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NECESSARY STEPS

BY WILLIAM BAIN

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Read a page for me.

I can't. My eyes are carried beyond the page.

from Dippold the Optician, Edgar Lee Masters

You look out your window, and you're met with a view of a dusty screen, a weed-choked garden, and the scabrous head of a sunflower. The flower averts its face from the garden and the accompanying yard in shame. It's the middle of a dry October afternoon. The wind beats the sunflower's head against the aluminum siding. You count the seeds. Your finger grates against the screen's dirty mesh as you trace the spirals. The garden needs a shovel. The fence needs paint. You have a lesson to plan for tomorrow, and this story won't write itself. But you are sitting in your kitchen enchanted with Fibonacci's sequence: 1.1.2.3.5.8.13.21...

When you write your stories, you talk to yourself in the second person. You can get carried away.

There are moments when things are arranged. Instances when all things are necessary.

Morning run is generally not such a time.

Jason sighs and spits. He blows out both nostrils. He tries to settle into a pace, but his legs are all splinters and gelatin. Bob stumbles behind him, and Andy accidentally spits on Chris. Woody giggles and then stops to tie his shoe. Everyone complains. It's 5:30 on a Tuesday morning. Eighteen teenage boys are bundled up against the autumn chill and darkness. Most of the boys are juniors and seniors, but a few under-classmen are trying to stay out of the way. The cross-country team has been running morning and afternoon practices for more than a month. They know the morning drill: stretch, five miles (relaxed pace), shower, class. Jason is a junior, but every morning still feels like the first.

It's an easy five, Jason thinks. C'mon. Easy five.

Woody catches back up. His shoe is tied but the now the other is coming undone.

At the back of the pack, Stevenson whines, "Isn't this supposed to be an easy run?"

Jason is annoyed, but it's Chris who fires off, "Keep up, shit-head."

Jason looks over at Chris and smiles. It's as if Jason's mind is switching bodies. Chris often speaks what is on Jason's mind. It saves Jason the occasional confrontation, but Chris always gets the best lines

That's the way it happens here. In this story, your Chris is speaking your lines. Here he can be tall and blonde: all shoulders, calves, and smirk. Andy can be stoic. Bob can be goofy. Stevenson can be annoying.

This is a distillation of nostalgia and muscle memory. You've had fifteen years to digest and excrete this story: black lines on a white page, sentence and passage, simile and metaphor. Analogy.

They run as a team, although small clusters form quickly according to friendships and ability. Jason runs close to the front but remains behind several of his friends. He glances between Andy and Chris. They are coming up on the elementary school—about a quarter-mile into the run. At this hour the playground is a graveyard of steel bones. Their footsteps pound irrhythmically against the concrete drive. The impact jangles the chains of the swings even though they are separated from the drive by a wide swath of grass. The steel bars rattle their joints and hum as the team trots by. It is not the first time Jason notices the hollow voice of the play equipment as it joins the team's conversation of foot and road. He hops off the cement and into the wet grass. The team picks up the pace.

Analogy.

If you listen closely, their feet sound like the tide of voices on a crowded playground. Or an echoing school hallway. So many voices. So many rhythms. The noise rises and falls on all sides. Just so much white noise: like the whisper of falling sheaves of paper or the hum of an orchestra as it warms up before the conductor takes to the podium.

The noise of memory. You wait for the rare moments of silence or pure tone.

With the elementary school at their backs, Chris and Andy start their morning ritual.

“Morning, Andy! And ain't it a bee-yooootiful morning?”

“Don't even get me started Chris.”

“C'mon Andy. Say it with me. Beeeeeeee-yooooooootiful morning!”

“Maybe I need to spit on you again.”

Chris holds out his arm like he's riding a horse and gallops around Andy. Stevenson asks Chris to please shut the fuck up. Bob joins Chris for a moment, and they gallop around Stevenson. Andy shakes his head. “Yes sir,” he says—long suffering, “it's a beautiful morning.”

At a half mile in, Jason lets his mind wander away from the fatigue and morning chatter. His feet are wet. A draft between the teeth of his jacket's zipper makes his chest ache. The streets are deserted, and his legs seem to know the way. Every step is a complaint, but it's a familiar one.

Why is Jason the only name you changed?

Jason is the quiet one of the team, but still an upperclassman: a junior like Chris, Andy, and Woody. Sometimes he envies the others. The ones who punch each other in the back of the arm. The ones who memorize all the lines from Saturday Night Live. The ones who can ask each other, “Are you always a fucking cock?” and the ones who answer, “Why don't you ask your mom?” They are on the inside. Jason knows he's invited. He can learn his lines and join the conversation.

