

## Survivors

I see them young women still, Hilary, Jennifer, Ildiko,  
running together into a spring haze  
across the water meadows by the Mill Pond  
only days before we all went down  
into our single destinies, and ceased  
to correspond  
except for christenings and marriages.

And now divorce. Water under the bridge  
where we used to drink draft cider has grown rough,  
our lives too turbulent. The easy reach  
of punts and parasols has gone, our sons and heirs  
are old enough to be here now, we're at the edge  
of middle age, waiting for second wind.

Whenever we meet memories grow ritual.  
Some blur, some gain in sharpness. We cannot help compare  
the lives we forged from comparable beginnings:  
One, retired from high school teaching early,  
lives in the country, has a flat in town,  
seems settled, cat-like, yet alive and pent.  
Hungary, Cyprus, Ireland — what dream still  
smoulders in those adventurous eyes?

This other in due season married well,  
produced her child, her book, made all the right  
decisions, is well thought of by her peers  
in academe. Like an estate  
in some lush valley framed with white picket fences,  
under control, she keeps the world at bay,  
nurtures hygenic tidiness of mind.  
Where was the lost chance trapped into success?

The third at first seemed to go underground,  
in basement flats, besieged by a squall of kids,  
married to a sci. fi. writer who quit,  
but like a trawler plunging through roughest seas  
she came through, battered, somehow, and from pain  
wrought a compassionate prose. She too lives on.

No use searching dusty entrails now —  
playbills, a weekend spent  
in Norwich, speeches, parties, and May Balls,  
Graduation sherry on the Fellows' Lawn.  
Six weeks after going down  
one bright young man committed suicide,  
a woman, driving herself to fame, in dying shed  
a fascinating gloom over our past  
that until then seemed recent, now shut off.

Others surface in films and magazines  
glossily handsome, happy and well-bred.  
Was this where our hopes and hesitations led?  
Was that success? How could we tell,  
until too late, what all our patterns meant?  
The delicate balances of brain and blood  
stir us or slow us in unseen accord  
with tides and moons and unforeseen events,  
a chemistry of will and love and chance  
each is caught up and crushed in, or learns to outlive,  
transformed and easier, knowing we are wrought  
as the wood grain guides the carver's knife,  
the rock face hewn or ocean pine trees bent  
by centuries' wind and tide.  
We take and give our life and love where we can,  
spend and are spent,  
and in this pulse of conflict find content.

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