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Where Do They Learn it All?

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Where Do They Learn it All?

Duncan Brown

December 10, 2020

To my mom, for always having a box full of books in the back of the car

Rally Caps and Rituals

Seeing a dozen tiny heads with inside out hats is always a little unnerving.
Who has told them that when eight innings have slipped away,
the best way to turn their luck around is to turn their hats inside out?

Who has told them that the best way to hit a grand slam isn't
going out and practicing, but chanting " Bases loaded look who's up!
home run hitter, better back up!"

There are no sunflower seeds in little league soccer
and yet they are invariably strewn across dugouts.
Who has told them they are the best replacement for chewing tobacco?

Who has taught them the complex patterns
of tapping the bat against the plate before they swing?
A tap for each corner, a tap in the middle, revealing a white plate under rusty dirt.

It's easy to say who has taught them some things.
Miss three swings, and the referee exiles you.
Finish the game, coach tells you to get in a line and shake hands.

But what about the rest?
Where do they learn it all?
I'm sure they could never tell you.

Mossy Nets

A tattered moss covered net
Always entangles the hapless wildlife
Better than a fresh white one.

An old net is the mark of an old hand
And a patient sweep through moss and weeds
A white net is wielded by the young and half-wild

A flick of a tail or a push of scaled feet
Pushes the water-bound animals up the current,
Down the current, and into a net.

A river, a pond, a lake, places people go to feel safe
A palace of relaxation for the human, a battlefield
For those less lucky.

For those without boats, or bathing suits, who live every moment unsure
When the bigger fish will come along and snap them up.
Unsure when a net will descend from the side of a languid Canoe

And scoop them up to dump them, sputtering
On to the harsh plastic bottom of a boat, less than an inch away,
an inch that might as well be a thousand miles

From all the water they could ever need

New England Winds

This afternoon, huddled against the cutting winter wind

I will the glowing warmth of shelter to move closer

I shiver and think about how much I despise the winter

But maybe it's the planning ahead that I hate

Gloves, hat, quarter zip, and on and on

There are no New Englanders who don't desire a closet full of warmth

A personal arsenal stocked against the wind and frozen water

Sent in by the cruel Atlantic

It's the constant need to check the weather before walking out the door

Which sours my mood when the thermometer drops

Because when it slips my mind

I end up with back hunched, hands tucked into armpits

Trudging along a salt strewn sidewalk

Trying to convince myself that only animals bite, and not the cold

But it's not a very convincing argument

When the snow sneaks over the tops of my boots

And the wind tears through thin, poorly planned layers of clothes.

The searing cold is almost worth the feeling of relief

From shoving open the door and staggering

Into the comforting embrace of an insulated atmosphere

The tingling of blood rushing back to fingers and cheeks

The sudden invisibility of breath from between blue lips

Restores a sense of life which only a moment before

I was sure was lost forever.

This afternoon, huddled against the cutting winter wind

line taken from Dzvinia Orlovsky's "Pussy Riot/Want/Don't/Want" from her book *Bad Harvest*

In The Bag

The blood throbbed in my head even louder now than it had when I ran from the store. Walking back in, as it turned out, was much scarier. As I hiked my bag further up on my shoulders, I pushed the door open. Before so much as two steps fell, a clear voice chopped through the air: “No bags inside.” “Can I leave it here?” I managed to respond, my voice infinitely close to breaking. A nod of assent, and the bag was left on the floor. Had he recognized me? Were there police on the way, cutting through the streets as efficiently as his voice had cut through the silence of the bookstore? I thought not, but my thoughts and my heartbeat could not align. I looked back at my bag, wondering if the man behind the counter suspected what was inside it. I felt my lips dry out; I had to leave, before my whole body shriveled up, before the pressure of my heartbeat ripped me apart. A book snagged at random, and I was at the counter. Without even a glance at me he told me how much it cost. “My money is in my bag,” I said, quick to scuttle off and bend over it. I opened it, and saw with shame my wallet squished next to a book. A book with an untarnished cover, and fresh white pages; pages which hadn’t been paid for, but had been stolen. It was meant to be returned today, but it wouldn’t happen. How could I look at the man and tell him I had stolen from him? Instead, I returned to the counter and paid for the book on the counter, and then paid for it again. I muttered to the man to keep the change as he looked at the money I’d placed on the counter, rushing out with my bag before I could hear his response.

Fresh Seed

Grandpa saw enemies everywhere; scoundrels and crooks lurked behind every corner, and now, apparently, they were poisoning pigeons in the park. It wasn't until the second week that I actually saw one of these avian assassinations. We were tossing out seed, making sure all the birds got their share, when I noticed one of them squawking oddly, and strutting around in circles. I watched it, and in under a minute it had keeled over, dead. I was astonished, and looked up abruptly at the man across the courtyard, who seemed blissfully unaware of the bird's untimely demise.

“Now,” said Grandpa, “you see what is at risk.”

I nodded numbly, but could hardly believe it. My grandfather had long claimed that the old man who sat across from him in the park spent his time poisoning pigeons, but my grandfather also thought his toothpaste had arsenic in it.

