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A Body in Time

Cory Brown[1]

If time in the psyche loses its scale and form, we court falling into inner chaos.
Eva Hoffman

On a beautiful September evening in Stillwater, Oklahoma, 1978, my two college buddies and I climbed into a jeep and took off, beers in hand, to our favorite bar. After strolling into the subdued light, getting a strong whiff of stale beer, and then scanning the place for familiar and unfamiliar faces, each of us would wander through the various rooms, a little like lost dogs in a pack who would sometimes go our separate ways looking for what, exactly, we didn't know. But how could we know when we weren't really ourselves yet? It's been more than a few years, so my memory may be conflating this bar with others like it. In some and not others there was often the slamming sound of someone scoring at the foosball table, or the sharp clack of a rack of balls being broken and then the soft thud of one or two dropping into pockets. But you'd hear those sounds only if the music wasn't playing, if it was too early for dancing, or the DJ was between tracks.

In the bar, you might see someone there you recognized, a girl if you were lucky because that's the *real* reason most of us were there. Occasionally you'd see a guy friend talking to a girl and you'd know immediately, depending on the friend, if they were going to have sex that night. Women seemed to line up for my friend Randy, for example. My other friends were somewhat successful in that regard, but nothing like Randy. Sometimes some guy I knew would end up sleeping with a girl and I'd later find out they were in a relationship, had already been in a relationship. That would always surprise me. Why weren't they somewhere else, somewhere where they could be with one another, perhaps in a meaningful way.

And why exactly was *I* there, when I wasn't always interested in scoping people out. What I was usually doing was watching myself watching people. I was like someone standing between two mirrors facing one another, one on each side of me, both images falling into an abyss. A few weeks later, I would have an experience while anaesthetized for one of my abdominal surgeries following the car accident that night that resembled this act of falling, except it was accompanied by extraordinary pain. And later the only way I knew to describe it was to liken it to what I'd read about Prometheus and the eagle that tore at his liver every day. For the longest time after my stint in the hospital, I think I was grateful for the bodily pain of that period, a pain that introduced me to my body in some profound way, but I'm afraid it may have also exacerbated my self-alienation, by introducing my body to death, since death signals—foreshadows, of course—our own absence.

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It was Barry's jeep and before we climbed back into it, outside in the parking lot, Randy insisted that he drive. He was drunk and being very loud and we hadn't known him long enough to know how he was going to behave behind the wheel. My group of friends had always given the "designated driver" the benefit of the doubt no matter how drunk he was, maybe because it was usually me and I always drove carefully when drunk and everybody knew that. But that night Barry handed Randy the keys and then climbed in the back between our old high school friends Amy and Clara. We'd run into the two girls at the bar and they had needed a ride home. I rode shotgun. As Randy started the jeep, he let out a laugh that sounded like he was impersonating the devil. It still amazes me that we didn't suspect that we were in trouble. At some point during the ride, we found ourselves driving through a playground, weaving in and out of monkey bars and slides and swings and teeter-totters. I remember it all as a blur, not blurred in retrospect by memory, but blurred itself, reality itself like a dream, everything flying by as if in periphery. After getting back on the road, Randy ran a stop sign and hit another vehicle, a pickup truck that was turning toward us into the intersection, and all of us were thrown from the jeep.

In the months and years after, I didn't know how to think about the role that incident played, was playing, in my life. Maybe that just means I didn't know how to think about the passing of time. On the one hand was my understanding of time as a child and adolescent: days, nights, months, years crawling along like a shallow stream you barely detect is moving because you're in it as well, treading water and detecting your own movement only when you see something along the shore, a tree or a parked car with people getting out of it, maybe to lay out their picnic on the grass, and there they would creep by you at a turtle's pace, a woman spreading out a blanket. Then as I grew older the pace of the river quickened and I would blink and another year would pass. My body is now nothing what it was only two or three blinks ago, when like a gazelle I would bounce up the 300-foot incline on the south rim trail of Taughannock park here in upstate New York, feeling the pleasure of well-functioning lungs, legs, hips, and knees, my ankles springing back and forth like well-oiled hinges.

