Howard Moss

Afternoons in New England

Up the hill near the graveyard, a boy is cutting down the tall grass. In the quiet of the afternoon, I can hear the sound his blade makes as it hacks through the stems. A small patch of vertical weeds has just fallen; throughout the day, the patch will become larger until he is boxed in by the surrounding grass, or until there is no grass at all.

There is something odd about the scene, some incongruity eluding consciousness — and too obvious to formulate itself at once: it is the live boy moving against the background of the dead. He is very much alive; naked to the waist, his body is thin but taut, his chest molded on a small scale. His blue jeans hanging down in two straight lines make his torso a perfect rectangle. His black hair probably seems blacker because of the intense sunlight; dark glasses enhance the blackness. He has just stopped for a moment to run the back of his hand across his forehead before flinging the perspiration to the ground.

In many ways, the graveyard has always been the pleasantest spot on the hill: cool because of the tall trees, greener than the surrounding countryside because of the care lavished on it. Meaningful in its finality, it does not vary from day to day. No one has been buried in it for years. The stones commemorating the dead are quiet time keepers; the time they keep is distinct from the heartbeat of the pulse, from time in the mind of the onlooker. None of them is large; the names cut into their surfaces — names I have noted on many afternoon walks — keep repeating themselves. The members of probably no more than a dozen families are buried here. The quiet is almost tangible and appears, at times, to hang visibly from the trees, to sound an overtone after an occasional bird call, to saturate the ground on which I lie.

Lying on the earth in the exact posture of the dead, separated from them by a few feet of earth, a few yards of space one way or the other, doesn't frighten me. It calms me. From this perspective, so many things seem unimportant and meretricious. The one train whistle I've heard all afternoon, followed by the clanging of iron way off at the edge of town, is the distant signal of another

cottages dotting the rims. Harrisville, beautiful, and, potentially more beautiful still, and Nelson, which you drive through between breaths. Something of the sea hangs over Dublin Lake — because it is so big? So grand? Or Cummington, with its little grocery and post office combined, a rich world hidden in the hills. Farms and money, not necessarily linked. Peterborough's waterfall and river, the red brick buildings of the town with their records and bureaus, farm lore and statistics, the hum of bureaucracy stretching across the hills. And because there are so many educational institutions in Massachusetts, the wonderful stationery stores, with terrific glassine folders, the handsome dark brown plastic filing boxes I've seen nowhere else. Villages everywhere stuck in the mountains. The best thing a small town can be is residual and not resentful.

One late fall, in Peterborough, it snowed overnight, a landmark snow, bled off a Christmas card, a Currier and Ives snow. The arms of spruces held the smooth, formed white in their graceful curves, jai alai players suddenly northern. The young birches, tortured overnight by the wind, had their tops grotesquely anchored in the ground, bent down during the night under the weight of ice. The frozen snow held them fast. I loosened them, carefully, and they sprang up, lithe and trembling, miraculous cures of the temporarily arthritic, the crippled made supple in a flash. It was the day of the liberation of birches. It was more than that — as if the spirit, damned by the physical, had reasserted itself, even if the assertion took a visible form. The air was special: a good white wine made solid for miles.

On another day, in winter, I arrived at Amherst at dusk in a snowfall. By morning, nothing broke the unending whiteness. The albino smoothness of hills had obliterated the square and the angle but not the circle. Everything was either very tall or very round. If two things touched, the piled-up drifts obscured their joining. The eye was forced, finally, to make distinctions of form alone: a tall spire, the lip of a windowsill — whatever showed. Snow belongs peculiarly to New England, as native as a red barn or a stone fence. A world in snow is a world beyond statistics, a world of no feeling at all, or feeling pure and simple.

In summer, walking among the headstones of a graveyard, one becomes aware of the dead. But in winter, watching the snow fall, one begins to know what dying — dying without pain, at least — must be like. A blanking out. A silence undistracted, in which nothing redeems or accuses.

noise stops, it is quieter than it was before, in spite of the Scarlatti sonata (which is beginning to seem like a part of nature), in spite of the swishing sound of the blade cutting through the long grass.

If summer is a season of silence, New England must be its place, for it has a quality that enhances thought, the quality of a pause, or a parenthesis (the summer itself seems plucked out of the twelve months of the year), combined with an historic sense of intimacy that never allows for coziness. Its history, huge in import, strikes the casual student as having occurred on a smaller scale, as if it were containable as a thought, had been plotted by eyes appreciative of detail, eyes aware of the power of diminution. Even Boston is the refined image of a larger idea, for one of its illusions is that it can be looked at whole. Think of the monumental sweep of the George Washington Bridge or the Golden Gate. Then think of those small stone bridges crossing the Charles. A smaller river than the Hudson, it is true, but there is more to it than that. To be drowned in the Charles seems unlikely; a swan boat would come to the rescue. I have seen it in winter, when still it wore a friendly aspect. In spring, one may watch the sculls amble up and down it, looking like toys. The main thing is: One can get to the other side on foot.

There is something lost about New England, but something capable always of being rediscovered: a world the mind can take in. Frameable as landscape, hard country and soft, it has the rational attraction of being conceivable. Only poverty or restlessness could have driven the first settlers westward, out of the eastern enclaves, away from the seaboard to the almost unimaginable Pacific. The frontier died in New England first, where it was born, so it contains images of a residual world. Who started out first, heading west? It must have been the city, with its stench and noise, shaking its fist in the background, that led the first pioneer to cover his ears with his hands, to head out for fresher air, to lay down his plow (in what would eventually be a suburb) and start building a wagon.