It's a pick-up game. He just can't make himself play.

The Marsh supermarket slips by. The first mile is past. Jason and nine others catch a traffic light as it turns yellow. They sprint across the four lanes but settle back on the other side. A second pack has formed about a hundred meters back. They won't make the light.

If there are only two or three of them running, then the banter of their footfalls is clear. It's like their feet

are all talking about the same thing. A civil conversation. One set of footsteps rings out, and then the next.

But that's not in this story. There are no twos and threes here. You have placed them in a pack (you can almost sense how the p in pack strains to be capitalized), and in a pack, things are more complicated.

There's a gentle downhill grade to the road. The pack stays on the sidewalk here because of the steep curb and the flow of traffic even at this time of the morning. The slope encourages them to accelerate without much effort. To their right, cars suddenly appear over the rise of a rail crossing, headlights stabbing up at the sky before dropping back to the pavement. The road is gouged on this side of the track where cars have bottomed out in a shower of sparks, rust, and the occasional exhaust component. Jason glances left and sees the pack reflected and distorted in wide, shop-front windows. Most of the shops are dark, but the last building before the tracks always keeps some lights on in the back of their show room. The display window is ancient glass, and Jason sees the pack of legs and faces and arms horribly deformed into a single scuttling mass, backlit by low, flickering lamps. He wonders if this will leap from the window and chase them through the indifferent streets.

Woody's knee hits Jason in the thigh.

“Sorry.”

“ ’s awright, Woody”

In those moments when Jason feels he might speak aloud the things that rise up out of his imagination, he inevitably sees Woody. Woody runs like a pile of twigs. His joints, especially his neck, seem loosely tied with twine. It is dangerous to run too close to him. His elbows emerge like thorns, and his feet don't seem to share the same path as his knees. Woody's comments are just as erratic: “You know, Hamlet was a runner,” or “I figure, better to wear panty hose than be cold,” or even “There isn't enough calculus this semester.”

Woody is never part of the conversation. He has no sense of timing. No internal editor. His exact thoughts are naked in every statement, and no one comes to the conversation naked. Most of Jason's friends hide behind some kind of mask.

Only your writer's voice would say “some kind of mask.” These boys aren't stupid; but for them, simile and metaphor are only useful ways to embellish an insult. They haven't embraced the figurative and the surreal. They are content with euphemisms for words like “penis”.

Long's Bakery on the right. Cream and cinnamon. A hint of jelly on fried bread. Two trucks idling in the parking lot. A bearded man sobbing under the pay phone.

Three and a half miles to go.

There never was a man under the phone.

The man under the phone will never be resolved. He will continue even after the team has run by. As a fiction, he will persist.

You might be asked why a man was made to cry on this cold autumn morning, when in truth, he never existed at all. Someone will ask this, as if your life is a book. You will not try to argue that Jason never existed. You will say of this moment, “My eyes were carried beyond the page.”

Will Jason look past this page?

Are the little fictions enough? These boys and this run are already gone. Have you imbued Jason with enough fiction to persist?

Stevenson is wheezing now. Jason counts eight in the pack. He can't remember who they lost since the stop light. They turn off Southport Road. Tree limbs extend across the narrow street. Jason can see

where his feet hit the road but not much else Leaves and darkness conspire to hide pot holes and loose pavement.

“Watchit...”

“Where’s the road?”

“Stevenson! Get off my ass!”

A telephone rings a few houses ahead. A porch light shows them where the road makes a sharp turn to the right. As they leave the porch light behind them, the telephone stops ringing.

You’re on the other end, aren’t you? You could have Jason break away from his pack right now, dash into the recklessly unlocked house, and pick up.

Tell his fortune. Pull his eyes away from the phone, the road, the team, and the approach of dawn. Pull back a corner of this page so that he sees: grad school and a teaching license; countless lessons on exposition, plot, rising action, and climax; two blonde girls and a tenth anniversary; the rejection letters and discarded drafts; that one day spent writhing in a vain attempt to escape a kidney stone; the heart attack.

It is a small hill, but it’s enough to shake Stevenson loose from the pack. Jason sees him bend down to one of his shoes. By the time the pack crests the hill, Stevenson has untied and retied both shoes. The pack turns left, and Jason figures Stevenson will walk up the hill if none of the other stragglers catch up to him.

Southport Park on the right. A police car is enveloped in dew in front of the community center. Fog hides the thin creek running beside the softball diamonds. More fog up ahead. The lead pack is now the usual seven. Jason smiles. They’ll pick up the pace again. He is smooth in this stride. His ears are cold, but his chest doesn’t hurt anymore, and he can draft in behind his teammates.

