

Shades

CULLEN PECK

nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals
the power of your intense fragility: whose texture
compels me with the color of its countries,
rendering death and forever with each breathing

—e. e. cummings

It is only April, but already the Piedmont Plateau has seen its oaks tremble and unfurl with an acid green shower of pollen. I can run my fingers down the brick walls and rocking chair on the screen porch, cutting words across so many layers of that poisonous-looking grit. The once-black dog comes inside looking as if she's begun to mildew. I am only here for the weekend, visiting family for a rare moment, hurried between rocking chairs and porch swings. Cups of ice water and lemonade in mason jars gather slick condensation as I take in the ramble about this cousin's new baby, the cat that needed a second surgery, the resurgent allergies already shunting everyone indoors. I would like to stay longer, for lately, cooped up with the new puppy in my cramped Manhattan apartment, my mind has made many restless excursions across the Mason Dixon line, down through Atlanta and past Macon, skirting above Savannah and into the marshes of St. Simons Island. "She rises from stiff knees, / Stiffly," says Conrad Aiken, "and treads the pebble path, that leads / Downward, to sea and town. The marsh smell comes / Healthy and salt, and fills her nostrils" (58-61).

I did not grow up in St. Simons—I am an Atlantan by birth and upbringing, freed, by so much urban grandeur, of my mother's warm tidal drawl. Still, it holds a part of me in its thrall, tuned down to the soft hum of long grass, tickling, on certain days, the back of my mind. Before the island morphed into someone's revenue opportunity, when the Gullah people still grew rice fields along the south shore in the African tradition, I chased the neighbors' dogs in and out of great skeletal swaths of Spanish moss and tiptoed around sand spurs. There is no sky bluer than the one that cradles a marshland: it is not a cowboy blue, but a great heron blue, cool despite the hot, sticky summer, and

as hazily impenetrable as the surface of the sea. Beneath it, crooked streams, running through mottled stretches of grass, cover the razor-sharp edges of clam beds so old they have grown into smaller islands that tatter bare feet. “Mud and reeds, the reeds / rattling like bones” (Aiken 10-11). It is a skeletal, whispering place, that island.

The reeds rattle, leaping in eastwind, rattling
Like bones. In Fond Remembrance Of. O God,
That life is what it is, and does not change.
You there in earth, and I above you kneeling.

—Conrad Aiken

We held my grandfather’s funeral among lilies in the only Catholic church on the island. Laid across his coffin, and illuminated by the slanted geometry of the skylight, was the pearl rosary he had prayed every night for forty years, as he paced the hallway of his shotgun house, whispering his three girls to sleep. He was a nearly silent man with Popeye forearms and blue eyes that magnified in his glasses. To the young child I was, he walked and breathed with all the mystery of the winding marsh streams and cottonmouth trails left in the mud; he was made up of something that had come from an unknown world and would make its way through this one, under the reeds and sawgrass. When I came to know him, he seemed as brittle as those reeds in winter, grey and rigidly upright. My grandfather is not shaped by bones anymore—his ashes have undulated in the Atlantic, riding sea currents around the world, taking him to places that the poverty of his lifetime did not allow him to see. Yet the memory of his fingertips against the rosary beads, rough callous caressing pearl, has been the backbone of my mother’s faith for as long as I can remember. The beads run along the spine of her lifetime, softened by skin, supporting her shoulders, steadfast against her heart.

In Fond Remembrance Of. The gravestones across from the Catholic church are immaculate, tended by someone I have never seen but whose hand has guided the elephant ears to grow broad in the dappled light filtering through oaks. Standing amidst them almost a decade after my grandfather’s funeral, I think of Conrad Aiken’s poem “God’s Acre,” in which a woman cuts grass among the gravestones of the men who have died at sea. The sweep of the poem is as smooth as a sea wind, breaking only over the staccato interruptions of half-read epigraphs. *In Memory Of. In Fondest Recollection Of. In Loving Memory Of.* There are names of course, but the people the names belong to cannot be more than dreams to the woman who tends the graves. As she clips, she imagines the dead men, risen at night, clanking their chains with brittle

skeletons as they “sit in moonless shadow, gently talking” (31). And all around, there is the marsh, where life always half-echoes between the grass, rustling with suggestions and long forgotten words that have managed to survive time by burrowing in a fiddler crab’s hole. The dead men whose graves she tends are sailors only, poor wandering souls for whom she wonders if “Sea burial, then, were better?” (44). Yet she clips and clips, sentinel and caretaker to these men and their ghosts, rare and lonely in her labor. All the while, “the marsh smells, too, / Strong in September” (9-10). The smells and the salt are healthy, hardy, full of the rotting plant and animal matter that gives life to that which comes after it.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

