

LIFE DURING WARTIME

It's war out there.

I'm speaking, of course, of the perpetual excavation of Woodbridge Avenue and its side streets. It looks as if they're exhuming the town. Crews swing pendulums of paint, and they inscribe the street: G1, G4, G6. These are the diameters of the underground gas pipes. Then the water company follows, blessing the streets with their censers of white paint. They draw white arrows; they adorn the adjacent lawns with tiny blue flags.

Next, in this campaign of relentless digging, come the Lantier Construction trucks—filled with men in green day-glo tee shirts and orange hardhats. You hear the beeping alarms of their trucks backing up at 7:15 in the morning. Then the hydraulic shovels. Plumes of dust and stone rise above the large rectangles of earth that are opened on the front lawns. And just walking to the train station—weaving through the police cars parked crosswise in the streets, the earth-movers lumbering—makes me feel as if I've suddenly been stranded in the music video of “Life During Wartime.” I half expect the Lantier Construction workers to tip their hardhats in unison and sing: “This ain't no party! This ain't no disco! This ain't no fooling around!”

They've been lacerating these streets since the spring. They refill the holes. They open the same holes a week later. All this is being done, apparently, with the goal of installing new external gas meters whose safety valves jettison their excess gas to the outside world, instead of the exploding basements.

I walk past the train station this morning in search of some sense of...what?... beauty and wonder and surprise—qualities that feel increasingly elusive these days—as the world has begun to look a little out of focus to me. Maybe it's age. I feel like a vegetable in the refrigerator that's gone past its date. I have a floater in my right eye—like a small spider hanging there that can't be brushed away. I saw an ophthalmologist yesterday. I arrived at his office at 4:30; it was crowded as a bus station, and I finally got to see him at seven. As I sat there in the waiting room for two and a half hours, I whispered the Jewish prayer, the *shema*, to myself. I'm not particularly religious, but, still, it was the season of the High Holidays. I remember last year reading Herman

Wouk's book about religion, *This Is My God*, and writing down a quotation on the back of a business card in my wallet. *This ancestral voice in our hearts—I put it to my Jewish brothers—is not imaginary or misleading. It is the call of our deepest, truest, best selves. There are fools who call it our shame. It is our immortality.* What I wanted to say at the end of my doctor's visit was: "Doctor, the message you're giving your patients is that you consider two and a half hours of their lives completely irrelevant." What I actually said was: "Have a happy holiday, doctor." And, I'm pleased to say, my friend the Trump supporter drove me home with my dilated eyes, my diagnosis decent, and our friendship stronger.

But passing the train station now, I look up to see two young women in summer dresses waiting on the platform: one wears a floppy black hat; the other is checking her phone—and behind them, on the southbound track, the train slowly departs, moving to the left past the billboards advertising hospitals and musicals. From my point of view, the effect is breathtakingly cinematic. Its framing and movement are perfectly composed. Stanley Kubrick couldn't have done better. And it strikes me as the first completely beautiful thing I've seen all week.

I have a royalty check in my pocket from Phoenix books (18 dollars and 59 cents!), and as I approach Wells-Fargo, I weigh whether I'd rather deal with a human being or an ATM machine.

"How are you, Mr. Kaplow?" asks the woman behind the counter whom I've never seen before, and I realize the computer has revealed my name. I read her nametag. "I'm fine, Ms. Davids.... You see, we both get to call each other by our names." She smiles. The woman at the front desk, Ausra, says hello to me in her middle-European accent.

"You used to work at another branch?"

"Yes," she says. "On Route 27, over by JFK."

"I remember."

And I suddenly feel better somehow, though nothing has really happened.

Outside the bank, a worker from the municipal department lies on the sidewalk repainting the public bench in a rich, satiny black. I smell the fresh paint. Across the

street, by the ice cream store, someone has chalked *Be Nice* in purple letters on the sidewalk.

I think: The universe is conspiring to give me a message.

It is our immortality.