A QUESTIONABLE SHAPE

BENNETT SIMS
For Dave
I hastily left the narrow street at the next turning. However, after wandering about for some time without asking the way, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence began to attract attention. Once more I hurried away, only to return there again by a different route. I was now seized by a feeling that I can only describe as uncanny. Other situations share this feature of the unintentional return. One comes back again and again to the same spot. To many people the acme of the uncanny is represented by death, dead bodies, revenants… The return of the dead.

Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny'

Human love is implicated with death, because it implies either resurrecting the beloved or following the spouse into the death realm. It is fitting that the lost one is a synonym for the dead one, since the dead are lost de jure and one loses them de facto in the labyrinth. Marriage requires the spouse to follow his wife into the labyrinthine realm of death… To follow them into undeath, as Orpheus did. Orpheus is the model spouse.

Jalal Toufic, Undying Love, or Love Dies
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Jalal Toufic, Undying Love, or Love Dies
MONDAY
Bennett SimS

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT THE UNDEAD SO FAR IS this: they return to the familiar. They'll wander to nostalgically charged sites from their former lives, and you can somewhat reliably find an undead in the same places you might have found it beforehand. Its house, its office, the bikelanes circling the lake, the bar. 'Haunts.' The undead will return to the neighborhood grocery store and shuffle down its aisles, as if shopping. They will climb into their own cars and sit dumbly at the wheel, staring out the windshield into nothing. A man bitten, infected, and reanimated fifty miles from home will find his way back, stag-gering over diverse terrain—which, probably, he wouldn't have recognized or been able to navigate in his mortal life—in order to stand vacantly on a familiar lawn. No one knows how they do it—whether by tracking or instinct or some latent mnemocar-tography—nor why, but it's an observable phenomenon. In fact, what it calls to mind are those homing pigeons, the ones famous and fascinating for the particles of magnetite in their skulls: bits of mineral sensitive to electromagnetic pulls and capable of directing the pigeons, like the needle of a compass, homeward over vast and alien distances. It is as if the undead are capable of 'homing' in this way.

Sometimes I wonder whether we, the living, are constantly generating the magnetoreceptive memory pellets that will guide us in undeath. Could it be that each time a place leaves a powerful impression on us, it deposits into our unconscious these mineral flecks of nostalgic energy? Eventually, over the course of a lifetime, these might accrete and calcify into little lodestones in our minds: geospatial anamnestic kernels, capable of leading us back to places, but activated, for whatever reason, only in undeath. In that case, the undead mind would really just be a chaff cloud...
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At seven this morning, an hour before Mazoch usually arrives, I sit down with a sheet of loose leaf to write out some of the sites where we’ll be searching for his father today. The list is for Rachel, who’s still asleep. I’ll leave it on the coffee table by our copy of *FIGHT THE BITE*, the infection-awareness pamphlet that the Louisiana Center for Disease Control doled out back in May, at the beginning of the outbreak (chapter titles include ‘1. A Bite’s Never Alright [sic],’ ‘5. A Knock To The Head Will Stop ’Em Dead,’ et cetera). Recently Rachel has been requesting a list of those places ‘you two go every day,’ so that, if I’m worryingly late coming home, she’ll at least be able to tell the police where to start looking. She’s right, of course. At the heading of the sheet, first item on our itinerary, I write down Mr. Mazoch’s old address.

He went missing from his house in Denham Springs several weeks ago, and Matt emailed me shortly afterward to enlist my help. We gave ourselves the month of July, just before hurricane season hits, setting this Friday as our deadline. Assuming that Mr. Mazoch hasn’t been detained, quarantined, or put down already, he might still be wandering, compelled, toward his remembered places. We figured it was only a matter of determining what places these would be, staking them out each day, and waiting for our routes to overlap. If our trip to his house in Denham coincides with Mr. Mazoch’s, then he and Matt will be reunited. To inspire us each morning, Matt copied out two Thomas Hardy quotations on separate post-it notes and taped them to the dashboard of his car: ‘My spirit will not haunt the mound/Above my grave,/But travel, memory-possessed,/To where my tremulous being found/Life largest, best./My phantom-footed shape/1/ will go/When nightfall grays/Hither and thither along the ways/I and another used to know’ from ‘My Spirit Will Not Haunt the Mound,’ and, ‘Yes: I have entered your old haunts at last;/Through the years, through the dead scenes I have tracked you;/What have you now to say of our past—/Scanned across the dark space wherein I have lacked you?’ from ‘After a Journey.’ Each poem seems to speak to the other across the inch of dashboard leather that divides them, just as I imagine Mr. Mazoch letting out an unearthly moan, and Matt humming out the open window to keep awake as he drives, and that moaning and that humming speaking to one another across Baton Rouge’s fields and highways, across all the remembered and misremembered suburbs that separate Mazoch from his father.

