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# THREE POEMS BY BRAD STILES

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## **Personal Doomsday Clock**

I watch my father in the home video,  
and I know I will bury him a few months after.  
Did I sense then the soft, glacial passage overtaking him?  
As I watch, his muscles are already melting on the bone.  
His nose is already sliding off his skull.  
He is sublimating, disappearing,  
and I wonder if he feels himself drifting, rising,  
like a balloon bounced from his grandson's fingertips,  
careless and unhurried above our conversation.

Just before sleep,  
my eyes closed, I watch.  
My wife's breathing, as she dreams beside me,  
is no more real than it is solid, or tangible.  
It is the heart of a balloon bounced from our son's fingertips.  
I feel them all all all all all  
(even me, especially me)  
drifting, rotating,  
to land briefly, as if settling,  
until urged elsewhere,  
random and blind,  
by the slight breeze that moves the moon.

## **Day Like Living Vellum**

I see morning, pink and warm and indecent and soft  
as the buttery flesh of an exposed midriff,  
and she's lounging across the stolid hills behind Germantown Pike.  
I want to bite her a little, softly,  
just in the tender spot,  
taste the salt and feel the flesh submit --  
to make this day my own  
by writing short, slightly vulgar words on  
the fragrant, inviting surface of her vellum skin.

Driving over the hills,  
I like to mount the pavement  
as if I'm an obsessed bull,  
only satisfied when the concrete rolls underneath me,  
unable to cease until I say so.  
I keep insisting, prodding, grinding,

trying to make this day give up its pleasure, its release.

And sometimes it actually works.  
Sometimes the day throbs joy and juice, almost against its will.  
Other times I pump away, hopeless and stubborn, and just get winded.  
But when the pressure builds again next morning  
and I swell and harden to the day's come-on,  
then I get right back on it and in it,  
determined, imperious,  
watching with animal cunning for the tell-tale flush  
that says the ride was worth the ride,  
and that the vellum day will shudder under my clutching hand.

## **Arrogance of the Ordinary**

She dreams she is Gretta from James Joyce's "The Dead."  
Michael Furey is singing under her window,  
doomed, beautiful, insidious.  
His weightless, quivering tenor buoys him into the next world on aolian sails,  
but she feels the weight of his sacrifice  
stacked against the long years of marriage and children she still has to endure.  
She knows, as she listens to his hopeless melody,  
that the years of practicality awaiting her  
will blunt the keening laceration  
of listening to this beautiful boy sing himself to death in the name of love.

She wakes, turning to the arid future of ordinary life,  
relentlessly called to normalcy by martinet necessity.  
She wants to cry for loss of imagined love and beauty.  
But the drone of morning traffic  
already infiltrates her bedroom,  
gray and irritable as the light sneaking around her blinds.  
There is no snow falling faintly and faintly falling over all the living and the dead.  
There is only the soft, fossilizing mud of routine and must and should  
covering beating hearts,  
turning breath to stone.

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**Brad Stiles** edits the online journal *Stone Table Review* ([stonetablereview.com](http://stonetablereview.com)) and is a past editor of *Clackamas Literary Review*. He is also the author of the critical study, *Emerson's Contemporaries and Kerouac's Crowd* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), which investigates the influence of Transcendental thought on the works of the Beat Generation. He teaches English at Bucks County Community College in Newtown, Pennsylvania.