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Time Zones

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Time Zones

HALLIE SANTO

Submitted for Partial Fulfillment
of the
Prerequisite for Honors
in English & Creative Writing

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“...the prison of time is spherical and without exits.”

- VLADIMIR NABOKOV, *SPEAK, MEMORY*

Nested

CRACKED STATUE

She does not wear
a hat of snakes,

so she wonders why
they are stone-still before her.

They do not mock, but envy her:
like Philomel, she speaks without a tongue.

Yet they can walk
away when the lights fall.

She longs to follow, tries
to dance, but a black vein

appears on her arm —
a scar, a sanction.

QUERCUS

This is the house
where I was born;
and this is not me
on the sidewalk,

out of time.

This headless oak,
limbless quartered man —
this is not the oak
whose acorns I collected.

A dummy acorn
could not save me,
let alone Cincinnatus: his seasick
cry sways the branches.

A man imprisoned in a book;
An oak imprisoned in his hands;
A child in her childhood,
A violin in a void.

NESTED

The Holocaust and 9/11
spared us, but my mother
still doesn't let me get on
a plane to St. Petersburg

or buy Matryoshka
dolls with lead-
paint patterns
at Brighton Beach.

What could be
is always more
frightening
than what is

when you are
the child who isn't
allowed to die.

HOMESICKNESS

New York why do you want everyone
to love you?

You who put a roof
of marquee lights
over my head
and watched me grow up --

you have been a second
father to me. I could never
love you; Dolly Haze could
never love a Humbert.

You will never protect me
from the monster under
my bed, the snake that rumbles
as it winds its way downtown.

You are the man in the
man-hole, hiding your balding
head from the sunlight, looking
up between layers of rustling fabric.

THE TIME TRAVELER

When we met I thought
you came from England
but before I was born

you were flying to Australia
and back to the west coast city
called New York By-and-By

while I was in New York
by my mother's side.
When I was a child

you were already
wearing loafers and listening
to Stravinsky and Messiaen.

You saw Television play
at CBGB's in the summer of 1974.
Your mantle is a marquee of moon rocks.

You were taken prisoner in Mexico
and considered shooting yourself.

You were taken prisoner
in a border clash

in sixteenth-century Scotland
and performed onstage
in Edinburgh centuries later.

When we met you were a student
in Boston who had heard
every great album

from 1967, 1977, 1988, 1991, and 2020,
from Manchester, from Minneapolis,

but you were there
in New York when I
got my first kiss –

you had the same name
as the artist singing about
his camera on the radio.

You were in one scene
in a nightclub in *Pretty in Pink*.

You were in one scene
in Chernyshevsky's only novel.

You were in one dream
I had when I was eighteen,
smiling down at me smugly,

because I must have been
smiling at you until I woke up
to the sound of my boyfriend's voice.

THE DYSPLASIA PARADOX

They say I don't have cancer:
this mark is just the period
at the end of the note
my body left me
before an unsuccessful suicide;

I will never have cancer
if I let them
pull these ragged pieces
out of my body.

I will never have cancer
as long as I keep
dying my way through life:

staggering like the elderly
women who forget

what their bodies are for.

FAUCET

Your
grand
-mother

is dying
your grand-
mother is dying.

My grandmother
has been
dying

one
cough
at a time,

one
phone call
at a time.

One
from her
inebriated brother –

*just so you know,
your grandmother
is still dying.*

One
from her husband
presenting a baby

cousin
I've never
seen before –

*her grand-
mother
is dying.*

Their words
won't stop
trickling in,

drops from
a leaky faucet
I can't repair.

THE MÖBIUS STRIP

Press the present
to the past and all

time will exist along
a one-sided ellipse

that twists in
the spot where you cannot

meet your former self.

True Stories

I.

This is how I got my imagination back,
a woman once told me. When I find
myself in a familiar place, I pretend
I'm an alien. I've never seen

buildings like these before; where I live,
I am taller than all the trees and the fields
shine like sea glass. These are games
I would play with myself as a child.

One morning in the middle of her
teenage years, she woke up to find
the tarantula hand of the lodger

on her bare leg. She pretended to
sleep through his heavy breathing
and the crack of his belt buckle.

She wishes we could all become
children again in the afterlife.

II.

This woman used to think
adults held all the answers;

so does the boy on the train
who speaks to his grandfather
in questions. "Why
are we waiting so long?"

"Because there are still people
getting on the train.
They're all going
to the baseball game."

"Why is there a bridge
over the tracks?"

"So the trains and cars
are kept separate."

"Will another train pass ours?"
The grandfather is silent
until the boy sees the rush
of distorted faces and metal.

III.

I can only miss
people I haven't met
the way I miss a book
I've finished reading.

