Requiem

> *The mysteries of a certain kind of locomotive whine are always given and withheld by way of the underwater cables some alien folk lay down when they are barred from travel and forcibly removed.*
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> Fred Moten, "Black Op"

On a December morning in 2014, when I was still a student at the Academy and just shy of my seventeenth birthday, I walked into town to clear my head of the scrambled mass of information it had accrued over the week and no longer had use for. I hoped, as I often did during my long walks in those days, to have a chance encounter with some part of myself. I am unsure, now, as I write this, if we would have recognized each other had we met — I and myself. Perhaps we crossed on the path that day and exchanged cursory nods, or maybe bumped into one another and apologized politely, but, alas: there was no one else on the path on that cold, brisk, morning — just me, alone with my thoughts.

I would never have guessed, before leaving the dorm that day, how cold and brisk the air outside was; the sun was bright overhead — yellow without a hint of orange — and the leaves on the trees were curled into themselves: impressed with the stricken fear that comes with the knowledge of their impending fall. Walking downtown with the casual, loping stride of a wanderer, I made my way through the cemetery, hoping, in spite of having nowhere to go, that the souls of the deceased would hasten my journey. Tombstones, erect and engraved with names long forgotten, jutted out of the ground as if to make a final statement on behalf of their possessors. As I turned out of the cemetery and stepped onto the path, I thought about the history of this place, about those who walked on these paths a hundred years before me, and about the ways their presence shaped the past into the present. The currents of time always seemed to run

faster here. As I rounded past Cochran Chapel and onto Main Street, the lyrics to a Bollywood song my mother used to sing drifted into mind:

oh re taal mile nadi ke jal mein

nadi mile saagar mein

saagar mile kaun se jal mein

koi jaane na

I had yet to see the movie from which these lines come. When she first heard the song as a child, my mother was so terrified she could not sleep. *The water of a pond goes into a river; a river flows into the ocean; where does the water of an ocean go to mingle? No one has any clue.* Her childhood fright of the abyss, of the global world, was as perfect an image for the song as any movie could have been, I thought as I reached the bottom of the hill. Across the street from me was The Lantern, a quaint diner that was a favorite of the locals. As I had nowhere to go and no one to be on that chilly, late-fall morning, I went inside for breakfast.

The place was small. The kitchen and the dining room were meshed into one — with a countertop enclosing the kitchen space like an animal pen — enabling the customers to watch their omelets being made. Along the wall near the windows were three booths, one of which was occupied by an elderly couple, who, despite probably having been together for what appeared to me at least 50 years, seemed peaceful and relaxed in each other's company. Around the stained-white, fake-wood countertop sat four people: a bearded man in his mid-twenties, who, along with someone I presumed to be his girlfriend, was discussing an online video game; a middle aged

woman — adorned with a pair of reading glasses that were tethered to her head by a beaded thread — reading the reviews section of The Eagle Tribune; and a young man — a student at the academy — whom I had seen a few times before during the walks in between classes. He had floppy blond hair which he covered with a blue cap and was wearing muted colors, which made his eyes, which were close to a violet color, all the more striking. I sat next to him. He introduced himself as Thomas and seemed fairly comfortable holding a conversation with someone who was barely an acquaintance of his. It's remarkable, Thomas said while rubbing his thumb along the vandalized countertop, how people like to etch their initials into things, almost as if their doing so constitutes an act of possession on their part — a firm, ineffable affirmation of their presence in a particular place. Thomas said this with no preamble or pleasantries; I am not sure he even looked at me when I sat down. They no doubt had in mind, he continued, a future in which someone would look at these initials and remark on them — on the jagged, uneven way in which they were carved into the wood by a bread knife, or the annoying, slightly pathetic way in which the word 'was' was intentionally misspelled to characterize the person to whom the initials belong as an uncouth, rebellious character. In that way, it is almost as though we, right now, are living the future of the past, finding ourselves, here, as the manifestation of the thoughts of one who lived before. It's a banal statement, sure, but not one without a ring of truth to it. I would never have expected, he said, two years ago to be here, of all places, at a boarding school, or, more specifically, at a diner with a stranger, reflecting on the past — my present life seemed like a dream to a younger me: the whimsical musings of a kid with too much time on his hands. I suppose, too, then, that the present — this conversation — is the past of some future; perhaps we should snap a photo and create undeniable proof that Thomas 'wuz' — he said this last bit with a

slight gesticulation, as if to represent quotation marks — in fact here: in this seat, eating this food.

