

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

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Falling into the Past

A memory to endure must be suspended like a tightrope between two people. Then you can cross back and forth to what once was, and what will become. Or, in the absence of that bridge, it must be shaped in words.

Floundering at the Edge of the Well of the Past

"As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day."¹

Sometimes though, if the past is not centuries or millennia ago, one can conjure an image from the well and infuse it with light and air, or even coax it to breathe again, if only temporarily. In a world where the pace of life seems to be stuck on fast forward, coaxing the past to life is perhaps worth a try. In such a world, events, perceptions, encounters rush past before we can acknowledge or account for them. Life seems to rearrange and lose parts of itself daily, and all the more quickly of late. (In some cases, they are being deliberately ground to powder.)

I have never grown old before that I remember, but doing so in a world vexed to frenzy comes with peculiar hazards. If the dangers pale in comparison to those faced by young people grappling for a foothold in an effort to come of age, they are nonetheless daunting. One struggles to remain intact as life and the space around it spins faster and faster. Like an elderly star subject to centrifugal force, pieces of oneself are cast away. They fall into the well and vanish.

In the universe, the spinning of an elderly star is a recreative process; perhaps in the end it will be the same for us. But here on earth, we remain poised precariously at the edge of the well of the past, less substantial now without the parts that have fallen away. We try to compensate for loss of gravity and do our best not to slip into the depths.

In this new rendering, the past is unknowable as the future and lacks allure. We are dependent on others to keep us from vanishing, or when we do, to coax us back to the present.

But just now, I am only at the edge and not as yet immersed. It's slippery here, but I manage to keep my balance. Perhaps I can conjure an image that has only recently been eclipsed by all the frenzy.

It's a lighthearted image and not mine alone; perhaps it will lend us ballast. There is so little that is lighthearted at the moment.

Once upon a time, I lived in a house (not so far from where I live in the present) that came with a rock and roll band in the basement. Not all band members were there continually, but they did materialize regularly in time for band practice.

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The entrance to the basement was through the bathroom. When it came time for band practice, a number of people would enter the bathroom via the living room and vanish. They would appear again sometime later, when practice had ended (or perhaps earlier, if they desired a bathroom break). In addition to the two doors, the bathroom had a long window that looked out onto the porch. Occasionally people who needed to get into the apartment but had no key would enter that way.

One tended not to linger in the bathroom, given all the possible events and interruptions. Still, I think we found it more entertaining than objectionable. We were young and adaptable, and fun was paramount.

The apartment itself, which occupied the first floor of a somewhat decrepit house (though no more decrepit than many student dwellings in the university town today) might have been referred to as “funky”--or at least, someone who didn’t understand the nuances of that word would surely grasp it better after a visit.

The house sat at the intersection of three different streets, two of them central to cars crossing town, but there were far fewer cars then than there are now. Students generally walked, and in those days, there were fewer of them as well.

On the other side of the intersection was a restaurant (in the most generous sense of that term) called “Blimpyburger.” If the house provided an image to explain the word, “funky,” the atmosphere inside this early incarnation of Blimpyburger expanded the concept of grease. (There is another incarnation now, and in the interest of research, I will visit it soon.) In those days, restaurants offered patrons matchbooks that included a bit of publicity. “Blimpyburger” the matchbooks read, and underneath that the legend, “Cheaper than Food.”

In addition to the rock and roll band, the house was populated by four to six regular residents, the occasional long-term visitor, and an assortment of cats and dogs. For some reason, it felt harmonious rather than chaotic—perhaps because none of us were very far removed from childhood and orderliness was not a concept that spoke to us.

Life there was accompanied by the music of the band or that of other musicians who came and went, and a great deal of earnest conversation.

It is only now, when I inhabit a world where we struggle to free ourselves from the glue of cyberspace or to distill our own thoughts from a rain of “smart replies.” that I have come to appreciate the immediacy of human connection in those days and how magically automatic it was. Only of late, when so much time is spent trying to fend off discourse designed to deceive or navigate dialogue contaminated by deception from above, have I come to appreciate the sincerity of that time.

Life in general then, in America and in many other parts of the planet, was orchestrated by the music of the still intact Beatles, who were all about connection, really--sublime proof that the whole can be more than the sum of its parts. The world was full of mystery, and despite the lack of orderliness or because of it, creativity and curiosity flourished. College in general was challenging but many times less stressful than it is today. New ideas elicited intrigue rather than anxiety.

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So much promise.²

And an infinite capacity for depth that we took, in our innocence, to be the natural order of things. The people who lived in the house remain close today, more than half a century after they shared their not yet mythical living space. I've conversed with all three of the other primary tenants only this week.

A few days ago, I drove past the intersection where we had once lived, and the house had vanished. Nothing remains but a vacant space waiting to be "developed." Blimpyburger had also disappeared.