I place the list on the coffee table and check my cell phone for the time. 7:15. Matt is no doubt doing his morning pushups right about now. He completes sets of a hundred before setting out each day, and always manages to arrive at eight sharp, giving his familiar, hearty knock at the door. With equal regularity he manages to drop me off by four, and—if Rachel and I

of remembrance, this mass of pellets causing sharp pain as it shifted magnetically in the direction of various homes. And the undead wouldn’t remember memories so much as be shepherded by them, tugged by headaches toward recalled geographies. (It occurs to me on clear nights that the Pleiades, clustered like buckshot in Taurus’s thigh, might be like memory pellets of this type. When the Pleiades shift, the bull’s thigh aches in that direction, and it is a kind of homesickness that leads him sinking beneath the horizon.)
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\(^1\) I like the phrase ‘phantom-footed’ because I’ve often imagined the footprints of the undead phosphorescing beneath moonlight, as if ectoplasmically, such that they glow in determined trails toward particular houses, restaurants, live oaks... wherever that undead had found life ‘largest, best.’ It would be like reading a map of remembering to look down on all the ectoplasmic paths glimmering through the city at night. Like Hardy’s spirit, our ‘walking dead’ don’t simply walk: anytime an undead is walking, what it’s really doing is remembering. It’s retracing steps from its former life and moving blindly along a vector of memory. In this way, the tracks that it leaves (of rainwater, of dirt across a carpet, of blood) record more than a physical path: they also materialize a line of thought, the path of that remembering.
don’t invite him over for dinner—goes home to read his ‘book a night.’ He’s been this way since undergrad: a mesomorphic litterateur, who keeps his square jaw clean-shaven and his blond hair buzzed close, like a wrestler, and who’s succeeded, too, in cultivating a wrestler’s physique (the perfect inverse pyramid of his back; the chest like a breastplate; the forearms thick as my calves), even though he’s never grappled with anything bigger than an OED. Back when he was LSU’s model English major, the bodybuilding always struck me—a stereotypically scrappy philosophy student—as a waste of his time: something that he would grow out of eventually, or else replace with a new routine. But not even the outbreak has altered his regimen. In the living room of his apartment a used bench press abuts a floor-to-ceiling bookcase, brimming with paperbacks, while in the doorway of his bedroom a pull-up bar is installed, with a fifty-pound weight belt coiled beneath it. It is this same self-discipline and rigor that Matt has been bringing to bear on the search for his father.

In his initial emails to me, he compiled a brief assortment of some of Mr. Mazoch’s likely haunts. Since starting the search, we’ve made surprisingly few additions to that list. There’s the house in Denham, which is my first item for Rachel, plus a number of other places that Mr. Mazoch would have frequented: the Freedom Fuel gas station; Louie’s Café; the grocery store, auction house, and antiques mall; the plumbing warehouse where he reported every morning for forty years (even into his sixties, when finally a debilitating heart attack forced him to retire). I write all of these down, in a column beneath the house’s entry. Then I add some of the fast-food restaurants—McDonald’s, Taco Bell, Jack-in-the-Box—where Mr. Mazoch took his lunch breaks every day (causing him to accumulate weight ruinously in later life, ending it, according to Matt, near three hundred pounds). The Goodwill, the Salvation Army, where he bought the used boots and ripped jeans he worked in. These businesses
are all boarded up by now, but they’re still places where his father might be. Places where Matt’s sensitivity and agitation reach a kind of peak, where he holds his breath at the appearance in the distance of every undead silhouette, trying to determine by the height and breadth of its fatherly shape whether it’s worth lifting the binoculars for.¹

Mr. Mazoch was sixty-four when he went missing. From what little Matt’s told me about his life, I gather that the man ordered his adult existence almost exclusively around these spaces: never worked another job than plumbing; only ever lived with Mrs. Mazoch, spending his last decades alone in that one house in Denham; and had as his single hobby (his only reason for traveling elsewhere) ‘antiquing,’ i.e., driving to garage sales at dawn on the weekends and buying up refuse from families’ attics, which he could then put on display in his own home or sell for a profit to dealers. Not an avid traveler, not a sampler of novelties: just a workhorse who lived and loved at a few addresses, where even now he might be found. Where, at any rate, Matt still expects to run into him.

