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John Updike

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In the Cemetery
High Above Shillington

JOHN UPDIKE

We fifth-grade boys would thread tricolor strips
of crêpe paper through our bikes' staggered spokes,
and spiral-wrap the handlebars, and ride
in Shillington's Memorial Day Parade.
With many a halt, while gold-roped drums kept up
their thrilling, hiccupping tattoo, we moved—
the Legion bands, the shuffling vets—along
Lancaster Avenue, then up New Holland
past Mr. Shverha's movie house, where war
was cheerful weekly fare, and death more sweet
than anything we learned in Sunday School,
to this bright static ground above the town.
A granite mausoleum stated LOEB.
The nasal pieties rang hollowly
above the sunstruck flags and sharp-edged stones;
we dimly listened, kidded and horsed around
there on the grit and grass, and pedalled home.

Have fifty years gone by since last I turned
into these unlocked gates? In rented car,
on idle impulse, briefly home, if "home"
is understood as where one was a child,
I glide into this long-forgotten space
carved from a flank of bosky Cedar Top,
my tires gently crackling as I park.
The town's drab rooftops fan out from my feet.
The month is June; the seasonal flags
and potted memorial flowers still are fresh.
Sole visitor, by knocking with my eyes
on graven, polished portals set in rows
I find here what the live town lacks, some friends—
some people I once knew. Many the time,
from well within our hedged-in yard, or out
our dusty front-room windows, did I spy
with awe and wonderment the pure white head
of Pappy Shilling, whose father had been
the town's creator and ur-citizen,
the subdivider of a primal farm.
So short that even a child could sense willed pride,
Pap looked too old to be a son. His cane
was lacquered black, a chain of Lutheran badges
hung twittering from his blue lapel, his bangs
of ivory bobbed in keen-eyed childhood's glare;
he seemed a doll-man living up the street,
his house more grand than ours, and more hedged-in.
Named Howard M., he died, his granite claims,
in 1943. Eleven years
we shared on Philadelphia Avenue,
lives overlapped like trapeze artists' wrists.

Some strides away, the headstone titled BECKER
remembers OREVILLE, dead in '57.
Within my witness, Parkinson's Disease
had watered his gaze to a groggy stare,
yet in his prime he was a nobleman
whose name had taken on the might of place:
Becker of Becker's Garage, its gas and grease
and oil-black floor and multitude of tools,
its blanching hiss of hot acetylene
and shelves of numbered parts and sliding doors
that rumbled overhead in tune with casters
that slid supine mechanics back and forth
like Jacks of Spades in a magician's pack.

My father, after school or playing hookey
for half an hour, would sit and puff a Lucky
Strike by the grease pit's edge, his run-down heels
up on the pipe guard-rail in cocky style;
he owed his teaching job to Oreville, who
had swayed the school board toward the son-in-law
of Katie Hoyer, Elsie Becker's aunt.

ELSIE, not dead till 1970,
was one of three (like Graces) Kachel sisters.
She crammed her house, next door to the Garage,
with bric-a-brac on whatnots; to a child
her knickknacks breathed of pious opulence,
as did her thickly laden Yuletide tree.
Her Kramer blood bid Elsie to be kind
to all of us, the Updikes and the Hoyers;
my humpbacked, countrified Grandma was thus
our link to local aristocracy.
Without the Beckers, our newcomer’s place
in Shillington would have been small indeed.

Pink polished stone adorned with mating birds
announces COLDREN—FATHER ELLWOOD E.,
SON ELLWOOD H. (his life’s parenthesis
open and closed in 1922),
and MOTHER STELLA M. Can this mute rock
be Woody Coldren, who with booming voice
and flapping arms would lead us town tots through
a storm of carols Christmas morning from
the movie house’s curtained, shallow stage?
He hid the sorrow of a soon-dead child
behind a plethora of public works—
of heading up the Sunday School, of being
the borough’s burgess, of bringing Noël home
full-throatedly, between a few cartoons
of hectic animation and the gift
of a with-almonds nickel Hershey bar
straight from Mr. Shverha’s Jewish hand.
Many in this community could sing—
the German knack of Lieder, probably—
and I, a croaky dunce at song, was yet
enlisted snugly under Woody’s boom,
within the civitas he cheered on.

Here neighbors, Lutzes, lie, Marie and Bill,
who used to sit upon their well-used porch
and nod toward our less fertile domicile.
Five sons they sent to war, and all came back.
Their stone is near-eclipsed by potted homage
—geraniums, petunias, marigolds—
a portion of their scattered spawn has paid.
Ample in form, sly in mein, this mother of mothers was one of the neighborhood's watchers, who made my life feel witnessed—safe and precious, set gemlike into the scene.

But who sleeps here, nearby? Another Lutz, a Lewis R., born 1928. Can this be Looie, long-legged Looie Lutz, who'd race down through our yard to save three steps en route to the high school, where he excelled at basketball and track, until football bestowed a blow that left his head off-tune? My father always called football a crime for still-maturing bodies, and cited Looie to prove his point. What took him to the grave so early, speedy Looie, just four years my senior? He became a postman, whom I met on Philadelphia Avenue one soft fall day, across the street from where he used to dash, trespassingly, along our walk, down through our arbored grapes behung with buzzing Japanese-beetle traps, on past our birdbath, ruffling my mother's feathers, and through the lower hedge into the alley. As I recall, my elders muttered in their kitchen consultations but did not pollute the neighborhood with a complaint, and now that Looie's raced to join the shades with his unbroken stride, I'm just as glad.

Few shade trees lend an opportunity for gloomy thought; I search the dazzling rows of Totheros and Matzes, Olingers and Millers, for one tomb that must be here, and find it—HEMMIG, CHARLES J., known as Jack, whose dates of '93 to '89 add up to near a century. He was my father's boss, the king of S.H.S., the supervising principal. He read Ecclesiastes to assembly each first day of school—"a time to gather up
stones, and a time for casting stones away.”
His big head with its fishy thin-lipped smile
seemed to be melting to one side; he had
an oozy unpredictability;
he would appear within my father’s class
and send my insecure progenitor
into paroxysms of incompetence.
The man had Roman hands, the senior girls
reported, and like Jupiter could be
ubiquitous, descending as a swan
in Mohnton or, in Grille, a shower of gold.
A stentor of the local charms, a genius
of local politics, he nonetheless
approved my going to Harvard, and beyond,
and reassured my parents that this leap
was not too daring, too Promethean.

Never shall I so lie, in trimmed green silence,
among the earners of this resting-place,
who underneath the patterned ground extend
the Shillingtonian ethos, the mild
belief that Earth’s safe center has been found
beneath the heights of Cedar Top, Slate Hill,
and elevations cold ambition climbs.
I am your son; your mile-square grid of brick—
the little terraces, the long back yards—
contains my dream of order, here transposed
to an eternal scale. The flags will fade
and tatter, the flowers will turn to litter
before next May will wheel around again
its formal protest against the forgetting
that lets the living live. We were too young,
we boys on bikes, to hide the giddy bliss
of floating over people freed from need,
a field of buried guardians who bar
the pathway back with sharp-edged swords of stone.