The uncle who gave me
his name may have
never walked the earth:

Perhaps it just spat him out
and collapsed in on him
to form a grave.

My mother always said
he died in a freak accident;
and like any great novelist,
she won my trust.

IV.

I am tired of stringing together
adjectives that barely describe
what I hear when I listen
to music, a young man told me.

This is why he plays guitar
instead of keeping a journal.

V.

I imagine future lives
for a lot of people, said
the girl; sometimes they
turn out right.

I read too many books;
sometimes I see
people as characters.
And people

often follow
the line of action

of a book. It's almost

as if they are aware
of the line and they
follow it nonetheless.

VI.

If time is as it is
in Nabokov's mind – an orb,
the past and present meeting
end to end, as in a lemniscate –

then we, in the present, ping
to and fro, passing and rolling
over each other. "He rolled

over me. I rolled over him. We
rolled over me. They rolled
over him. I rolled over us."

Time Zones

THE TIME TRAVELER IN ALGIERS

The walls are weeping pale and red:
today, he's come again.
But do not fall to knees and pray
below the arches of this cafe:
no one listens in Algiers.

He was the beginning of a man,
the beginning of a mustache
on his thin lips, and a tendency
towards eating with his hands.
He scans the maps of old Algiers.

His body towers when he stands,
but, seated, he just babbles.
The walls are bleeding blue and gold:
his cobalt eyes are turning cold
enough to freeze Algiers.

IT IS EASIEST TO LOVE BY NIGHT

for those who wish to hide
their imperfect bodies
from lovers' sight;

for those who take
shelter beneath
streetlights that caress
their shadows.

"With all insomnia, I love you,"
Tsvetaeva told beloved Blok,
as though insomnia impelled her
admiration, her nocturnal need

to stroll along the river bank,
keeping her vigil,
hanging her lonely head
like a lamppost.

TIME ZONES

There is no way
to say *I miss you*
in that language, only
You cause a lack in me,

which is the best way to say
I am aching to know
someone I've never known –
senseless to your ears.

So when I think
about you flying home,
I try to think instead
about the uncanniness of

time zones:
as you travel west
through imperceptible obstacles,

hours of your life
hang in the air
and never pass.

SKY AND LAND

Just as Escher saw water
in the feathers of birds
and the sky in fish-scales

I see the sky beneath
the wing of the airplane:
urban galaxies,

a mirror image
of the Big Dipper
in the streetlights.

Let's cross the sound
on that strand of light;
I'd rather not

walk on water,
but fall in, drown,

CEMETERY GATES

This place serves breakfast
all night long says

the ghost across the table
as Emerson's radio plays

its static song. I used
to fear estrangement

wading through the graveyard
of living people that had become

my past. Now all time
encircles this bloated body

I've unearthed. The wide-eyed waitress
compliments her complexion

as Morrissey begins to
howl through the speakers,

filling pity's urn with tears
on a dreaded sunny day.

Outcasts should not overturn
the stones of those they mourn.

Notes

QUERCUS: An homage to *Invitation to a Beheading* by Vladimir Nabokov (1938). Cincinnatus C., the novel's protagonist, reads a book called *Quercus* about the life of an oak tree during his time in prison. ("Quercus" is Latin for "oak.") Nabokov described the novel as "a violin in a void" in his forward to the English translation.

NESTED: "Matryoshka," another word for a Russian nested doll, is etymologically related to "mat", the Russian word for "mother." Brighton Beach is a Russian émigré community in Brooklyn, New York.

THE TIME TRAVELER: "New York By-and-By" is a nickname for Seattle, Washington. The New York-based post-punk band Television released their debut album, *Marquee Moon*, in 1977.

THE DYSPLASIA PARADOX: "Dysplasia" is a term for abnormal cell growth that precedes the development of cancer (in this case, melanoma).

TRUE STORIES: A collection of second-hand stories. The lines quoted at the end of Part VI were taken from the murder scene at the end of Nabokov's *Lolita*.

THE TIME TRAVELER IN ALGIERS: An homage to Patti Smith's "The Sheep Lady From Algiers," set in Café Algiers in Harvard Square, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

IT IS EASIEST TO LOVE BY NIGHT: The quoted line was taken from Marina Tsvetaeva's "*U menya v Moskve*," or "Here in my Moscow" (1916), which she dedicated to the poet Aleksandr Blok.

SKY AND LAND: This poem refers to M.C. Escher's "Sky and Water I" (1938).

CEMETERY GATES: "Cemet'ry Gates" is a song by The Smiths (from the album *The Queen is Dead*, 1986). During its chorus, Morrissey sings about visiting Oscar Wilde's grave on "a dreaded sunny day." Wilde's epitaph reads: "And alien tears will fill for him / Pity's long-broken urn, / For his mourners will be outcast men / And outcasts always mourn."

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