

WHAT SURVIVES

The crosswalks of downtown Metuchen are painted with quotations drawn mostly from pop culture: Bart Simpson, Dr. Seuss, Dolly Parton, James Brown—their intentions are largely comic—but on the corner of Rt. 27 and Main Street, in front of Chase Bank, is a line from the poet Philip Larkin: *What will survive of us is love*. The words (painted black against a rainbow background) are sobering to encounter when one is walking downtown to check his lotto ticket—like having a skull on the kitchen table silently asking you, as you eat your oatmeal: “What does it all mean?”

I like the line *What will survive of us is love*, and every time I read it I consider if it could possibly be true. The lines conclude Larkin’s “An Arundel Tomb,” a poem inspired by two medieval tomb effigies carved in the image of a man and woman lying next to each other, still holding hands. I think of the people I know who have died (half my address book), and I ask myself what of them survives? Surely my love for them endures; I’m looking right now at the image of my father on the desktop of my computer (smiling at the camera, blue/pink short-sleeved shirt, seated in his favorite Sticklely chair that now sits in the corner of my dining room next to a black-and-white photograph of my father holding court at a book signing.) And right this minute, in my right-hand pocket, I’m carrying carry the Swiss Army pocket watch my sister gave me for my birthday. She’s gone as well. My love for them endures. But how does *their* love endure? I think of a line from Rilke’s First Elegy—*Angels (they say) often can’t tell whether/they move among the living or the dead*—which suggests there is somehow a continual *transit* between the living and the dead—that we *imprint* all we have deeply felt into the spirit realm and, at the same time, the spirit realm imprints all the universe has deeply felt into us. We’re like satellite dishes forever picking up faint signals from the infinite.

My friend of forty years (let’s call him Marty) called me a few Saturdays ago. Lynn and I were packed and ready to set out for a week in Vermont to look at the foliage. Over the telephone, Marty’s voice cracked right down its center. “Hank is dead.” Hank was his 29-year-old son, the only child of Marty and Isobel. Hank had died from substance abuse in his Jersey City apartment. The words *no, no, no, no* began pouring from my lips.

Lynn and I cancelled our trip. And we found ourselves, the next afternoon, sitting at Hank and Isobel’s kitchen table. “We are so grateful,” said Marty, “for the 29 years we had him. So lucky his life was so good, that we could love him, that he could love us. *Gratitude* is a strange word, given the circumstances, but that’s honestly what we feel. Grateful for more love than anybody could deser—“ He’s crying again. And I envy the solace his religion is offering him and Isobel—envy his certainty—measured against my own vaporously inadequate beliefs. A week later 700 mourners stand in St. Francis cathedral in Metuchen. I have never seen so many people in a church, even for Christmas. They are standing against the back wall: former teachers, neighbors, groups of Hank’s friends in their twenties. Lynn and I say to each other that if we died, it might be a struggle to round up *seven* people—

and five of those would be looking at their watches wondering how soon they could eat.

The entire congregation is now standing, row by row, walking to the front to receive communion. At this point, Lynn and I step outside onto the steps into the bright autumn sunshine. Parked cars pack Main Street and Elm Avenue.

We return to our seats as Marty walks to the pulpit to deliver the eulogy for his son. I cannot believe he has the strength to do this. He falters a little—a long moment of nearly unbearable silence—but he carries on. And there it is again: *How grateful we feel...* He articulates again that no one could have loved a more joyous son—so lucky a son—a son so generously aware of what a privileged life he had lead—he'd taken a semester abroad in Florence, had risen to distinction in every job he'd held, every team he'd played for.

Marty and Isobel follow the coffin and a small procession down the aisle of the cathedral. The finality and the *smallness* of poor Hank's wooden box, followed by his parents, looking like lost refugees, is too much for me to bear, and my eyes blur.

Two week later. Marty is at my house giving me his social security number so I can fill out an online form he needs to complete for a university where he's working already: supervising student teachers in their certification program. "Life goes on," he says. He's created a memorial fund in his son's name to help fight substance abuse. He's arranging the interment of his son's ashes. He talks about moving to Vermont. He attends church daily. He's the answer to my question about whether the Larkin quote could possibly be true. His love endures. And perhaps his strength and solace are the answering love from Hank, radiating back from the realm of the angels.