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But I can't think of time as a river now because a river has banks and a sky above it and maybe people in it or floating on it and also possibly standing along its banks watching. Time can't be a river because nothing can be outside of it. It's as if time is analogy-proof; it's the air we breathe, the bubble in which resides all the clouds in the sky and all the stars and the milky way and our galaxy cluster that itself is but a pebble in a colossal sea of super galaxy-clusters. In book 9 of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*, he argues that "Loss is nothing else but change, and change

is Nature's delight," and then goes on in Book 10 to say that once you internalize change and its attendant losses, you'll be a better person for it:

> Make a habit of regularly observing the universal process of change; be assiduous in your attention to it, and school yourself thoroughly in this branch of study; there is nothing more elevating to the mind. For when a man realizes that at any moment he may have to leave everything behind him and depart from the company of his fellows, he casts off the body and thenceforward dedicates himself wholly to the service of justice in his personal actions and compliance with Nature in all else.

Understand your ultimate, inevitable demise, internalize it, and you'll become a person dedicated to justice. But I wonder if in my case my near-death experience merely exacerbated my alienation, robbing me of a sense of myself as young and alive (read: immortal), causing a certain resentment such that I went through my days afterwards feeling I had a right to indulge myself. I wonder if maybe it's not only about casting off the body, as Marcus says, but about narrating the body in time so that one can take accountability for one's actions. The casting off doesn't happen *ipso facto*. *"Make a habit of regularly observing the universal process of change; be assiduous in your attention to it, and school yourself thoroughly in this branch of study; there is nothing more elevating to the mind."* My near-death experience didn't foster an internalization of death, as he prescribes here—I was only twenty, after all.

Dazed and confused we were in those days, my friends and I, the country reeling from defeat, the image of that helicopter in everyone's minds, the last one leaving Saigon on that fateful day in April of '75, a few South Vietnamese loyalists hanging from the landing gear with their legs dangling like wasps, presumably hoping not to die from the inevitable fall. 1978 was among the years Dutch Elm disease struck Oklahoma, thousands of trees across the country dying and in need of care, and we were living out a sort of cultural analogue to it. One of our high school friends, Larry, was at West Point and our favorite movie was *The Deer Hunter*, our favorite scene the one in which a young Robert DeNiro and Christopher Walken are in a bar after the wedding reception, both scheduled to ship out to Nam in a few days. They spot a veteran at the bar standing erect, a green beret on his head, downing one shot after another. They're in awe of him and are dying to hear what it's like over there, so they ask him, and after a long silence the green beret turns toward them as if noticing them for the first time, lifts his shot glass and gives the toast: "fuck it." That was it, the Ten Commandments, the Bill of Rights, Pledge of Allegiance, Declaration of Independence, Gettysburg Address, all reduced in that bar deep in the bowels of the upper-Midwest to a simple vulgar phrase, the ideals of American colonialism spat into the air as a whisky toast by a burned out ex-green beret.

I wonder if what was going on in the country at the time served to buttress my sense of entitlement at the time. Was the country's war giving me permission to replace my alienation and fear of death with the will to power? Mother culture teaches us to exalt ourselves, exalt the self, but then we grow to understand that time—in ever-expanding increments—obliterates the self by

virtue of change. How are we to be someone if we are, essentially, change itself? Larry had come back from West Point for a visit the previous summer and we'd taken him out to get stinking drunk and he talked about the army as if it were a prostitute he'd bought for a night on the town. We'd take him into our houses and our parents would fawn all over him—young local boy made good, as if he were studying to be a priest—and then we'd go out and get drunk and he'd talk about how fucked up West Point was, all the cadets as disillusioned as that green beret in the movie. I remember how his attitude created an unsettling disjunction in my mind because my father, as an officer in the infantry, had fought Nazis up the Apennines, having landed at Anzio as General Clark's fifth army was breaking out of that beachhead and heading toward Rome. He was awarded the Purple Heart with an Oak Leaf Cluster (wounded twice) and a Silver Star. When Larry was in our house, he saw the medals on the wall and turned to me to say that my dad must've pulled something out of his ass for that Silver Star. It was strange trying to reconcile my noble vision of my father's service with Larry's stories about West Point. Now I see that Larry's attitude was simply another manifestation of time passing and pulling me and him into the fray. There was nothing timeless about my father's service in Italy; what could induce moral cynicism more than the horrors of World War II?

