IT'S HARD NOT TO NOTICE

"FADE TO BLACK," LISSA HUNTER

Tom Litster

Only when dusk starts to fall does the owl of Minerva spread its wings and fly.
—Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

THINGS HAVE CHANGED. It's hard not to notice, like the light fading toward dying light and then inevitable darkness. Everything I believed before, can I still believe it today? That's not possible. The terms have been altered.

I'm what Wallace Stevens may have meant by a "medium man"—most of us are—not a hero, not a tragic figure, no creative madness. Anyone looking at my life from a distance would not see much to shake a stick at. If I were to write it as long story, the kind grandchildren ask us to write when we're old, the plot would not be complex (though we don't write down complex stories for grandchildren). There would be ill-choreographed main events: a move from rural to urban, a peculiar and conservative religion jettisoned as part of the move, university years when the passions of youth thought every poker was hot, one marriage that produced no children, long-term relationships that produced disturbance in each of

our lives, and unremarkable occupations before a professional career made me remarkably less confusing to my friends.

There would be characters: those who arrive but you're not sure if they are the visitor or you are, and then the ones who gradually found a home in my life. They stayed when that's what made sense.

Just past my seventh decade, I appreciate the upside of conspicuous aging. I'm free to do as I please and think only what I want to think, and I feel no yearning for approval. I enjoy my emancipation from the professional pecking order and worrying about the revenue value of anything I do. In other words, I've retired, another event in the ordinary model of modern life we agree to. Possibly I'm of no help to society anymore—something of an artifact—and what interests me seems of little interest to anyone else. But I am happy to be out of it.

I get stuck for answers when asked how I like retirement or how I pass the time—questions that make less and less sense to me. Usually I say, "I look around" or "I try to figure out what I actually think." But here's the truth of it (Stevens again): as a way of avoiding a "poverty of the imagination," I still hold some hope for "imagination's hymns" and "its images, its motions." In shiny hours yet to come I intend to project my humanity onto the world.

Growing old is not much different than looking out the window, it seems to me. I have a fraternity of windows in my second-story flat. The large ones face west, the smaller ones face south. I enjoy their company. I can sit with them for a long time, alone with my own mind and my refigurations for what may still be possible. I might even put on my coat, walk out the door and leave it all behind. Sunlight arrives at my windows in abundance and enters joyfully. As the day goes on, shadows will slide across light until there is no sharp boundary between them. Dawn to dusk is the natural cycle of a day, or a life for that matter.

Outside are treed streets and flowery front gardens of sturdy houses sitting cheek-to-jowl. They are command and control markers that signify this is not chaos, this is not poverty, this is us in our habitat, a civilized neighborhood in one of the Pacific Northwest's famously civil cities. Familiar dogs come by with their humans on leashes as they circle a few blocks of the neighborhood, as I will on my

walk. Most of them, the dogs that is, pause to sniff in the grassy strip between sidewalk and street and leave their own pee, barely disturbing the crows that strut and peck there. Two crows made a nest under the eaves above my windows. It's been said that if humans suddenly disappear from Earth our cities will be one of our first artifacts to disappear, right after our agricultural fields.

In the small towns of the southwestern desert country where I grew up the edges were rougher. There was less worldly success, no dogs were ever on leashes and the towns had less staying power as human artifacts. But old people were not sequestered away, and when someone died nearly everyone remembered them. I have been told by a friend from the Midwest it was mostly that way in farm country. I told her I hope it will be not be solitary confinement or an altogether cold shoulder for us here.

One of our poet laureates, Donald Hall, sat by his farmhouse window when he was a dozen or so years older than me and wrote essays ("New poems no longer come to me, with their prodigies of metaphor and assonance," he wrote. "Prose endures."). Of his age, he wrote, "I feel the circles grow smaller, and old age is a ceremony of losses, which is on the whole preferable to dying at forty-seven or fifty-two." It's the smaller circles that I pay attention to, now that time and energy feel finite and choices matter more than ever.