This monologue went on as the waitress poured us both coffee, and I asked Thomas what he thought of Twitter and Instagram. This was before our Twitter president was elected but around the time of the Arab Spring, and there persisted a constant anxiety about the different social relations these technologies would induce. In regard to memory, though, Thomas beckoned me to consider how the social fabrics we sustain through posting get sold for advertisements and build profiles of ourselves in a manner that distorts even further, for those who study that field, what the hell a self is anyway. Thomas reminded me how just a few days prior, Chris Hughes, an alumnus of the academy and a co-founder of Facebook, addressed the community in Cochran Chapel. Hughes didn't talk about Facebook or Instagram. Instead, he spoke of solitude and isolation. Of long walks in the sanctuary and a closeted yearning for an escape from insignificance. I wanted to be the best, Hughes said. There behind the podium, he described bearing witness to the suicide of a dorm-mate, an older student by the name of Zach Tripp, who shortly prior to his death had stepped down from the role of student body president. Gaunt and harrowed, this 30 year old billionaire recounted from the podium how they wept and mourned, and in the owlish gaze of his eyes, one could see how it never really left him. Imagine, Thomas asked, finding the Instagram archive of Tripp's death, seeing photos with undeniable proof that he was here, and that he was loved.

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I eventually returned to the academy in August of 2018 as an excursion from a longer journey north to New Hampshire. I drove in from Boston and parked my car in the visitor spots

by the Bell Tower, which tolled a dozen times just as I stepped onto the street. What struck me first was the new Sykes Center, which was built to be a wellness center and was completed just after I had graduated. It filled a space I hadn't known existed prior to its construction. The grass between the ceramics studio and Bulfinch Hall had never appeared as though it could accommodate a building, and yet there in the middle of campus was a center devoted to mental and physical health. I wondered then what Thomas would have had to say of the building. It was said amongst the faculty in small whispers that the Sykes Center was included in the academy's planning because of the death of Zach Tripp, who it is known had a close bond with the head of school at the time. It was cruel and ironic, then, that in the year after the building had been constructed, nearly two decades after Tripp was found hanging in a dormitory, Daniel took his own life. Looking at the Sykes Center, I shuddered as I thought of how many times I had been to the station where Daniel had jumped, and the number of times I had listened to the alluring whirl of that passing train. The Academy must have been so proud of itself once the center was finished, and yet . . .

I cut across the street to the lawn and across the lawn to the armillary sphere, the one we used to congregate around for cross-country practice. From the sphere I looked out over the landscape of the lawn upon which I stood. Designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, another son of the academy, the Great Lawn afforded a view of the chapel and the bell tower and was bisected by a vista leading to the iconic Samuel Phillips Hall. Behind me was the Oliver Wendell Holmes library and the tree which one president of this country gave to the Academy on the 200th anniversary of another president's speech on the lawn. In this three-acre space I was swamped in history and the relics of old and dead white men, giants of their times, and yet where was the

relic of Daniel, of all the other colored bodies that had died at the hands of this school? I tried to recall if I had seen him before graduation. He was one of those faces I knew peripherally, from some easy-to-forget class we had together. He was a freshman when I was a senior and so it was unreasonable for us to interact outside of class with anything but a cursory nod, and yet I wondered when I last had last seen him, if he had been present on that lawn at graduation, spectating as we in the graduating class walked up the vista and commenced our new lives. I moved from the sphere down the lawn, cutting past Cochran chapel as I had done with frequency all those years before. Rather than choosing to amble down Main Street, I coursed through the back path, by Rabbit Pond, and as I looked out at the pond for a brief moment, it appeared just as it had all those times I raced by it during practice, with freshly fallen crabapples lying in wait like landmines. I passed Stowe house and recalled the wintery days I'd spent outside of it, shivering at my reflection in the window of the door, waiting for my then-sweetheart to let me in. But it was summer and of course there were no fallen apples by the pond, and of course there was no sweetheart waiting in Stowe. How uncanny it is to return to the homelike! This dwelling I associated with warm food and tender love was historic in many ways. Its original location was closer to the cemetery, where the academy decided to build the Inn. Rather than raze Stowe House, it undertook the cost of transplanting it a block away, a service done for this home by virtue of its eponymous owner. Harriett Beecher Stowe relocated to the area now called the academy from Maine when her husband received a teaching position at the Andover Theological Seminary. She financed the construction of the home with the proceeds from her best-selling abolitionist novel, Uncle Tom's Cabin, and in this way, Stowe House, like the American economic system, was built from the profits of slavery.

