

Time Machines

Rose Herald

How your face ended up on the Internet.
Weed ash and pocket lint.

I think about you more than the others.
Probably because you died.

In the ghost classroom gray
of the upper level alternate dimension
I listened to sacred music
on a haunted CD-R.

They're dead but breathing now.
I can feel them at the corners of memory.
Their bodies are like books.
Sound is a time machine.
It's obvious.

Xander stood in the center of the field behind the collapsing farm house. Everything about him was inspired by lyrics he didn't understand. It wasn't his fault though he could have tried harder.

“Shut up.”

He felt stupid in his leather jacket and he shouted some equally stupid words at nothing.

“Shut up.”

He exhaled. He looked at the dead grass damp from drizzle and felt something that he would never get the chance to understand. Around him on three sides stood pine trees slowly disappearing into fog.

The city buried in low clouds, echoing like storm
drain tunnels. Dim but not dimming. Cold haze
permanence. A mirror of the sub-basement history
project, leaked out via flashlight reflections. Street
lamps replace lighters. I can walk further, but not far
enough; there is still a cage in the stairwell.

Uninspired trespassing.
A boring, unbroken tradition.
I can still feel it, sometimes.
Stupid punk band.

Xander turned around in the field. He walked away from its center and towards his car. He picked up a rock as he passed the farm house and he threw it at what was left. It made a quiet bang when it hit.

“Shut up.”

He started his car.

A CD spun in the stereo.

His black leather jacket kept him stiff.

“Shut up,” he thought at nothing. Himself included.

I've been trying to describe this song for years;
a jungle inside a skyscraper at night. Dripping from
a recent thunderstorm, everything glistens in high
definition, high contrast, deep black and fluorescent-
lit green. DVD inspired with jaguar eyes that watch
as someone undresses in the penthouse apartment.

Steph walked through the antique store. It was a haphazard maze of loosely themed rooms, dusty tables and glass shelves that held neatly arranged mostly garbage items.

From a winding path, Steph found a doorless doorway covered by a bed sheet. On the other side was a tiny room with no windows and a dusty folding table holding more mostly garbage items. Steph surveyed the mostly garbage items on the dusty folding table in the tiny room with no windows. She picked up a framed photo of a swamp covered in snow under a sky filled with stars. She felt the premonition of a memory melting backwards from the future.

Her eyes watered.
Her eyes burned.

Cut fields, light snow.
Nothing for miles.

Classic torso.

Fingernails
between floorboards.

Xander drove down Main.

"God, this is fucking dumb."

God agreed.

The car disappeared.

Xander's name changed.

He sat on the curb in front of the soda shop.

He stared at the horizon.

He didn't know what his new name was.

He was now just "the boy."

Sadness permeated his flannel shirt.

His leather jacket was gone.

Like his name. Like his car.

He saw Steph leave the antique store.

The lonely city looks down at the frozen beach that looks up at the city across the bay. The wind is an organ. Ice churns in the waves.

“Everything is wrong here. Everything empty. It's snowing. You're in the freezing water, bobbing in the waves. You think of ‘your body will never be found.’ You think of houses full of ghosts. You think of silence and indifference and how the moment never comes and you never sink. Nothing changes and it's night forever. It snows forever and the snow disappears into the water around you forever. It's hypothermia forever. It's dark blue and black silver numb forever. It's the same refrain forever.”

Steph stepped out of the antique store and onto Main Street. She saw Xander sitting in front of the soda shop.

“Hey.”

He flicked a lighter while she hummed something. Xander lit a cigarette. The boy lit a cigarette.

“I’m bored.”

They walked to the other side of town and down to the river. It was March and snow snuck into their shoes.

"Remember the car?"

The boy didn't. Steph threw a stick into the river. "Shut up," she thought as she followed it. At least it was warm enough to walk.

Steph stepped out of the antique store and saw the boy.

“So sick of disembodied voices.”

Time passed. Xander was silent.

The boy sat in front of the soda shop.

Then it happened (i.e., God acquiesced).

Xander disappeared onto the train tracks. The ones behind the mall. The ones that fade into a cartoon tunnel of a black hole forest.

Steph stepped out of the antique store.

This is the photograph I couldn't take.

A phantom on diphenhydramine sipping tea and swaying gently in an apartment at the edge of downtown. Streets and sidewalks. Cool and wet.

The city night light tells me to go to bed.

I crawl.

Horns calling from a soft white glow
echoing through a great marble hall.
Profoundly empty but of high regard.
Vast as all wilderness,
ascension, and
annihilation.

Afterwards, a saxophone plays
to a photograph laying on the floor.

One hundred years later, Steph sat at a tiny desk in her bedroom and typed on her typewriter.

“I knew you and that mattered but I didn't know you when you died. All the things you missed because of death and what you would have been without it. I won't speculate because you deserve more than that. You were a real person, not just a memory to disappoint me (as if, in the end, I was anything enough to you for me to deserve that feeling).”

“I'm sorry that I keep writing about you but maybe you wouldn't or don't mind. I'm sorry I haven't said much nice about you because that's not fair (a lot of it isn't even really about you but about me and everyone we knew). I'm sorry I probably let you down. I'm sorry I logged off that day when I was at work and didn't want to talk to you. I'm sorry that I'm glad that I did because to be honest I wouldn't want to remember that conversation. I saw you in that dream and maybe that was you. At least you didn't seem mad at me.”

Steph put on her coat and went outside shivering. She followed the wood stove smoke from the house at the end of the dirt road through the snow, down the hill, and into the swamp. Hiding behind a tipped

over tree she stared up at the stars. She had seen this moment many year ago, framed and for sale in an antique store. It was as haunted as remembrance or because of it. Completely untethered, she wouldn't be here much longer.

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