I'M GLAD FOR FRIENDS, men and women who are conspicuously aging, like me. Some of us gather at the same cafe nearly every morning. We circle our wagons around what we have in common: white, retired or near to it, a postwar American aesthetic and our cultural capital of deft decisions about education, health, parenting, careers and retirement. For each of us, a once greater intensity has been dulled by everyday use (the surrealists thought they could reanimate everyday objects by putting them unexpectedly together). Someone is likely to ask, "I wonder what it will be like in old age?" I'll say I don't think the world will pull away from us, rather it will be us pulling away from the world.

"You're looking great!" someone will say, and then remind me there's an upside at our age. After living young, we get to live old. This means we also have to circle our wagons against a once mere notion that now holds great force—dying

and death are out of the closet. We don't talk about dying often, but as our bodies become problems that need to be explained we talk about ways to ease the insults: high blood pressure ("It'll be as high as you're afraid it will be," Caroline used to say when she was still with us), a fluttering heart, bypass surgery, stiffened fingers, knees and hips replaced, cataracts and a panoply of pills. We worry that what we eat or drink might somehow attack us. We know we're pretty close to hitting the wall as mortality accumulates arounds us, but there are reasons to believe it will be easier nowadays. Our pain factor can be well-controlled. We even have death doulas who, for a fee, will help us whenever we do want to talk about dying and plan the practical details.

These are the years of rotten news as our circle grows slightly smaller by way of dying. Caroline, a music teacher for whom Christmas was more about Handel than Christ, beat cancer once but not twice. "Well, I aced that test," she told us at the cafe after receiving the second diagnosis. On the occasion of her departure, Henry, the longest retired at the cafe, and with a fondness for saying old saws, said, "That was unexpected." I told him there are no unexpected deaths at our age. If nothing else, we'll die of exhaustion.

Yet I can still be surprised. One of us had a happy year together with a woman he met in a cancer patient support group. Daniel was a Jew who loved to tell jokes about Jews, like the one who was hit by a car while he crossed a street. The first person to rush out to him as he lay on the pavement asked if he was comfortable. Yes, he replied, I make a good living. The woman died at the end of that year. Daniel died a few months later. Other than a few particulars, it was like any other love story. We old ones still feel love and loss and grief, and like a joke.

As mortality accumulates around us, each of us has a directory of dead that might include parents, a brother or sister or cousin, neighbors, sidekicks, a spouse or someone else's spouse, or maybe a child (sadly). My directory is not lengthy. It will get longer soon enough, and then I'll be added to a directory. My mother lived to ninety-five. Her dead seemed uncountable, boxed up in order to keep them straight. I will have fewer to count.

Darwin promised us "we may console ourselves with the full belief that the war of nature is not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that

the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply, and to suffer great destruction." Darwin, I think, got it wrong. Death is just as often not prompt, and the journey to human has not been a well-intentioned evolution. Nature tinkers and improvises, catastrophes and broken equilibriums accompanied every success. Nothing climbed straight up the ladder. At any time, biological life could have turned in an entirely different direction. I accept the contingency of my existence and hope that I — not terribly fit —will not be discarded like overripe fruit.

Henry James, during his last days of illness, collapsed while dressing. Before his personal secretary could help him back to standing, he announced, "So here it is, the great and distinguished thing." He concluded it was a stroke "in the most approved fashion." Pneumonia quickly added more insults to his body and he began to imagine himself in Ireland, or elsewhere in foreign hotels. It doesn't happen all at once but then here you are — *conspicuously old,* and here *it* is. Perhaps I can prepare as Phillip Larkin wants us to believe he prepared: "All that's left to happen / Is some deaths (my own included). / Their order, and their manner, / Remains to be learnt." He claimed, "I give all that the cold shoulder." I'm skeptical that Larkin really felt that way. I'm not eager for it, but if dying happens once I figure I can take it.

I don't believe death will dissolve life into the eternal. I don't think of it as the ultimate promotion or imagine an unearthly fulcrum to launch me up or down. I don't expect to be arraigned at St. Peter's Gate for closing arguments. I remind myself that Kurt Vonnegut said, "I've had a hell of a good time. I tell you, we are here on Earth to fart around, and don't let anybody tell you any different."