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Larry's girlfriend at the time, Amy—one of the girls in the backseat of the jeep that night—had visited him in the Hudson Valley and had gotten poison ivy on her backside from the sex they'd had in the woods near campus. In the following weeks, he would break her heart and marry some Connecticut woman he met from a wealthy family. He's an engineer now, I think, for some Japanese car manufacturer. About a year after I got out of the hospital, I spent an evening with Amy in her apartment in Stillwater. Maybe it had been a date, I don't remember. She herself had been hurt in the accident that night, a slice across her thigh above the knee that took several stitches. She'd visited me in the hospital a few times, with others, and I was grateful for that. We were fond of each other and because I was drunk that night and it was late she offered to let me sleep over on her couch. But I declined, I think because I sensed that whatever would happen that night would become something and at the time I didn't know how to think about that, didn't even have the wherewithal to imagine how that might pan out. Maybe, I now think, I was reticent because I was still experiencing bodily trauma from the months in the hospital. Maybe I hadn't yet grown out of, healed out of, those brutal experiences. It's as if trauma, nurtured by mother culture, exacerbates the exaltation of the self, compelling us to *hoard* it. Maybe I was still walking around in a fetal position, as it were, self-protectively hesitant still to share my body, my self, with anyone else.

Another factor—and perhaps the stronger one—was that I was still in love with Amy's best friend from high school, Mary Beth. She and I had had a serious thing for months during my last year of high school and then as a freshman in college when she dumped me and I pined for her for two years. She too had visited me in the hospital. The first time, during the first few days,

she told me that she still loved me. I can see her in my mind standing near my knees beside the bed looking pretty as ever, gorgeous lips. I remember staring at her lips and appreciating in a kind of pained awe the way she would twist them when she talked. I was stunned by her presence. She told me that on the night of the accident—as the five of us partiers were flying through the playground in our chariot of fire—she had gone to a high school football game in our hometown looking for me. She'd wanted to have sex with me, she said, but instead had had sex with a good friend of mine that she used to date. How amazing it is to me now how isolated each of us is in our own psychologies, solipsistic silos. What did she have in mind telling me that? What was I supposed to do with that information? One side of my face had been scraped off, broken bones in my back, broken wrists, no water by mouth, my lips chapped from round-the-clock thirst. I'd suffered a ruptured spleen and pancreas and a torn duodenum, my whole belly wrapped in gauze and tape, and was most certainly on morphine or Demerol. There we were on the ICU ward, babies screaming all around us (I was under 21 so it was a children's hospital) and all I wanted—yes, I suppose it's true—was to be loved by this young woman who two years earlier had jilted me and sent me down a spiral of depression, but more urgently someone to take a soaked washcloth and squeeze its contents into my open mouth. I was a baby bird in its nest waiting for its mother to drop something nourishing down its throat and I desperately wanted that something to be a few drops of water.

Nonetheless, before she left we managed to negotiate around the NG tube in my nose and kiss, but maybe that was during one of her later visits, I'm not sure. She came back to the hospital once or twice more before abandoning me, again, and when it was clear she wasn't coming back I resented her for having shown up in the first place and did so for several months afterwards without, I think, realizing it. I don't blame her now, years later. Any resentment I felt at the time was from a sense of entitlement, the desperate need of the self. Who knows what it was like visiting me in the hospital with romantic intentions? I'm sure all she wanted for herself, a twenty-year-old, was to have a normal romantic relationship with someone who was not laid up in an ICU bed with sick and dying babies screaming all around him. I did manage to get my own room after a while but, still, in the next few weeks I would lose close to 50 pounds, mostly muscle mass—from 175 to 125, as I recall—so I wouldn't have been in any shape for a relationship for some time. That month and the next—September and October—I had three more operations, to patch up the duodenum again, because it had hemorrhaged, and to drain abscesses, one that took a fist-sized chunk of muscle from my lower right abdomen and the other requiring a foot-long incision behind my left kidney. Soon after, I developed another abscess in my solar plexus and was asked to sign a consent form for something called the Whipple procedure, an operation with, I was told, a 65% mortality rate.