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This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old
mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

—Walt Whitman

In the graves of seamen, as in those of tool- and die-makers like my grandfather, grass grows up from “under the faint red roofs of mouths.” My mother fingers her rosary and prays for her own mother, for me, for her other two children who have grown too old to be whispered to sleep. She tends her field so carefully that even the wildflowers bend loving heads to her fingertips. Under those fingers, there are bones like the bones of my grandfather, bones that wind their secret cross-trails through her body like the waterways in the marshlands she calls home. “Dem bones, dem bones, dem bones of mine, dem bones gonna rise again,” goes the spiritual. In the silver, rubbed smooth under her fingers, she resurrects the sound of her father at night, whose voice maintained the gateway to her dreams; in each Hail Mary, a flower adorns the gravestone that no one sees but she. She kneels amidst the many epitaphs of her life, trimming memories in honor of those who, though dead, have never been wholly lost. They sit among us as we drink lemonade, turning their gray faces to the familiar rhythm of our voices.

Bodies may have no great opinion on the state of the land they inhabit, yet we must trim the grass that grows up between those who have gone to rest. Somehow, we are beset with the need to keep tidy the places that contain our past, treating them with an attention that even the present does not always receive. On battlegrounds, where the blood of brethren is more often shed than that of strangers, we pour concrete foundations for large brass plaques, emblazoning what little we can recall upon them. There is, I think,

an undeniable call to homage, an awareness—despite our rationality—of the ghosts that remain among us, calling for help with matters they cannot attend to themselves. Remembering the lost is not the act of a single evening, of a raised toast and specially purchased black tie; memorializing is a lifetime occupation, a custodial necessity that calls for daily maintenance.

In the bend of Denbar Creek, a deep streambed running through the marshes on the western side of the island, fishermen draw up their nets and quiet their engines, letting in the whisper of the marsh wind as it rubs up against the sawgrass. It is there, they recall, that a group of enslaved Igbo people, rather than submit to a life of slavery, walked together into the water, bearing their chains down until the rattling was drowned by the tide. It was only one small rebellion among countless others over four hundred years of slavery—one determination to hold tight to dignity. But its ghosts remain in the minds of the fishermen. Some tell the story differently: in and out of the mouths of storytellers, cradled by dancing tongues and time, the Igbo people are brought out of the water, unclasped from their chains. They did not walk into the water, some say, as much as step off the ship and raise their arms in unison, lifting themselves into the heron blue sky to fly back across the Atlantic, back home. Others say something different. In the end, the facts of the event do not matter; I like to think that each story is as true as its ability to endure. The tending of a folktale, like the tending of poor men's graves, is a labor of honor that requires a certain kind of faith in the resurrection of lost things. Risen, drowned, flown away or not, the slaves of Igbos' Landing gave life to a pride that has endured, that bows the reverent heads of the fishermen who dare not disturb the place with their cast nets. *In Fondest Recollection Of. In Memory Of.* In the mouths of storytellers and the perfect quiet of the bend in Denbar Creek, where their memory is reverently trimmed and tended, you can hear their lost souls talking gently.

“And He Said Come.” ’ Josephus Burden, forty,
Gross, ribald, with strong hands on which grew hair,
And red ears kinked with hair, and northblue eyes,
Held in one hand a hammer, in the other
A nail. He drove the nail . . . This was enough?
Or—also—did he love?

—Conrad Aiken

As I lie in bed in my Greenwich Village apartment, awake on the edge of dawn, my eyes fall on the woman beside me. She belongs to this city in a way that I never will; her voice has its cadence and she runs with its unabashed syncopation, moving in, around and against it. She has the softest skin of any-

one I know. Over time, we have become each other's electronic hum, present primarily as a backbeat. Sometimes it is comforting, other times frustrating, but mostly routine—equal in interest, perhaps, to breathing.

The sun slips under the blinds and warms the air until everything feels as bulbous and dizzying as the inside of a balloon. The streaks across my face are more heat than light, and I turn away from her side of the bed, creeping down into the bottom corner in a futile attempt to keep cool. She will get up before I do, showering sometimes, though not always. I will keep my eyes closed, but it can almost always be assumed that I am awake; she will assume it. After she gets up, whichever pillow she ended up with the night before will still smell like her when I get home in the evening, when I make the bed, clean the room, start dinner. I do not presume to know her better than she knows herself, but I know when she is running out of orange juice. I know when she will ask to have her pants patched or her hair cut. I know how her fingers and toes move when she is between wakefulness and sleep. I know she will come home soon if she is not already here.