CAFES OF EUROPE in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were splendid. According to Shachar Pinsker, who wrote a book about them, they were "gilded chandeliers suspended from the ceiling and lamps shining from every single wall and electric lights turned on in the daytime and marble tables gleaming, and people of stately mien wearing distinguished clothes sitting on plush chairs, reading big newspapers." The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas insisted coffeehouses and salons were the early spaces of political modernity, a foundation for the liberal Enlightenment. Revolutionaries found places of politics for the price of a coffee. Democracy emerged from cups and saucers.

Intellectuals and radicals in Europe began losing their social spaces to the twentieth century and a growing bourgeois society. The crushing destruction of two world wars finished the job. Their culture of modernity made its way to the melting pot of America, where the émigrés found homes in humbler coffeehouses and cafes of New York City. The subterranean counterculture of basket houses, bars and coldwater flats mixed them with America's new nakedness of mind and soul. As a college kid far to the west and in love with my youthful passions, the visible avatars of the Beats, already ghosts, and Kerouac's "rucksack nation" ducking out from America, and Bob Dylan showing up with a guitar and a pack of lies about himself were the stuff of legend for me. As it turned out, these less splendid places were crushed by high rents and tourists, and Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty circled America in *On the Road* but never found its center. There was a funeral in a Manhattan apartment to symbolically bury the Beat generation.

Our cafe is dull by comparison. There is no one who will change his name to Leon Trotsky and lead a revolution, no Emma Goldman. We vote and make socially responsible contributions. What we talk about buying locally and favor artisanal goods, talk about fair trade and foreign affairs and want to believe we have a global awareness. We have limits when it comes to the direct actions of politics. Caroline, before her death, "I can't do *that* anymore." Henry still, "Not in *this* weather." We want our lives to be undisturbed and prefer to be inconspicuous. We would be uncomfortable, though tolerant, with exhibitions of too much political passion or creative madness, or anything as reflexive as the howling of a dog.

Decades ago, I and a substantial part of America were losing faith in myths of "a new frontier"—places beyond our borders to throw our weight around—and in a government dedicated to the "falling dominos principle" of going toe-to-toe with communists. I shared late-night alienation with my university friends at a cafe with red vinyl bench seats, formica tabletops and low-quality paintings of western landscapes on the walls. Every night Bill and his wife Nadine, conservative and conspicuously aging, tended the kitchen and till, unaware we were plotting, in theory, a new America before heading into the streets in protest. People were in the streets all over the world. There was much to argue with.

Already, Medger Evers had been shot dead in Mississippi, George Wallace blocked two black students at a doorway on the University of Alabama campus and a Vietnamese monk set himself on fire in Saigon to protest our war against the dominos of communism in Vietnam. I saw a photograph of naked, napalm-burned little girl running down a road near Trảng Bàng. When Henry Kissinger said the Vietnam War was "cowboys and Indians," I was with the Indians, and with them again as I watched the movie *Little Big Man.* I watched a nationally televised police riot in Chicago. Richard Nixon turned out to be precisely what he said he wasn't—a crook.

But we got our men on the moon. I saw it that on television too—"The eagle has landed." We put footprints in moon dust, and just like that we were the aliens while many families couldn't afford food or a decent place to live. A year later four students were shot dead in Ohio over our cowboys and Indians war. Two years after that we stopped putting men on the moon.

MY CAFE FRIENDS AND I HOPED to reproduce our cultural capital in our children. I hadn't noticed until recently that they may have turned on us, when I read an online commentary that began, "You might not have noticed, but apparently you're living through something of a revolution." I was not entirely surprised to learn that "OK Boomer" has become "a rallying cry for millions of fed up kids." Apparently, it's meant to remind us old ones that it's our fault and we just don't get it. "Gen Z," the commentary went on, "has finally snapped over climate change and financial inequality. It's not the fault of the capitalists, it's not the politicians—it's 'boomers.'"

We "boomers" boomed into a brand new postwar middle class with means, goods, education and longer lives distributed like never before (for people of color, not so much). It was the spoils of war, and getting back to the world of tomorrow the war had set aside. We declared all of that suspect when we became the fed-up kids. We revolted against aspirations to be middle class, along with a lack of public goodness, white hegemony and going to war against people with brown skin and black hair. We consulted within ourselves in order to *see* more, *hear* more, *feel* more. We took it to be a revolution in consciousness.