At each of the sites, Matt’s MO is to case the perimeter, looking for traces that Mr. Mazoch might have left there. But in the past three weeks we’ve turned up nothing. Day after day the premises remain undisturbed and blank. That is how thoroughly the police have been patrolling the streets: any remaining strays are quickly apprehended and sent to the quarantines. When Matt first emailed me (when I-10 was still jammed with mass-exodus car wrecks), it was impossible to imagine conditions ever stabilizing to this degree. But now we really are learning to live

¹ A far-off infected usually constitutes our great excitement for the day: Matt will peer at it awhile through the windshield, then—shaking his head—pass on the binoculars to me (though I still haven’t worked up the nerve to look through them. I’ve only ever seen one undead in person—up close I mean—and it was eerie enough from two blocks away, by the naked eye).
with undeath. The federal government has standardized its plan for handling the epidemic, and Louisiana has been faring no more or less poorly than any other plague state. Though most schools, businesses, and malls remain closed for decontamination, FEMA has begun providing relief in the form of refugee shelters and welfare checks. It’s FEMA relief that is funding Matt’s search, in fact, and funding the shelter where Rachel volunteers every day. The worst that’s going to happen appears to have already happened, and life in the city is returning to some version of normal.

Other than the quarantines—which Matt and I visit on Fridays—I’m not sure what else to include on Rachel’s list. There are a few extra sites, but none that we bother to check on our rounds: Matt inspects his apartment himself, and he also visits his mom’s house (the one that she won in the divorce, and raised him in). Now, as we’re heading into the final week, he’s begun suggesting that we revise our itinerary. Maybe stake out some new sites. For instance, there are places from his own childhood that he’s brought up before: like his elementary school, where Mr. Mazoch had to wait in carpool for him, or Highland Road Park, where he used to take Matt to play chess on those weekends when he had custody. I add these to the list with asterisks, in the event that we end up going, then explain in a footnote\(^1\) that they’re provisional.

One site that Matt has mentioned in a passing way is Tunica Hills, a pine-forested park up near St. Francisville, with hiking trails winding along red-clay cliffs and down through precipitous waterfalls. He and Mr. Mazoch had gone on day trips there when Matt was a kid, and they always remembered the hikes fondly together, promising they’d do it again sometime. But once Matt was grown, Mr. Mazoch was already too out of shape—his back too wracked from manual labor—to attempt anything so physically strenuous. Then, after the heart attack, it was out of the question forever. So Tunica may well be a site on Mr. Mazoch’s radar, a locus of nostalgia and regret. Matt’s said that he might expect himself to wander there, eventually, if he were undead.

I doubt we could actually go—it’s a three-hour drive; the area’s too large to feasibly locate one body in; and, because of the travel ban that’s been enforced, we’d have to circumvent border guards simply to leave Baton Rouge—but it’s nice to talk about. I myself remember Tunica fondly (even though I’ve been only once), and could almost be guaranteed to return undead to it, so strong a pull does it exert over my memory. Rachel and I went on one of our best dates there, late last summer. Like Matt and Mr. Mazoch, we hiked along the cliff trails, and at the end of one steep uphill slog we rewarded ourselves by splashing around and otherwise disporting in the algid waters of a wading pool, and by showering beneath the thundering brainfreeze of its waterfall. We must have stayed in that same place for hours, passing the entire afternoon—or at least this is how I remember it—kissing and smiling goofily at one another. In fact, I find that most of the frames of this memory are just of Rachel’s smiling face: her jagged blond hair plastered wetly against her cheeks, her green eyes gleaming as I cradle her head in my hands. Everything’s shot through with a burnished yellow light, as if there were actually lens flares in my memory. I’ve discussed this effect with Rachel—the color saturation of my memory of that day, its emphasis on amber—and she says that she experiences the same thing, that what she can recall of Tunica is more like a music video than a memory. She thinks that it’s a result of our having paid such close attention to the quality of

