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Time After Time

Mark Halperin
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SPEECHLESS

Long past missing anyone, then
we will make little houses of our words
in honor of work they once performed,
and sitting by their shaded windows gaze
over a landscape that never changes.

The warmth of our own bodies
will heat the air. Light will pool outside
in the boughs of swaying pines and trellises
with a smell of sea-spray, and our breath
be as easy to hold as an open door.

TELL ME

Tell me a secret, something you've never told
anyone else, he said, and though I knew
he regularly asked others, made the same
request of them and that I was no one special,
I didn't refuse, aware I was handing him power

over me, as you hand power to a love, as if to say,
here, I trust you. He asked for a bond, offering
nothing in return. And such was his version or
inversion of charm, the ease, the confidence
with which he asked, its sincerity, that I suspect
for him it was no more than wheedling
a prescription for Percodan or rummaging through
someone's unlocked drawers, rather than
manipulative. He used what talents he had
to keep himself on a par with who
he thought of as you. And now that he's dead,
it's not as if those secrets revert to their owners.
He keeps them. Useless as they proved to be,
they confirm his integrity, tenuous stand-ins for him.

SONNET

The streams of droplets fall
in lines like little fences
on the other side of which
lies yesterday, its hours
thin as hair. You could be
the streaked blank window,
blocks of black felt

or the hand holding them,
the vigorous wiping away
of an hour's work as if it were
an accumulation of dust or
cobwebs—even that student,
eyeing the clock's drawn out
advance on tomorrow.

PAIN

He thought my poor disloyal friend, that death
was personal, and tried to dull his fear
with words. When that failed, he would stare
at comic books. If he left
letters unanswered, drank in the basement, missed
work as often as he went, wasn't it

further proof a mirror can take its toll,
a wall metamorphose into an abyss?
Romantic, or was it egoist
drawn to what appalled

him, he slid more and more into a distance
no one could breach. Had I insisted

on arguing that death was less frightening
than pain, would he have listened? It was easier
to let him be, to brood. We posture:

who's the guiltier, whose sin
more unpardonable? Turn away from
an inconvenient confrontation

or unconsciously postpone it, and who's
to judge or forgive you? Is nothing worse
than cowardice? Though the dead pursue us,
they only listen to
themselves. Tell him, although we die alone,
tell him, it's once and done.

HEAVEN

What we held back, refused
to admit to, will escape,

whistling like gas, rising

like arms that have been pinned,

defuse, thin, less and less--

like the flickering light of stars

whose distance can only be

expressed in terms of time.

FRIENDSHIP

Just out of grad school, the three of us boozed,

smoked dope, concocted intricately lewd

“Dear Abbey” letters late at night.

They taught me friendship's openness

and trust—if those are two—and left me

to figure out the rest. Jon didn't write

back when they moved—too far off

for dropping in. But I kept in touch with Steve.

Something would gnaw at me, I'd phone

and he'd fill me in. He was the one

who told me John was found in a garbage strewn room,

he'd hung on till they got permission

to turn off life-support. “Don't drink
any more,” John would pause and let you think
he'd finished, before he added, “than
I used to.” His death was no surprise,
though it hit me hard. Steve's was in it's unrelenting
speed. Lung cancer. Who can

say what role cadged pills and smokes
played, or why Steve hardly every spoke
of the love his father withheld and ours
couldn't compensate for? What hurt
did I conceal from them or from myself,
what was the source of that anger

that erupted without warning? Confess:
there are injuries friendship can't redress,
an inherent loneliness we can't confide
to anyone. What did you hide
from me, my irreplaceable friends, besides
your selves before you died?

WHATEVER IS MISSING

How childish the stubbornness
that refuses to decide:
which will be the greater loss--
the sight of branches
waving in a tumultuous wind

or the inimitable scratch
of their thrashing? Light dims;
sound fades. Night
wipes away the traces. Thank you,
you'll say, polite, though

declining feigned friendliness.

You'll pay what you owe,
let that be that. Less clear is
just how long the scent
of faintly resinous air will linger.

NAPS

Taking naps scared me; they seemed
a suicide—a wasting of what time
you had. Weren't dreams
illusions? Though my head swam
when I tried to read, lying down
felt dangerous. I'd recall the woman who drowned

herself, and try to imagine how much
it took to leap from a wind swept boat deck
to the frigid sea, from the touch
of a terminally ill husband, the wreckage
of the future, to the swirling current.
Can despair grow so all embracing, one

brief struggle seems a fair exchange
for ending it? Remember the kid who'd wonder
how you tell which
was the real, which the dream you'd wake up from,
the nightmares that left you screaming? Who said
you move beyond that? With age you discover regret;

you tire easily. Sleep seems
to suit you. "Row, row, row your boat," you sing,
"life is but a dream,"
as if naps could only bring

refreshment, the innocence of childhood
when you couldn't imagine you'd close your eyes for good.

GHOSTS

You spot them just as they turn
a corner like shadows edging
into night. Or they surround
you, noiseless as rain, brushing
your shoulder in their flimsy coats.

If they seem to have surrendered
vowels and consonants for dancing
hands, scrawls still cross their faces.
Called to repeatedly, they back away;
ignored, they gather like clouds

and then go on without a nod. In time
you will convince yourself they wait
for you as if they'd mastered patience,
wait as snow does, as if we all become
like weather, unsettled backdrop, a decor.

LOOKING FOR ANDREW

When I search his name on the internet,
I get a list of rock musicians, artists,
but not the person I knew. He resists
my efforts. That one would chide my lack
of rhythm, scowl when I'd lose track—

A part or B, repeat or turn?
A year of effort later my five-string locked
with his fiddle; I've learned the chords and knock
each part out with clock-like precision.
Back up for me, lead for him,

we play our parts. We reach
an accord of sorts. But our different agendas persist,
our conflicting aesthetics. The avant-gardeist,
he strikes me as a dilettante,
unwilling to put in the effort art

requires, while I must seem lacking
spontaneity, notions of time at the heart
of that unvoiced conflict I gingerly skirt
with silence, or is it hauteur, pride,
the guilt that even now I hide from?

He leaves for another job, another

life. Three decades will pass before
he visits and we sit facing each other,
unaware he's got less than a year
to live. I name a tune. Unsure,

we start to play. Nothing's changed:
he's far and close, like our music that combines
melody and cadence, that we climb
out of ourselves on, anonymous
agents, as time beats on without us.

FORGETFULNESS

How little there is
to forget, I'll think
that evening, the blur
of hills becoming
plains and the plains

horizon. Thought
will replace thought, fade

as smells do, as spaces
between trees we can
no longer distinguish.
A smile will cross
my lips, acknowledgment
of this justness, all else
seem as far away as
once the future was.