Things changed. We became the aspirational class, collecting our cultural capital and not wanting to be disturbed. Does that and aging inevitably mean a conflict with the young, both of us rutting over who gets most of the meat and who is to blame? If there is "a generation gap" am I on the other side, so remote that getting me out of the way is the best option? Or maybe it's as elemental as Simone de Beauvoir seemed to think: "Old age in others also causes an instant repulsion. This primitive reaction remains alive even when custom represses it; and in this we see the origin of a conflict that we shall find exemplified again and again."

I have younger friends. They seem genuinely glad to see me. One day, I expect they will be surprised to see me still around and vertical. They see me in my body, but I know myself as something younger (E.B. White thought of himself as twelve throughout his life). George Orwell's yardstick was that anybody at age fifty had earned the face he wore. I'll settle for that.

I'm glad they are more or less talking about antagonism between the Included and the Excluded, which means talking about capitalism again. Somewhere along the line we stopped talking about capitalism, which meant its triumph was total. It became "the economy," which, the new narrative insisted, must be kept "healthy" by and for us, bits of human capital measured by how well we do at becoming bigger bits. For the record, I never stopped talking about capitalism and its mechanisms. One can hope it may be dying as well.

If the young ones want to burn down the house and try again on their own terms, I'll join a line to pass the kerosene. As I see it, they were born backward into a realm of stories, images, music, products and cultural environments we older ones believed would blot out America's worst stains. We took it to be power. Like anyone invested in power, we are loathe to give it up, no matter how illusory it is. Any sententious resonance of wisdom we are prone to claim as our defensible ground is doubtful, shaky ground at best.

At the cafe, Henry is always eager to offer a historical discourse with a great social failure or a political miscalculation as its moral, even if it is not quite on the path the conversation started down. "As you've heard me say," he will say once again, "we were the luckiest generation ever and we turned into the most selfish one. My son's generation is the first one not to have better opportunities than the previous

one, better than I had. We screwed up." As Henry sees it, we failed to reproduce our cultural and economic capital in our children.

I see it differently. I will say to Henry that his lucky generation leaves out the older workers and retirees struggling to survive every day with too little money and too much harshness of age. Maybe if we put them together with the masses of slum-dwellers in the massive cities of the world we would have a new proletariat. They—the ones left out—are millions, billions if we start counting around the world. Habitués of an urban cafe can't reinvent them as an image to our liking.

IT'S HARD NOT TO NOTICE the whole world has gone wrong, for all of us, young and old. We don't need cranky millenarian prophets who surveyed the wickedness around them and then took to newspapers, reading rooms, pulpits and streets to declare an end to the world—maybe in fire, maybe in flood—and set a date. Grand stories of beginning, middle and end—Genesis to Revelation, for example—often end in an apocalypse. There is hardly a day that scorched earth apocalypticism isn't ringing in my ears: we are on the brink of disaster, we are witnessing the destabilization of life on earth, no time to lose, the whole world is burning up!

We have a new Judgement Day: over-heated tomorrows followed by over-heated tomorrows, featuring massive crop failures, apocalyptic fires, epic floods and refugees fleeing landscapes made uninhabitable. Scientists tell us, with equal amounts of accuracy and alarmism, we have only ten years, or twelve, maybe twenty at best before "the world's people will face untold suffering due to the climate crisis." Right before destroying what's left of the old earth, angels may judge us for "not listening to the science."

A new story of Penance: "To secure a sustainable future, we must change how we live." Our wrong-doing has been living too long with our myth of infinite growth, and capitalism as the default setting. We humans, the all-purpose species, have become planners and technicians of our own destruction. We dug up long-dead plants and animals and set them on fire, transferred their never-used energy from the ground to the atmosphere to power a carbon economy. We contritely acknowledge the consequences. We have to stop or face retribution.

A new End Times story: the Anthropocene. We insist it's a whole new geological era, when humans collectively became a geophysical force capable of determining the planet's climate for a very long time and triggering a mass extinction. Each day we bring fresh ruins to the fields of ruins. We project ourselves back into a history to explain this era to ourselves and into a future that we fear because of it.