My doctors decided the Whipple was overkill and wanted instead to let antibiotics do the trick and they did, but I think signing that form left me scarred and dazed. I remember a few weeks later following my discharge the car ride home through downtown Oklahoma City, the view out the window as we made our way up 18th Street to Kelly Avenue, looking at the skyscrapers, early December, the few trees around the city bare and skeletal. I couldn't for the life of me distinguish

between reality and dream and I think some of that disjunction lingered in my consciousness for years afterwards, as if I'd tasted something I was always on the verge of recognizing but never could, or had just heard a song I'd known as a child and couldn't quite place it in my mind, couldn't remember the room where I'd always heard it playing, the color of the room's walls, the cooking smells from the kitchen maybe, that mysterious tune so familiar yet strange playing in the background. It was a foreign country to me that day, the city streets, the blue sky, clouds above floating by in their amorphous shapes. Maybe they could tell me something, I thought, if only I knew the language of clouds, big faces floating across the sky, if only I could read their expressions, friendly or hostile or indifferent.

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Can anything pull a person out of the alienation caused by bodily trauma? One thing that comes to mind is the phenomenon of living in the moment. Here's Ludwig Wittgenstein:

> Death is not an event in life; we do not live to experience death. If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, then eternal life belongs to those who live in the present. Our life has no end in the way in which our visual field has no limits.

Our life has no end in the way in which our visual field has no limits. Whatever is beyond our horizon—literally or figuratively—is meaningless in the context of what we *can* see, what is in front of us, which constitutes an eternity. Eternity, then, doesn't mean everlasting; rather, it means an ever-expansive sense of the moment, of every moment, though perhaps even just one would be enough if it's felt deeply enough. It's a paradox we're asked to embrace. On the one hand time is simply change, and as we age we experience it viscerally, in our bodies, and on the other hand is the miracle of the moment, the eye of the hurricane. If we expect, in our vision of time, some concept of lasting eternity to emerge in our consciousness, then we'll shut ourselves out of the miracle of the moment. Even on walks now, say, with my wife or alone, I always feel I'm moving too fast, passing over what my eyes could take in if only I was to take the time. That ride through the playground that night was the proverbial ride through hell, our own private underworld, a blur of a beautiful Oklahoma September evening. John Updike liked to use the phrase "fat eyes" to describe those who choose not to see the world around them, to fly through their neighborhoods, the landscapes of their commutes, their work spaces, their own backyards, with little regard to what lay before them, all that appeals to our eyes, ears, noses, fingers, as well as to our imaginations: a cricket chirping, a leaf falling, squirrels or chipmunks yakking away at one another, trees sprouting new buds, dropping old leaves and sending moisture up from the soil beneath them and into their limbs right before our very eyes, all as common as a rising sun.

About a year after getting out of the hospital and a few weeks after that evening with Amy in Stillwater, I was dating a fellow English major and an ERA activist who'd recently divorced,

when Mary Beth called me out of the blue to say she'd like to see me. I was crazy about Maura, the woman I was dating, but two or three weeks later when she was away for a weekend—a visit to her parents in Lawton maybe, in the southeast corner of the state, I can't remember—I drove the hour-and-a-half to Mary Beth's apartment in Oklahoma City and spent three days and nights with her, mostly in bed. We were obviously working out a few things with our past, and, respectively, ourselves: love, lust, guilt, rejection, heartbreak. But in the end, when it came time to leave, I told her I couldn't see her anymore because she had abandoned me in the hospital. I remember telling her this while holding both her hands across her kitchen table. She was crying and begging me to stay with her that night so she wouldn't have to be alone. I said I couldn't—I remember feeling I had to get back to my real life, but I was probably feeling that I had to get away from my own confusion or, more likely, my own cruelty.