Lately, there have been more and more long, idle days in the middle of the week when she is busy and comes home too late to eat with me. Sometimes I find myself counting the hours by her absence. Alone in a room full of the memories of our lovemaking, I fold the sheets back over the comforter in careful creases, stack books that have been shunted into corners and under chairs, sweep spare pennies out from under the bed. The ghosts of long hours that have passed between us rattle brittle chains deep in the chambers of my heart, far beneath my bones. In silence, I tend to the buried things, to the gentle talking that echoes only in lovers' tombs. The room is softly colored, and sometimes it feels complete in a way that is so purely human, it aches. It does not hurt or sting, it is not an extraordinary, excruciating thing: it simply aches as joints ache, feet ache, as hearts that have loved all day long with no time to rest ache.

Weaving in and out of the day-to-day mundane of our life together, the kind of love that we think of as nearly unbearable still somehow remains a fragile, waiflike thing. In the diffuse glow of city streets coming in through the window, we burrow into one another's shadows, consumed by the insatiable need to draw impossibly closer; in these moments, love resurrects itself until it is so large it frightens us. Yet its livelihood relies on the care that comes only in the time *between* the embraces, when absence creates the tombstones of our memory and folding sheets, starting dinner before she comes home, making sure her favorite shirts are clean—these rituals keep our ghosts alive enough to whisper to each other. When love's voice grows soft against

the drone of daily life, we attend those things that love, by itself, cannot attend.

As the woman of Aiken's poem cuts grass across the graves, her joints, too, must ache. The grass gums up the clippers until they are almost unusable, and all the while she thinks of the men on whose graves she kneels. "Burden! Who was this Burden, to be remembered? Or Potter? The Potter rejected by the Pot." Men whose names, for her, are all that's left of them, men whose loved ones could be close or distant but, regardless, are absent.

Who was this Burden? This Burden—her burden, if it is right to call it such—is to remember, to recall with dutiful maintenance, the ghosts that cohabitate this place. And Potter? He lies in a potter's field, a poor man with a soul too restless to grow roots deep enough to merit prestige among the living. But his is a soul that still hears the mewing of "The owl / That hunts in Wickham Wood" (35-36); he remains, whispers with the marsh wind, observes the world turning back around on itself, new, old, dead, and alive all at once. She kneels alone amidst the bones of strangers and loves, as best she can, the ghosts whose day-to-day consists of little now but witnessing that which lives on. All the while, the sawgrass rattles in the wind. Unfurling from the fiddler crab holes, life wriggles and squelches in the mud. Something comes back even after it has left, something always returns from the graves, sits in moonless shadow, *gently talking*. It is something to be tended to.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths
for nothing.

—Walt Whitman

As time passes and the first of May arrives, I write at the window to catch a breeze blowing up from the Hudson River. All along the Southeastern coast of the United States, turtle nesting season has begun. In many places, beach construction is banned, and conscientious residents replace their white porch lights with amber-red bulbs. Hatchlings use the reflection of moonlight off the sea waves to find their way into the ocean, and the red glow from porches does not distract them. Under the cover of night, thousands of tiny turtles erupt from the dunes where, two months earlier, their mothers buried them. Impossibly fragile against the rage of an immense world, the hatchlings flutter like waterlogged butterflies over the mountainous beach to fight their way, against the tide, into an endless ocean. For the average person, to see a live, wild sea turtle at all means to see one only at its birth or for the brief return to land that occurs each time it lays its eggs; even so, the seeing always

comes with a rigorous attention to time and a willingness to rise impossibly early or stay long after the setting sun, watching the dark ocean. In between that time, these massive, ancient animals inhabit a world to which we have little access. Even to the dedicated naturalist, the turtles are ghostly creatures with lifespans as long as any human's, silent and elusive, breathtaking in their sleek, primordial strangeness. And yet, despite the unfathomability of their existence, there remains a small but steadfast group of people who tend to the delicate sandy wombs full of turtle eggs, protecting them in honor of a richness of life that, so little seen, must be taken on faith.

Beyond—or perhaps because of—the sheer joy of resurrection that comes with watching these miniscule children of the ocean crawl home by instinct alone, there is an even more reticent attendance to their long winter absence. While the hatchlings navigate a world which seems so vast as to be unreal, spectral, beyond imagination, the steadfast and faithful stand guard over their dunes, fighting development projects that threaten the existence of this mysterious species. Meanwhile, sea turtles themselves tend to the sea floor, chewing down the seaweed beds with their clipper-like beaks, keeping the vast underwater fields trimmed well enough that they do not choke out the homes of slippery fish and skeletal crustaceans that people rely upon for food. *In Memory Of* the great beasts and their tiny offspring, whose mystery keeps alive the breathtaking love that connects us to this earth, we catalogue and count each fragile egg. *In Fondest Recollection Of* us, perhaps, they keep alive the fish that feed a strange world on land. All that we do not tend risks being tangled up in seaweed. Without the turtles to trim the ocean floor, that which sustains us would grow scarce.