The way I see it, there are no horizons anymore. The old saw, "Red sky at night, sailors' delight / Red sky at morning, sailors take warning," has lost its meaning. In a world made hotter by us, with a climate changing for the worse, it's the same unprecedented hurricanes and cyclones on their way to landfall everywhere, the longest recorded drought and epic flood, the same wildfire and the same climate refugees everywhere. We are condemned to live with this awareness as we go to the grocery store, pick up the kids, do laundry, fly somewhere for a holiday or start our car. The *Washington Post* published an article about our new awareness in the Style section.

At the cafe we express our concerns and talk about what needs to be done to shore ourselves up against rising seas and dire consequences for us and every other creature. But I don't think most of us do much at all. Beyond our vacations, I'm not sure we really love the world.

The poet Mary Oliver said, "There is only one question / How to love the world." I think she meant we need to feel an intimacy with Earth. Franz Kafka told us, "There is infinite hope, only not for us." It may be that both are true. Or maybe it's as Edward Abbey put it, "We're none of us good enough for the world we have."

FICTIONS have been required to get this far. Fictions make a life, make a world, assay the future and help us keep grip on the prospect of death (Dr. Johnson said death would wonderfully concentrate the mind.) It's our character to live by lying to ourselves. Ernest Becker, who wrote *The Denial of Death*, the book Alvie (Woody Allen) insists Annie Hall (Diane Keaton) read, tells us lying about death "is a vital lie." Freud had warned of the "fate against which there is no remedy."

When it comes to storytelling, I make no binary distinction of fiction/nonfiction. For example, I've been told that in Kenya separating facts from storytelling is at

best mysterious, and generally not seen as useful. *Rũgano* is sufficient for "story" or "narrative." It's the nearest thing to "fiction," but could also suggest a historical narrative. *Kũgana rũgano, "*to tell a story," can mean either of those, but most often means retelling of well-known stories such as fables. The term "story" can be specified further, with *rũgano rwa gwĩtungĩra,* a "made-up story," as a kind of creative fiction as opposed to fables, while *rũgano rwa marimũ* is an "ogre story," literally about an ogre, and also "a story that is not true." There are *ndungo*, "compositions," which can be fiction or nonfiction, or *ũhoro, "*the news," which offers a general sense of what's happening and actual information, but might include a story. The art is in the telling, not the facts.

Joan Didion saw mortality accumulating around her—a husband and daughter gone within a year—and wrote about it "because I found my mind turning increasingly to illness, to the end of promise, the dwindling of the days, the inevitability of the fading." Did she tell us too little of the truth, or too much of the truth? It doesn't matter. It was a story particular to herself. She was examining the patterns of her own thinking and coming to terms with her experiences in the precision of her words. "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means," she had told us in her essay "Why I Write." Then, at age seventy-five and aware of the ongoing nature of grief, "What if I can never again locate the words that work?"

Minerva is the goddess of wisdom and philosophy, and associated with the owl, as in "bringing owls to Athens," which means bringing something to a place where there is already an abundance. Hegel's owl of Minerva was meant to tells us wisdom takes flight only at the end of the day, when its main events are done. It is only at the end of human history that we come to understand history's logic. For Hegel, this was not tragic.

Sitting at my windows as the light moves through the rooms, I plan to take flight by writing essays, stories if you like because both can meander. Meanders let the

self be a chameleon, changing from line to line, from page to page. Otherwise too much would be left for dead. Quiet tales, mostly in the mind, in memory, told in one head. There will be hauntings and moments of recognition since these are the years for following clues, nagging doubts and disturbing telltale signs. I these need stories to accompany me the rest of the way, as consolation for loneliness and a place to look for marvelous clues that make sense when it's hard to believe in earlier ways of knowing the shape of life.

I let each day unfold slowly, find its way between looking backward—a set of questions: what happened and why?—and points of attachment to the world even though it has gone wrong and I am getting old. I expect the world will remain enormous, and life and death incomprehensible. I wait for the good, shiny hours.