In the weeks and months after, I rationalized that someone who'd made me feel unworthy of love twice before was likely to make me feel that way again, and once I'd had a taste of someone loving me as much as I felt loved by Maura I couldn't subject myself to that risk again. But what was my *real* motive, or at least the less subconscious one? Was it revenge on Mary Beth, even though I loved her deeply, or thought I did? Love is as love does, as the saying goes. I hadn't learned that yet. Or maybe I had. Maybe I was so angry at Mary Beth that I couldn't resist teaching her what I had learned about love from her, the essential pain of it. But if revenge was the motive for hurting Mary Beth, what accounts for my betrayal of Maura, who had done nothing but fall in love with me? Merely collateral damage? Why would I do something to simultaneously hurt both these women whom I loved and who loved me, not to mention the pain and trouble it caused myself? I wouldn't have thought that I could ever use my appeal and the appeal of love itself as a weapon. How could anyone be hurt by *me*, I sensed, an essentially loving person? This wouldn't be the last time, it turned out, that that psychology manifested and influenced my behavior.

I don't remember how Maura found out about the betrayal—in my confusion I probably confessed it all—and as one might imagine it took a while to patch things up with her. I don't think she ever got over that betrayal because two years later she cheated on me and then jilted me. What goes around comes around. You can't demand of love that it be loyal to you out of one side of your mouth while lying to it out of the other. Hurtful behavior is shameful and stupid because of course you're hurting people, but also because it sabotages your own happiness. If my behavior stemmed from fears of abandonment, say, what better way to lose someone than to betray them and what better way to lose yourself, in a sense, your values, the map of who you want to be, which is what happened. I lost both lovers as well as a sense of myself as a decent person.

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There's a section early in John Knowles's classic coming-of-age novel, *A Separate Peace*, in which the narrator says that everyone experiences a period in their life when time stops. For Knowles's narrator it was wartime America, when he was seventeen and this country was a land

of shortages and full employment and servicemen filling up the trains and buses and, more personally, when he and his friends were about to enlist or be drafted. This is either shameless nostalgia or a heightened awareness that for his narrator or for him, or both, Knowles's identity in that period was indelibly forged, perhaps in anticipation of the trauma that lay ahead of them, combined I would suspect with the collective trauma America was experiencing fending off that madman in Berlin. I don't know if that principle, abstractly speaking, is true for me, that the post-Vietnam period in college when I almost died from a jeep accident is my America suspended in amber, my Grecian urn. Maybe it is, but I'd like to think, rather, that consciousness has been more continuous than that for me. Maybe that's a way to embrace time in a healthy way, to fully acknowledge its passing by embracing one's life as continuous, which would entail a certain accountability, even if merely to oneself. Continuity entails a certain sense of connection to the world and to others.

These reflections may evidence that accountability, evincing some hint of moral development. Then again, how do I know anything I've said here is a species of wisdom? How do I know that like Knowles's narrator I haven't simply spewed out a boatload of self-protective rationalizations? "Memoir is not an act of history but an act of memory," wrote Mary Karr, "which is innately corrupt." Though I'd like not to think so, sometimes I feel like I *am* stuck in that post-Vietnam era and that my reflections have done nothing but reveal something essential about myself, perhaps a mirror image of something sadly essential about this country: defensive, intensely self-protective, insecure about its own identity, habituated to hoarding the self. It may simply be true that reflection is mostly for naught. What good is it if it can't retroactively prevent the one-dimensional thinking of a drunken 20-year-old from hopping into a vehicle driven by another drunken 20-year-old hellbent on courting death? Or barring that impossibility, how might my lifetime of reflection keep other 20-year-olds from making the same mistake? What good is reflection—to speak of our current cultural moment—if it can't help us live with and heal from the self-destructive eruptions of a hemorrhaging democracy addicted to the self?