Driving through New England, one is delighted by whole vistas that fit into the eye, like contact lenses — just enough, not too much, as if God had fashioned the landscape with the shape of the eye in mind. Conceivable space is its overwhelming comfort, silence its great virtue, and, together, they put one in touch with a continuous past.

I have never been anywhere else in America where the dead

seemed so accepted, so much a part of the fabric of living people. There is much that is false in New England: the insistence on the past for its own sake, the smugness of historical pride and self-love, the leftover bigotry of the Puritan. But it is a bigotry without hallucination and can be reasoned with — or at least it could be. The memory of Cotton Mather and Sacco and Vanzetti should have been enough to stay the hand of a rock-hurler drunk on the passions of busing. New England (to an outsider) seems to have a conscious sense of guilt, which is better than feeling guilty and not knowing why. And death can be a strange enemy of Puritanism; being aware of its inevitability either loosens or draws tighter the bondage of Puritan strictures.

New England can be sad: dismal wrecks of cities that once hummed with industry and prosperity, broken-down mill towns wreaking their revenge on a river. Unpainted eyesores, the meanness of a factory town in which every wheel is idled, the railroad station a deserted junkheap of remembered grandeur. But something of the possibility of revival still hangs over them, over Bridgeport, over Northampton, over the poorer sections of New London. New England often has saved itself with a college or a university, transforming a deserted estate covered with weeds into a spanking new campus, or a cultural center. Last summer, a Shakespeare company was restoring as best it could the faded magnificence of Edith Wharton's old house, "The Mount." And the rivers are still there, ready for traffic, for the shiny new tourism of the hovercraft, for edgy real estate to take to the water. There are estuaries on which it would be delightful to live, aspects going unperceived, hilltops barren from which one could command a 360 degree view.

If death undermines the moral certainties of Puritanism, death itself has an enemy in indifference, not a lazy indifference but the surprising energy of life lived in the very face of it, like those fish that clean the teeth of sharks, little dentists of survival. I recall a small cemetery on Cranberry Island in Maine. It was on the way to the sea from the house I was staying at, a walk through woods, going downhill gradually, sometimes through tangled thicket, sometimes through open forest. The air was very clean, the ground dotted with chanterelles, as if some pointillist had been working only in yellows. I walked, suddenly, into a small graveyard, with maybe twelve to fourteen headstones. But the odd thing was: between two stout trees, someone had erected a ballet barre. Someone had stood in the cemetery, looking toward the

sea, and practiced ballet positions! Someone for whom time was the only mirror, someone for whom, I hope, no stone has yet been erected.

I think of Rockport, Mass. Eating dinner at the old Blacksmith's Shop facing Motif # 1 as dusk fell, and then a long walk out on Fisherman's Neck. It was there I heard the Brahms Clarinet Concerto for the first time, seeping out of the lighted window of a shack. At the end of the Neck, dark water and rock, and stars. And I think of Duxbury, with its orderly yacht basin, the houses along the bay, the bridge — no longer passable by car — leading out to the Atlantic. And of Magnolia, Mass., with its single street of chic shops, come upon out of the lilac and wistaria of gardens and woods, its great white elephant of a hotel where, one night, a string trio, something out of an Anouilh play, discreetly camouflaged itself among the potted palms. And the Gardner Museum, looking over a balustrade. Four stories below, in a Venetian garden, another trio played Beethoven, and the flowers and the music were as heady as the Rembrandt drawings I had just left in a room a little too dark for Rembrandt shading. I think of the old St. Clair's in Cambridge, and the Brattle Theater before it was transformed.

The Berkshires. On a mountain in Ashland, two pastures at the top, shaved like the heads of Indians. And lower down, cows placidly walking on a slant, oblivious of the incline. A world of natural wonders, and motels, worse when they imitate "architecture," like the Colonial facade of the Treadway in Williamstown. (Its designer might have taken a clue from the new wing of the Clark Museum whose dark marble leaves the white of the original structure intact.) The inns of Lenox, its bustling shops: glassy fronts, bow windows held together by thin wooden frames. The Lord Jeffrey in Amherst, its complicated interior plan, as if another world existed below ground. Monument Avenue in Old Bennington, remarkable for its black-shuttered white houses, its elegance, its sense of shade and space, the obelisk of the monument itself defining a vista, the small statue with its figure (a Rolls Royce of the Revolution?) standing in front a short distance away — lessons in perspective. The emptiness of New Hampshire, reassuring and forbidding at the same time. Monadnock, Big and Little. The Franklin Pierce Inn at Antrim with its curved bar, the rare square room at the Arlington Inn in Vermont. And the lakes, secret with the small (or largish)

cottages dotting the rims. Harrisville, beautiful, and, potentially more beautiful still, and Nelson, which you drive through between breaths. Something of the sea hangs over Dublin Lake — because it is so big? So grand? Or Cummington, with its little grocery and post office combined, a rich world hidden in the hills. Farms and money, not necessarily linked. Peterborough's waterfall and river, the red brick buildings of the town with their records and bureaus, farm lore and statistics, the hum of bureaucracy stretching across the hills. And because there are so many educational institutions in Massachusetts, the wonderful stationery stores, with terrific glassine folders, the handsome dark brown plastic filing boxes I've seen nowhere else. Villages everywhere stuck in the mountains. The best thing a small town can be is residual and not resentful.

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