The mayor of the town is an aficionado of "development" and has lots of rationales to convince the voting public that "Progress" is in our interest and the only means to solidify the empathetic heart of the town. He makes some points: rent in the university town is prohibitive; in most areas, only certain classes can manage. The mayor and his developers forget though, that when they raze funky old structures or the woods and greenery around them in order to replace them with concrete squares and boxes, they drain away soulfulness and substitute its opposite. They expand *Egotopia*, "the only synthetic environment in history that systematically anesthetizes those who call it home."³

Egotopia has already gobbled up a great deal of Southeast Michigan. We are all anesthetized enough. Clearly, given our current predicaments, catatonia hasn't worked for us, and yet there is an unwitting impulse to reproduce it.

A little imagination, and no doubt a bit more funding, could have created equity but still preserved our souls—for the privileged and the less so.

Perhaps imagination was what tinted the era in which the baby boomers came of age with so much hope. I know baby boomers are sometimes ridiculed today. If some of this is deserved, a great deal is petty, a product of the "winter of our discontent" and the cloud of negativity which currently shrouds our perception. Deep down, we know that a single generation cannot be to blame for all that has gone awry.⁴

But perhaps there is a way to breathe to life some of the hope and harmony of those days.

I contacted my friend, the one who had been the resident bandmember in the house, to tell him that our erstwhile home had been demolished and Blimpyburger along with it. (The University, I believe, devoured Blimpyburger. The University cannot stop growing and has its own rapport with developers. Its ranks and tuition metastasize continually. And of course there are many rationales for this as well, though not all are plausible and some call into question other recent decisions—such as opting to bend to financial pressure in order to appease the current regime.

I told my friend that our house had been demolished. "Now there's nothing there, where we once were. Do you think it was all a dream?"

He laughed. "Well, if it was, it was a good one.

When things vanish, as the planet Earth will do someday (hopefully

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later than sooner), I believe that a thoughtform remains—an echo that will, if stimulated, emit vibrations.

Perhaps there is such an echo where our house used to be. A kind of us-shaped hole.

“Sometimes I think about it and I really miss the camaraderie of all our friends,” my friend continued. “I had friends that made movies and all my musician friends and all your friends and K.’s friends and L. and her boyfriends who came crashing through the window.⁵ Life seems pretty even keel compared to those times. Dare I say it? Dull by comparison.”

This comes from somebody who remains connected to artists, performers and business associates and to members of a thriving family, and who is still regularly on stage himself.

Of late though, I encounter more and more people who seem to be shipwrecked; they are lost in a sea of cyberspace and desperate to be rescued--adrift in a borderland inhabited by technology but devoid of voices, touch or the ambient feelings and thoughts of other flesh and blood human beings.

In such a world, the silence is deafening.

I am familiar with such a predicament. Sometimes the desperation is almost palpable; it can be measured by how panicky we become if we are asked to detach from our phones.

Connection, though, is distorted when it comes through the intermediary of a screen--devoid of sensuality and the orchestration of human voice. One scrolls and texts frenetically but remains alone and unmoored in the silence. Silence, of course, can be therapeutic. But this is a hollow silence; it resembles nothing so much as a vacuum.

“In a way, it’s very much like the Buddhist tradition, which says nothing is permanent,” continued my friend. He made it sound a bit funny, since we were still talking about a house where people kept vanishing into the bathroom.⁶

But I prefer to go with the thoughtform. There is an us-shaped hole that when prodded emits waves, an echo of what once was.

Now that I have awakened them, the waves sound and resound even as they remain almost inaudible; they resurrect colors of hope and possibility as they were then--unobstructed by opaque squares and boxes and bloodless rationales for their existence. Perhaps you are beginning to hear them or see the image they’ve summoned. Can you imagine the funky old town with its soulfulness and music and real-life conversation?

We have been through so much since then. Our young people especially. Yet their empathy is intact—perhaps more intact than ours was for their experience of loneliness and their willingness to bond with those different from themselves. If their curiosity has been dulled by Egotopia, we can induce it to resurface. They know there is a world to be dreamed. Not unlike the old one where connection was so easy and the colors of harmony and camaraderie still intact.

I have done my best to coax that world from the depths and infuse it

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temporarily with light and dust and air. Just now, it breathes, if only for a moment.

Can you see it? This is a world where myriad possibilities hover at the threshold of perception—a world not unlike the one I glimpsed so many years later as I moved through space in a country utterly unfamiliar to me—a place where dancers leapt into the air for no good reason at all and where, beyond the gathering darkness, invisible shapes took form.⁷

The thoughtform shimmers where I have conjured it, just at the edge of the well of the past. It's visible if not entirely solid. Can you see it? It's full of people of all persuasions, with so many different thoughts.

This was a place where, orchestrated by the music, joyfulness came to eclipse judgment. For an awkward young woman unable to conform to contemporary social expectations of being a "girl," an identity was suddenly possible. If girlhood had been elusive, friendship was something I knew. And friendship, modeled by the sublime interconnection of the Beatles and the curious, creative conversation of those around me, became paramount.

Sometimes, if I struggle to describe something that has not yet come to be or no longer entirely exists, a word will come to me in French that I can't quite transmute into English. ("Magical" has been used to describe this time a bit too often to be meaningful.) The word that came to me in French was "grisant." It describes something exhilarating or intoxicating—though the intoxication is not chemically induced.