After this assassination, there was one after another, the pigeons making their dramatic farewells, at the rate of about a death a day. We fed the birds, and glowered at the man on the other bench, until one morning he failed to appear.

As we sat and tossed out the seed to the early birds, I saw Mr. Mearsheimer rolling his cart into the park, and gave him a wave. Mr. Mearsheimer was the man we bought our seed from, and he helped keep a watchful eye on Grandpa when I wasn't around. He smiled back, and let his eyes drift across to the bench of our absent adversary; I watched, perplexed, as his face turned to one of panic. At the same moment, I heard the all too familiar sound of a pigeon dying. Mr. Mearsheimer dashed towards us now, but by the time he arrived, the pigeon was already dead, and my Grandpa was staring at it, confusion clear on his face.

Mr. Mearsheimer snagged the bag of seed out of his hand, and pulled another one from his apron. “You need fresh seed, Mr. Hawkins,” he said to my grandfather, quickly giving him the bag and rushing back to his cart. I sprung up and chased after him, leaving Grandpa muttering to himself about the “final revenge” of his nemesis.

“What was that bag?” I demanded as I caught up to him.

“Fresh seed, of course.”

“Then why’d you take the old one? And why—” I said, cut off as he pulled me close.

“This new bag does not have avocado in it, see? Pigeons cannot eat avocado. Now, they won’t die.”

“But why?” I spit out, genuinely perplexed. *Mr. Mearshiemer had been using Grandpa to kill the birds?*

“Because,” he explained slowly, “it is when you stop giving them something to care about that they fall apart. My father, his mind left him, but it left twice as fast after he burned his hands and stopped baking. He sat around all day, losing who he was. When your Grandfather talked to me, I decided to make his delusions real. Now go, hurry back,” he finished, pushing me away.

Squeeze

It was on the last day of every summer that the laws of nature and custom dictated the streets must be left behind, and in what could be one last exploration of the woods, before such things were deemed too childish, the storm drain running underneath the town aqueduct must be traversed.

Shane didn't want to go through; he didn't see why he should, and he didn't see why all the kids whom he had grown up with now called him by his last name. There wasn't another Shane to confuse him with, but there were another four Mumas in the neighborhood. The boys laughed every time he insisted that he was Shane not Muma, and now they laughed as they egged him forward. It was understood that the honor of their group would be tainted if they didn't all go through the tunnel, and Shane was obviously the weak link.

"Why don't you go first, huh? You'll be able to see the light the whole time, and you won't have anyone's butt in your face," said Austin in a conciliatory voice.

"I'll go. Last."

This drew grumblings from the group. Despite the discontent, the boys agreed, excited to start. Soon they were all in the drain, backs scraping against the ceiling, and knees shuffling on the curved floor, forced to crawl through the tunnel.

"Ugh, there's water up here"

"Man, did you fart?"

The voices died out, and the boys went on silently. It was halfway through that Shane felt the tunnel go from tight to suffocating. The weight of all the water running through the aqueduct above them seemed to press down on Shane's shoulders, locking him in place. "Austin," Shane whispered to the pair of shoes in front of him, "I'm stuck."

“What?”

“I’m stuck!” he repeated, his voice breaking this time.

A brief hesitation: “No you’re not. Keep going,” and with dread, Shane heard Austin's knees start to shuffle forward again.

“Austin!” Shane yelled out, with no control over his voice now. He was met with a chorus of “Shut up” from the boys in front of him. Shane knew that there were other boys in the group who were bigger than him; how had they squeezed through? He mulled this over, the panic rising with every passing second, until light suddenly shone on his face; he was alone in the tunnel.

“Muma? You moving in there?” called out one of the boys.

“No! I’m stuck!” There was murmuring at the end of the tunnel before a new voice called back “Get off it Muma, there’s no way you’re stuck. We all made it through.” “No! I’m really stuck!” To his dismay, he could now see that the shapes at the end of the tunnel were walking away, until only one was left.

The voice of Austin echoed down the drain: “Shane? Come on man, please come out. I’ve got to go home for dinner ok? You can fit through, I know it,” he finished, but his voice did not convey confidence as his shadowy form moved out of sight.

Shane had no idea how long he stayed there, arms propped up under him, triceps burning, making no move forward or backward, but it was a rivulet of water which finally made him move. It snaked under his hand, and as he looked forward, out of the tunnel, he saw rain falling outside the drain; now he was moving toward the light at breakneck speed. No matter how tight the tunnel was, he was not going to wait in it for water to come rushing through, drowning him like a rat. The skin rubbed off his knees, and pebbles ground into his palms, but the light was too

alluring to even consider slowing down. He crawled, desperately, and just as he thought it would never end, his hands found nothing but air, and he tumbled head first out of the tunnel.



Duncan Brown grew up in Wellesley Massachusetts, with one older brother. He is a sophomore at Providence College with a major in english. When he is not reading, he can be found running or rock climbing. He hopes to go into publishing, to help spread stories worth telling.

"Duncan has an amazing way of engaging his audience. Each poem or story he writes leaves you with a feeling of wanting more. His choice of diction and images are outstanding and clearly show his talent as a writer."

-Daniel Cano

"Able to capture the essence of a literary twist, Brown's work will leave you with a sense of surprise."

-Ian McElrath