



Time After Time

*Mark Halperin*

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Artwork by Bobbie 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,

diffuse, 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 Jon 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,” Jon 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 ever 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 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.