True, feelings and perceptions at the time were enhanced by psychedelics and the mind-altering effects of marijuana. (Alcohol had become passé—though it no longer is today.) But there was something else that I meant to capture.

When this happens, I am grateful for the Internet, for I can quickly unearth help in shaping my idea. Eventually, I found a sentence that conveyed the "grisant" aspects of the time in question—in an article meant to capture the heady effects of truly working as a team. (In this case, the intent was to convince the reader that the emotional construction of a sports team could be exported from the basketball court to the work world and be equally as productive.) The author sought to describe the magic of a "team" almost always composed of athletes—strong, young people. "They like the camaraderie, the sense of belonging, the sheer fun of being with a group."⁸

Young people today are still enticed by the "sheer fun" of being with a group, but they do sense that the artfulness of communication has been truncated. Perhaps some of them try to replace it with alcohol; I am not of their world and cannot truly know. They do ask me about the time I came of age here in the town that they themselves inhabit, and sometimes express to me that they would prefer to have lived then.

In those days, nonconformity was a virtue and expressing oneself safer and more exciting. With the creativity of conversation intact, there was less pressure to repeat an idea that had already been emitted. There were infinite thoughts to share—each unique for it emerged freely from inside a living breathing person.

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Can you see the people come alive now inside the thoughtform—if only fleetingly? They talk and move amongst themselves; they change position and then sometimes emit new colors. They bounce off each other like atoms—attaching to some and drifting away from others. But new thoughts emerge. New songs. New hues and combinations of colors, and even more possibilities at the very edge of perception. Creativity thrives and with it, a great deal of hope for the plasticity of human potential.

A premonition of happiness and harmony remained vital despite the obstacles to overcome. (Perhaps those who have disdain for the baby boomers are critical because those obstacles were not, in the end, overcome, and now loom larger than ever.)

But still, there was promise. If I have lured the echo from the well of the past and made it shimmer and live for a moment, perhaps its essence can be breathed to life and made vital once again. We need that essence—to combat our disconnection and mend what has come undone. To relieve our isolation and the paralysis it inspires, and to resurrect artfulness.

After all, the plasticity of human potential is not diminished from what it was in those days. Perhaps our commitment to that plasticity will be stronger now for having suffered—even as our task will be more daunting because it must, of necessity, be infused with reason and resolve. Just now, the old premonition of happiness is in danger of being eclipsed by the gathering fog of a nightmare. A great deal is being demanded of us. We must all be adults, even our young people.

For the moment, inside my mirage, people move and transform each other. Imagination is wholly intact. Depth of connection is pursued and altogether plausible. The essence of such a world is spirited and creative—an antidote for paralysis. That is why I have conjured it.

Look now, for soon it will stop breathing and slip back into the well.

Can you see it? Can you breathe it in yourself and let it mingle with what is inside you?

Or was it all a dream?



1. This quote comes from Margaret Atwood, at the very end The Handmaid's Tale. (1985) Ballantine Books. New York Here is the full quote: "Our document, though in its own way eloquent, is on these subjects mute.

We may call Eurydice forth from the world of the dead, but we cannot make her answer; and when we turn to look at her we glimpse her only for a moment, before she slips from our grasp and flees. As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day."

2. Remarkably, the advent of the Beatles occurred almost at the same moment as the advent of Motown music in Detroit, only 50 miles away.

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While much of what is considered quintessentially American music--jazz, rock and roll, rhythm and blues--has its origins in the resilient community and creative brilliance of people who were slaves or whose ancestors were, Motown marketed an infectious hybrid, and the Motown business model allowed the sound to distribute itself throughout mainstream populations. Its joyfulness invaded dance floors and its melodies became instantly recognizable; young people absorbed diversity by osmosis.

3. *Egotopia: Narcissism and the New American Landscape*. (1991) University of Alabama Press.

4. From the John Steinbeck novel by that title. Originally published in 1961. Many editions available. Originally from *Richard III* by William Shakespeare.

5. To explain: A lovesick boyfriend who hadn't discovered that there was ingress by way of the bathroom jumped from the porch through the bedroom window in a fit of passion—or a fit of something.

6. This conversation took place by text on January 24th, 2026.

7. These were observations made during 1989 trip to the as yet intact Soviet Union. I was struck by the brilliance of “folk concerts.” Dancers trained by the Bolshoi or Kirov ballet performed intricate choreography with superhuman discipline. A “folk” version of the ice capades was the caliber of the Olympics. Yet none of the performances cost more than a few American dollars. Money and excellence seemed to have no special relation in the 1989 Soviet Union. In pre-capitalist Russia and Ukraine, economics and entertainment were not even distant cousins--and so artistry and entertainment had merged.

8. <https://www.linguee.com/french-english/translation/grisant.html>
<https://www.rbc.com/fr/notre-compagnie/histoire/bulletin/vol-63-n-1-jan-fev-1982-le-travail-dequipe-et-les-affaires/>