Listen.

The lead pack runs like a choir. The different voices of their feet weave complicated rhythms. Sometimes you can pick out themes. Two or three voices might carry on a brief refrain while the others improvise—search out their own voices. Out of the seven sets of feet, maybe three themes will emerge, dissolve, and then reform with different voices.

They pass under the power lines. The wires hum above them. The stars are gone; only a sliver of moon holds out as dawn comes in low and gaunt from the east. The giant, skeletal towers and high voltage lines are ink-black against that sky.

The tracks are coming up again. Jason can smell the creosote from the ties. Same tracks as earlier, but this is a much gentler crossing.

Chris’s voice breaks through the electrical hum, “Hey Bob. You remember coupla years ago—Jingles sprinting to beat that train?”

Bob smiles over his shoulder. “I forgot you ran with us as a freshman. Man, Jingles was funny. What was it he did? Stop to piss or something?”

“I guess. Got a couple of guys to stop with him too.”

“Ford was one of them,” Bob remembers.

Chris has Andy and Woody’s full attention. He mimes urinating against a wall as he runs. “Yeah, but Jingles was only part done when the train whistles. We’re already across the tracks, and he’s screaming

at us *I'm givin it all I got!!* I thought I was going to wet myself laughing.”

Bob picks up the story as Chris resumes his regular stride, “All of them come flyin’ across the tracks. Long train too. The back pack had to stop.”

Everyone laughs, but it dies out quickly. Two miles to go, and the pace is fast. Jason smiles at the back of Chris’s head. Chris wasn’t the only freshman who ran varsity. There were three guys who stopped and had to beat the train: Jingles, Ford, and Jason.

You brought them here, to these tracks, on this early morning. Was it for that smile? Are you beginning to see a climax to this bit of story? He hasn’t done anything yet. He has to do something. You have to let him do something. Maybe with the black sedan.

A driver waits for the pack to pass by her intersection. Black sedan. Faint green glow from the dashboard. The streetlight reflects off the windshield like a piece of the sun riding in her passenger seat. Jason sees her face in profile as they run past. Her headlights bounce off their legs like a strobe. The remains of a lightning bug glimmer in the radiator grill.

The climax is waiting...

Jason and the lead pack make the turn onto Banta Road.

They are close to race pace at this point. No one has said a word during the previous mile, but with less than half a mile to go, the pack is giddy. They catch a green light at Madison and surge across the four lanes just starting to fill with headlights.

Waiting...

They are on the sidewalk now. Chris laughs and keeps repeating “Come to Momma!” Andy and Bob are reciting lines from *Fletch*. Jason laughs out loud as Woody starts to sing *La Bamba* in between ragged breaths. Jason balls up his fist and punches Chris just under the tricep where it’s sure to sting.

You’re glad he did it. That punch. He’s not you—always holding back. This point of separation will scab and perhaps scar, but all pages hereafter are his. You are real, and he is fiction. He will endure. You are alone, but you still have one true thing to give his story.

Without preface, their footsteps all fall at the same time. Jason glimpses what the next few moments will hold. At any other time, no one on the team would pay any attention to the sound of their own feet; they would be just as likely to tune-in to the static between radio stations. But perhaps once or twice a season, the random patter of foot to road collapses and the pack runs in unison. In that moment, it seems each runner ends and the team gets to run. Jason never talks about this part of running. He suspects that the rest of the guys keep this to themselves as well. They will argue about god and religion, but spirituality is never part of their conversation. Jason suspects that god does not exist, but in these moments when their feet and legs and even their hearts seem to pulse as one, Jason can believe that his body is not his own. No one talks. No one laughs. Each stride is a single syllable—a single drumbeat.

Jason counts the number of steps they take in unison.

One.

One.

Two steps.

Three steps...

There is no inside or outside now. There is this now. There is this pack. There is this breath. This pulse

ripples up through skin, time, and a thin membrane of memory.

Five steps...

This is the breath you notice This is that next breath—the one you wait for. This is not the breath you hold.

Eight steps...

It was always there. Waiting...

Thirteen...

This is the space in between.

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William Bain lives in Indianapolis where he teaches college English classes to high school students. He has had stories published in *Not Just Air*, *Country Feedback*, and *Maize* literary magazines. In May of 2008 he earned his MFA in creative writing from the University of New Orleans. He is currently searching for a home for his first novel, [Between the Voice and the Echo](#).