I continued along Bartlet Street, which ran parallel to Main, and, as I passed the park, spotted a bird flitting around the gazebo often frequented by the kids who lived in the town. It landed in a small puddle, one that only existed on this summer day because of the shade from the gazebo top, and was pecking the floor, ostensibly looking for food. Etched into the wooden post on the far side of the gazebo was the name Thomas in jagged letters. I walked toward it, and recalled the time Thomas and I, on our way back from The Lantern on that mid-autumn day, ambled back to campus and paused at the gazebo. He had insisted we sit inside, with our backs to the stores and our eyes on the pine trees and overgrown grass in front of us. This gazebo exists outside of time, he declared. The certainty with which he proclaimed this was not out of character, as I had come to learn that day. It has been constructed for a purpose, but what is that purpose? Thomas asked rhetorically. This gazebo is public and bears no description of what its for. It's not a store nor a court, a church nor a classroom. It exists here solely for the purpose of recreation; for the purpose of respite. It doesn't belong to the world up there, he said, gesturing toward campus, and has no way of being subsumed into a schedule, Thomas said, with a small hint of defiance and a small hint of defeat. He and I both had to return to campus soon to continue with our studies, and, like any departure from respite, our eventual one from that gazebo left a trace of desire, a mark of what would be deemed halcyon.

As I ran my fingers along the engraving, I wondered when Thomas had come back and etched his name into the wood. I played with the keys in the pocket of my shorts, and as I considered using them to etch my name adjacent to Thomas', I heard a faint echo of the bell tower tolling once in the distance. The sound from the tower emanated from speakers, the real bells having been removed long ago in favor of their digital counterparts. The little bird stopped

pecking at the floor of the gazebo and flitted away, and after the last of the quiet following the digitized ringing had settled, I followed suit and left, too.

I made my way toward the train station, past the kitschy stores and Main Street's three coffee shops. I walked to the front of Memorial Hall Library, the public library of the town, which had often served as a healthy reminder that other people than we prep-school students had access to knowledge, and stood in the circular, brick-red patio, gazing out onto the rest of Main Street. Unlike the bell tower, which was initially dedicated by the Academy for those who served in World War I, Memorial Hall was erected by the town to honor those who died in the Civil War. It was perched on the top of a hill and bisected by two roads, both of which forked away from it, lending the impression that everything below it was somehow building up to to this library. To the north of the library was a road that would lead one to Merrimack College and the river after which that college was named. The word some indigenous peoples had for the river we now call the Merrimack was *Merruasquamack,* meaning something akin to "swift water place." Standing in the patio, which I realized then was the memorial part of the library, I thought of a poem I had come across in *Poetry* the other month, of a boy on a bridge. The first stanza of it went something like this: *The newspaper caption read: "Two officers talk to a young man, name withheld, as he stands on a bridge above the Merrimack River, distraught over learning that his mother is terminally ill."* Upon remembering this poem I pulled up my phone to try and search for it, and as I did I thought of Daniel again, and how much like that boy he might have been. When swiping down on my home screen to search for the poem, I inadvertently typed 'Daniel' instead, and his contact, labelled 'Danilo' from when we had to trade numbers in Spanish class, appeared. What would happen if I called him, I wondered. Would anyone answer?

I stood there outside the library with passersby all around me, with my thumb pressed to his name, and thought of the email we had all gotten announcing the news. It, unlike the first stanza of the Merrimack poem, proffered no cause, for it didn't need one. The inimitable hum of an outbound train does not demur. It, like the wailing song of a Siren, beckons all for whom there is no place.

Months later, I read in the news that eighty fires broke out all along the Merrimack Valley. Weeks before that, most of the indigenous languages of Brazil were extinguished in an inferno that roared through the Museo Nacional.

I like to think it was the spirit of those who named the *Merruasquamack* that preserved the valley, that swift water and the relics of those who once had a home quelled the flames. I admit, once I read that the devastation began with the explosions of gas pipes in homes, I first thought of Stowe House, of homelike, wintry days, and of the field of crabapples that would have just then begun to lace the ground.