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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 hokey
 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 cheerled 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.