Joshua Weiner

A Marble

High on fentanyl, sickbed like an aerie
you sat upright in, even as you nodded off
you came back on, eyes clear, *sprung*
you couldn't get enough.
As if the sun dropped into the room
insistent now—rough affection pulsing with all
you hoped to do, then did,
consuming pain, betrayal, of body,
family, friendship, youth, your searing
sense of fatedness; burning up every error
and treatment you survived, had *already*
lived through, lived in, your dying,
and continued to live (the cures, over decades,
so damaging)—nothing to put away, no jumped ember, no ash,
and turning us, one more time,
into siblings again, for one last day.

"Sister in the art" I called you once, I meant it; and you almost smiled
recalling that, bitterfree, our stillness
marking the distance we crossed now,
drifting like floaters you never see
until you look up at the sky, and find what
you're always looking past (yourself, of course)—then came
back out to talk about new cars and Henry James,
the figure in the carpet a fiction worn away,
all groundless now, everything atmosphere,
small movements a whelming of something we couldn't tell,
and the quetzal you spied in Panama
(impulsive trip, ill-advised and irresistible

once bad news arrived).
Places I've never traveled to, or will,
without thinking of you finding your shy
spiritbird, its riot ruby breast
flashing cobalt, midday bright,
tail streamers covertly waiting to come out,
and its barking seal-like cry, you said,
was something . . . something like . . . something like . . .
—your voice faint, dry, skipping a groove
to some other world, and you had no purchase there—
Oh my god, you shook your head, hands floating up,
it's all gone now . . .
Like the tension
we sometimes felt, friction of poet friends—
we had a funny way of talking to each other
both at the same time even as we listened,
yes, like two keets, too keen,
careening in their speech while
chirping a single tune—our going on
and on about Bunting, Loy, Niedecker,
Oppen, Pound—sparking syllables
igniting at the center of a sound.
"Those dying generations—at their song—" blah blah
Welcome to the cancer club! your voice
merry after they cut my kidney out. How many years ago?
None of that's important now, you said,
only this—but what *was* this?
We hardly knew, we couldn't parse it, an unknown tense,
mute closeness radiating the body's
broken eloquence.
That was February; almost June: so fast . . .
now it's just your work—
dense, tight, twisting like ribbon
swirling through a kid's glass marble, or the sharp tongue
when rock salt opens the taste of lime—
your pen always cut to the quick and tender
underneath where life's infused

with the poems that we say (and maybe, too,
the you in me in you in me I carry now as memory
of what we both remembered . . .)

So here's our poem; you would've done it better,
I think, we both know that—like, six lines
from the brush of a Japanese master,
it'd be the epitome of capture gesturing
release, the moving letter of a fish in living
water slipping through bars of sunlight
some late afternoon in summer . . .

For twenty years we never wrote or spoke in summer,
knowing back at school we'd see each other.
Summer soon, and so I can pretend . . .
Yeah, no; that day you shared in truth
an end that hasn't ended, and what we
                                    loved in each other
was how neither one pretended.

i.m. E.A.

Meeting My Oldest Friend, Bill Schroeder, again in 2025, after Decades

I traveled 200 miles to meet my oldest friend, Bill Schroeder, in the small town we grew up in.

We went together to the old neighborhood, once surrounded by woods and corn and soybean fields, now turned into ex-urb developments. We walked around for a while, then stopped.

"I met you for the first time on this very corner, when was that," I said.

"It was 1968." Bill recently retired from programming and data analysis.

"I was five years old," I said. "Me too," he said.

My family had just moved from far away, and I had a speech impediment that wouldn't be fully corrected until the end of second grade.

"You didn't understand a word I said," I said. "That was only at the beginning," he said.

We walked the streets and talked about every house.

The details wouldn't interest you—maybe the ones that included some incidental bloodshed,

or the boy we played with who climbed the tallest tree only in his underwear. (We all wore the same brand of underwear back then, called Fruit of the Loom—every label had a tiny color print of a harvest cornucopia.)

As we traded memories, the world of our childhood floated between us like a soap bubble we peered into, careful not to pop it with our noses.

For Bill, it was a happy time, he said, though the happiest time is now.

What happiness I knew was mixed with pain, frustration, and the tension of dark clouds gathering inside the house, the charged air, the storms of anger . . .

His parents still live in the house he and his sister grew up in, hardly a thing has changed; the antique MG TF roadster, British racing green, sits expectantly in the garage, worked on, taken care of . . .

They were so delighted to see me. We reminisced about the past and discussed the deplorable politics of the present.

I tried to go further, into the heart, but there was a clear limit, like a border crossing, and I stayed on my side.

(But I didn't want the history, only to enter the mystery.)

Bill and I ate little spears of fruit his mother had thoughtfully prepared; he held three wooden toothpicks delicately between thumb and forefinger like the spines of a tiny ancient fan.

We said goodbye, and walked through the village—everyone called it "The Village"—tracing the path of the old trolley line where we once placed pennies on the rails to flatten out as the train passed over them—the stamped profile of Abraham Lincoln pressed back into smooth copper anonymity, we would savor the fleeting warmth of the metal discs' new energy and touch them to the lids of our closed eyes.

Returning by way of the creek, we meandered to my old street, and ended in front of my house, its brick face and white porch columns blankly reproachful, flickering between vague resentment and aphasia.

I was no longer its object. It was no longer a witness to my talking to myself through long afternoons.

Slowly, over the years of my abandonment and absence, it had become a place of muted desolation.

Who lived there now? All the trees were gone, the dogwood, there long before us, the willows we had planted, the honeysuckle whose nectar I had always looked forward to sampling in the spring . . .

There was nothing in reality to return to, only this inexorable feeling of being alone.