding
if someone rubs the arches of her feet.

Which someone will be me that evening,
after I research the concept like the scientist I am,
discovering it to be ridiculous even by Internet standards,
where endorsed stimulants include sweet potatoes
and weightlifting, but nothing remotely podiatric. Still,
I do like her feet. Midwestern. Optimistic. True.

We start out a bit confused. Did he mean rub or massage?
Top, side or bottom? I show her a plastic card,
correlating regions of the sole to internal organs,
that a coed-turned-shaman gave me in the 60s,
after we shared an interesting night.
My love is not convinced,
though while pressing and squeezing for a full forty minutes,
I can't resist some attention to the base of her pinky toes,
which apparently commune with her earlobes.
She asks if chatting would break my concentration.

Wednesday morning, the only number that means something
isn't the Dow or how many runs the Giants scored.
It's seventy-nine.

Who knew that at my age I could do anything
to interest the young. Who knew how ready I had become
to abandon science and play the goddamn Pied Piper.
I see all those bright cells texting each other as they leave
the comfort of the marrow for what my fingers have promised
will be the role of their lives.

LAND'S END

As the light comes up, first shorebirds come in
one by one to tip the steeped granite
where surf breaks black to blue to white,
then their kin fill in quietly below
as a stream's bustle spills the tide sideways and slips
a bleached herring bone from its windowpane stone.
Plumes of gold bottle grass never enlighten
the igneous char and tilted slate,
nor do cormorants believe in the squall,
gravid kelp swales or sardines shivered down,
just as lizard and rock have different knowledge
of each other, yesterday, the gutted cliffs, the sun.
You may find you aren't needed, which is not the same
as unwelcome, and there is an order without design.

CARAVANSARY

My buddy asks why they call it *independent living*, then answers his own question: "Because it's not."

About a hundred geriatric women and seven men are figuratively connected by yards of yellowed plastic tubing propagating from hissing oxygen tanks like a root system they dragged with them from the old country to yet another barren passage.

A man from Oaxaca trims hedges in two feet of snow. Half-solved jigsaws splay in dust on card tables. *Tootsie's* in the social hall for the fifth time this month. A Matagalpan woman slips a brownie into a widow's beaded purse. Sittercise, story time, something hurts every day, and there's no bazaar at the end of this slog, though two grizzled girlfriends parade the latest walkers as if shopping underwater, for what they cannot say.

A mason from Mixco helps a grandma from Yonkers make solitaire moves on a rococo tray in her bed. A teacher from Soyapango sets place cards for dinner. No salt allowed, nothing to die for, so suicides are beside the point and elevator talk quite civil, even by those who were vile for their first eighty years. Sons do stop by, with their sons, for the family day buffet.

Sovereignty and asylum in the eye of the beholder, here is the junction of two endless goings, the ego's laundromat, where rashes spread like wildfires but nothing is more contagious than dignity, much of which radiates from kitchen and garden: Their names are Rosa, Beatriz, Miguel and Hernán.

So it's OK not to give a fuck what papers they have and just thank them for looking after our mothers.