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\(^1\) Since the outbreak, I have often reflected that the footnote is the typographic mark most emblematic of undeath. By opening up a subjacent space on the page, the footnote digs a grave in the text, an underworld in the text. The words that are banished there are like thoughts that the text has repressed, pushed down into its unconscious. But they go on disturbing it from beneath, such that if the text were ever infected, they are the words that would guide it. Footnotes are a text’s phantom feet.
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light in the park. On our hike, she kept stopping to admire the sun’s suffusion in the air, pointing out the way that it punched through the pine branches in great gold shafts, so like the conical tractor beams of hovering UFOs that all those backlit motes of dust, which were in fact being circulated in every direction, seemed to float only upward, in abducted currents. Given the level of attention we paid to scenes like that, it’s possible that our memory is a little sundrunk, Rachel said. The moment that even now, a year afterward, we still recall to one another is the one when Rachel cupped her hands beneath the waterfall and withdrew them, holding them up so that a scattering of sunlight was reflected there, between her hands, lambent in the water and over the skin of her palms. The sun was diffracted into a dozen small spots of glare, wriggling white oblongs, like larvae of light. We stared at them for a full minute, delighted. Because they were caught in her handful of water, Rachel was able to slosh them around, and to make them appear to sift through the creases between her opening fingers, and finally to make an offering of them: to extend her hands to me, the way the moon rises, and proffer her handful of the sun’s light. As she ladled it over my head, I didn’t shiver, or feel reinvigorated by solar forces, but I pretended to.

A few weeks into the outbreak, Rachel wrote me an email reminding me of this afternoon—as if I needed to be reminded—in which she referred to the lights in her hands as ‘Bethlehem stars’ (I knew at once what she had in mind, but to me those slivers of brilliance had always seemed, all wriggling whitely in her hands, more like lampyrid maggots than stars). She asked me whether I remembered Tunica, and specifically whether I recalled the constellation that she had caught, ‘as bright as Bethlehem stars.’ Of course I did. The entire day was—to adopt a photic vocabulary—‘seared’ into my memory, and it was this episode especially, the quiet magic and mad happiness of watching sunlight play on each other’s bodies, that
Rachel and I had incorporated into the mythos of our courtship. We always referred back to it with semi-tragic nostalgia, as if for a prelapsarian period in our love. We might ask, in the middle of a fight say, why things couldn’t be now as they were then, or remark, in acute distress, that we hadn’t watched light together in weeks. That was the rhetorical strategy of this particular email, which exhorted the two of us—this was after a string of nasty fights, induced in part by the cabin fever of our staying inside the boarded-up apartment for days—to exhibit only our best selves: to try getting out and going on a sunset walk together; to recuperate the love we’d displayed at Tunica, when we spent whole minutes staring patiently into her hands, into the lights there, as if stargazing. A bath of Edenic goldness, a trace of our best selves: it is this kind of life that that afternoon has taken on in our imaginations. And because neither of us has been able to visit Tunica Hills since, we both, if we were infected I mean, might be expected to head straight there, bypassing other sites (our crappy apartment even) in search of this one memory. Following, as it were, our Bethlehem stars.¹

After some hesitation, I decide to write ‘Tunica Hills*’ at the bottom of Rachel’s list. We won’t be going there today—or any other, for that matter—but I suspect that Rachel will appreciate its presence on the page. At the very least she’ll savor the coincidence of our sharing the site with the Mazochs. Of course, it’s unlikely that the hills hold the same significance in Matt and his dad’s relationship as they do in hers and mine, or that Mr. Mazoch could be expected to wander so far afield. But maybe they do, and maybe he could, in which case Matt might devise

¹ All that Rachel meant by the phrase when she first wrote it—little was known at that point about the homing of the undead—was that the lights were brilliant and beautiful. It’s a happy coincidence that these Bethlehem stars happen also to have matured in our memories in the way that they have, and that they might serve—like the Pleiades, like memory pellets—as the guiding lights that will shepherd our undead bodies.
a way of driving up there after all. Probably, though, we’ll just keep visiting the same handful of sites, until we find Mr. Mazoch or until Mr. Mazoch finds us. Or, failing that, until Friday arrives, and Matt abandons this search and gives up.