

When the Editors asked David Slavitt, our Class Poet, the author of over twenty novels, plays, and books of poetry, to update our class poem for the second time—a task he had already undertaken once, for the twentieth reunion in 1976—our obliging laureate responded so rapidly that the Editors smelled a rat. It turned out that—anticipating our request—Slavitt already had the following stanzas in hand; they are part of a larger work entitled “Dozens,” to be published this spring by the Louisiana State University Press. They are about Yale and us now:

(I am not sure how much of a gloss is needed for these stanzas. The whole poem, running to 144 twelve-line stanzas, seems to be set in some Central or South American country during a revolution. But other things are going on too, and a number of strands are woven or braided into the piece. One of these strands is my (our?) memories of Yale. Some of these are private and quirky. One knows, or doesn't, that my daughter (#37) coxed the Yale Varsity Women's Eight. One may or may not figure out that the stones I'm leaning on (#143) are—I swear—Harkness Tower. But to pin down each reference is probably more distracting than helpful. Most of you will get the general drift and will indulge me for the rest, as you have so kindly indulged me in the past.—D.R.S.)

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1.

Admitting that I am lost, that my calculations have brought me round again to the same or a spot that looks the same, the light, the shadows the same, and the trees, scrub all alike, I must make a different plan, boldly silly. I'll do what the sheriff does, holding in front of his hound's snout some object, a garment, give it a sniff of the thing's tang and let it go, let it quarter the ground, baying me back, obeying. Give it its head. If I have to get down on all fours and be my own hound, rough. Rough.

2.

There was a courtyard. There is still a courtyard. I've been back, have stood in the pouring rain, peering at faces, looking for mine or for one who knows me. Is that old Charlie under the *vaste portique*? Or old Wally under the huge portico in this remembered abode, the habitat of imagination? On these stones serious drunks have lurches and gray visitors staggered giddy with freedom. “Of what

is this house composed if not of the sun . . . ?” Stevens asked. The shield on our gate showed three suns; dazzled, we thought they had to be rising.

37.

We lie to our children, try to persuade them to build their characters up and lower their expectations, preach to them stern words we've heard ourselves: *Sois sage et travaille bien*. We hope they will, and want for them glittering prizes they'll earn while we watch. O, let the sun glint on the oars, and let my daughter's shell slide over the water like light—for me, for the grace I had in me somewhere that she wears like a bright sunhat. In the lottery of the world's poor dream, she has my number. The unearned are the only triumphs that count.

41.

Sweating in their splendid gowns, they parade a loop around the green and through Phelps Gate to the Old Campus, one or two of my old teachers among them still, and now my son. *Admissus est*. And then we are stevedores, lugging crates to the station wagon. None of the snapshots catch this sweat, the freight of it, the way he goes north with his mother in the wagon and I go south, nor should they. Ceremony is staged, posed, an art. Trumpets and banners say all the important banal phrases for our mute hearts. Tantantara, tzing-boom!

50.

Sick unto death with circles, revolutions and orbits, horizons, the round eyes' arbitrary limit to the whirling globe, I return bringing my children back to these old quadrangles' rectitude where they may find respite from dizziness in stones laid upon stones. Outside, in our city's rubble, the few surviving palazzos, settled out of true, stagger

the mind like strong drink. To remember the plans is heartbreaking. O, but gentles! Not to remember would be heartlessness. Marx brothers, we stand looking ridiculous, holding up the walls.

85.

Chambermaids, bellmen, busboys disappear, possibly jailed or killed or just afraid of being jailed or killed. We have buffets; there's no room service; no one turns down our beds. I miss those little mint wafers in green foil they used to leave on the pillow. Last night there was thunder—  
we hoped it was thunder; it could have been a bombardment.

The bar stayed open late. Someone played the piano, and the rest of us sang, mostly college songs from Princeton, Yale, or Notre Dame. Why not? We had forgotten, or never learned in the first place, the hymns we were nearly frightened enough to need.

110.

The hotel recedes, becomes a bracelet charm, a souvenir of itself I can squint into focus. Solid or only plate? But time will tell, for Fabergé was right about crucial scenes of a life being trinket-tiny. The blur of tears that keeps me from picking out my room he froze to crystal, lapis, malachite, appropriately enough. In all the ore of any operation, value glints at the rock-hard heart of which he liked to carve some posed banal moment I can imagine flashing before my eyes just as I drown.

130.

The action painters agreed—there is no background; no place in the canvas is more important than any other place; the tyrannical middle, lording it over the corners for generations, was only a pretender. In the remotest province, a couple of loonies plot together and the capital trembles. In Key West, the conchs reverse the order and try to imagine Hartford, New Haven, and New York. And fail. The trick is to see not with the mind's eye (vulgar), nor the eye alone (stupid), but with great courage, with the eye's mind true blobs of the truth.

133.

They tell me the world is wobbling on its axis and that the red shift means the universe

is flying apart. I know. What else is new? The infinite spaces between the stars that scared Pascal are even bigger now, the silences even more silent. Giddy, I can't catch enough of a breathe to bid farewell to my flown friends or, left alone, mourn my lost illusions. Which of those sons of bitches with whom I have drawn corks and broken bread will show up at my funeral? Red dots speeding away: I wobble, watching them go.

135.

Childhood always looks better than it is, seems to our inauthentic adult selves authentic and spontaneous. It wasn't. Some of the bullshit took us in; a lot we saw but couldn't call—the word was forbidden. Years passed and the rage subsided. Forgiveness? Hell, no! A defect of recollection and character: unable to face the truth, we invent a happier time—then now, and now then. It takes a grown-up's courage to admit we were lucky to get delicate moments too fine for our minds' coarse mesh to hold.

143.

The hewn stone is cool to my leaning forehead, a prop, comfort, fortress, monument all at once, and a caution—the stone wall against which the apothegmatic head bangs itself to a bloody pulp. But heads perceived the rectangular solid, imagined the wall, and gave the stone its shape and position here. On an ordinary evening in New Haven with my son and daughter, I am the ghostly presence haunting them as my father haunts me. I would fold them all in arms of stone and speak in the stone's laconic tongue of reliable love;

144.

they don't believe it, as I didn't and don't, but we can pretend, letting what faulty love we bear one another pass for that best we deserve to give and get. Those moments of courtesy like dainty insects in amber could survive as the data of history. Let grubby truth be carted away—with New Haven, a grubby place except in the mind. Drive on, and don't look back to hobble imagination. Let our havens always be new and the broken down world heal as the poets have taught us to think it may. It may if we say so often enough and loud enough.