She rises from stiff knees,
Stiffly, and treads the pebble path, that leads
Downward, to sea and town. The marsh smell comes
Healthy and salt, and fills her nostrils. Reeds
Dance in the eastwind, rattling; warblers dart
Flashing, from swaying reed to reed, and sing.

—Conrad Aiken

When I was growing up, before my grandfather died, an abandoned dock stretched out over the creeks and sawgrass, beginning just past the place where my grandparents' street turned from pavement into gravel and from gravel into a mangy weed. Braving the crooked sections of wood sunk deep into the mud and minding the twisted nails that had worked their way out of the gray boards, we children gathered at the farthest point, where the man-made skyline over that mysterious marsh had long fallen into a crossing

stream, plywood only just peeking through the clam-bed graveyards. We were so far out that land seemed only a distant suggestion made around the edges of the sky, and the wind that cooled our sunburnt shoulders—along with the crab traps we'd sunk hopefully into the muddy water—were all that mattered. Since then, someone has bought up the land and built, in place of our weeds and cockleburrs, a gated community with high stucco walls that gleam a gloating hotness in the mid-afternoon sun. I do not know what has happened to the dock where we caught blue crabs with raw chicken breast and dared one another to step out into the gray-brown mud that could steal the shoes off your feet—the fence is too high to see over, and I am too old to go climbing walls into backyards that are not mine.

In tending to the marshlands that haunt my adulthood, I know only imperfect words, careful sentences that are trimmed again and again to keep the ghosts alive. Something in me strives to carve, over and over, the epitaphs that might mark moments in my life. It matters not, I think, that I revisit the dock that reached out into my childhood imagination. The Igbo people at Denbar Creek did not need to fly to bear witness to a reality beyond what we can see. The sea turtles that crawl into the ocean, no matter where they go after they disappear from sight, leave behind a call to remember, if nothing else, that they will come back, that they are real and lasting, and that keeping them alive for generations to come will require a certain stalwart faith. It is, perhaps, the faith that my mother has, the faith that it takes to trim the grass in a poor man's graveyard even as the clippers gum up with the dewy pulp of long labor. We protect the mysteries of this world, allowing the unknowable immensity of the past to cohabit with our present. We must.

nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals
the power of your intense fragility: whose texture
compels me with the color of its countries,
rendering death and forever with each breathing

—e. e. cummings

Twilight fades to its last glow across the Hudson, sketching the outlines of highrises in New Jersey. On the tables of this outdoor riverside restaurant, fake candles flicker, illuminating nothing, leaving the visible world outside our table shadowed by its own intense fragility. Sitting here on the edge of the city, you can even see stars if you have the patience to look long enough.

Across from me sits the woman I have loved and lived with long enough to forget what it might be like not to know one another. She wears the jacket I often steal from her closet, and her hair has slipped out of its rubber band,

framing her cheeks. I know that face so well, I could sketch its outline with my eyes closed. It has been storming, and the air is thick and wet and tastes almost sweet when I open my mouth to lick dry lips. In the silence between us lies the weight of an ending, full of all the impossibilities that we can no longer ignore, and the words of severance, so often misused in anger, are much heavier here in the soft half-light of evening. We are not parted just yet, but already our love has become a ghostly thing. In the bags that I have packed back in our apartment, I cannot find a way to stow it secretly, to bring it, whole and alive, away with me.

Yet even now, as the world seems to tumble off its axis, I would not call what is over gone. With love so rare and fragile a thing, its ghost must be tended to, its name and epitaph carved and reread in the long labor of remembering. *In Fondest Recollection Of*. Like the sea turtles, it might live long elsewhere and then come back to reproduce, to renew itself and its kin. Or perhaps it may crawl into the ocean, and disappear totally in the depths. Regardless, it is there, and it still watches. It hears the mewing of the owl that hunts in Wickham Wood. As the years lead us, parted, through the seasons, I will keep an ear out for the muted rattling of chains, the gentle talking between epitaphs. Standing in the streets of Greenwich Village or wandering through the sawgrass and cockleburs of a far more ancient place, I will rise, with stiff knees, and listen to the warblers sing.

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