

JUMP

It's a small thing that holds me.

On the sign that reads *Last Death from Jumping or Diving from Bridge, June 15, 1995*, it's the *or* I can't shake. Why fuss with ambivalence when real mystery abides: here stood intolerable grief or failure. Sheerest abandon, joy in a long summer evening. A dare. Need for adventure/a history of. Why work at precision when, hitched as they are to *Death* in this fragment, both *Jump* and *Dive* convey a misjudging of depth, of current, ignorance of rocks below the dark water, and, with "June" added, an insistent sun peaking the river with camouflage ripples. And isn't it *Death* that I, passerby, secret entertainer of edges and precipices, should instead linger over—approaching, riding, then putting behind me the impulse as I cross the bridge, daily, this winter?

Someone thought to be personal about it, not slap up an ordinance "By order of" and "with a \$\$\$ fine." No organization (Bridge Jumpers Anon) claimed the sign; it's not a fraternity service project or probationary do-good feat. That unadorned "Death" is no stat-like "fatality." "Or" is a move to cover the bases, and observed here, now, mid-February, the slightest warmth coming on, barest inflection of sweetness in air, the river still frozen—it opens up all kinds of questions.

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Imagine the onset of summer in Iowa, each day in June the light and soft air a surprise, a relief from the long winter's cold. It's been twelve years now since the sign's announcement. The bare facts are holding, but time folds the story back into "the past." None of my friends here remember the death. When I stand on the bridge thinking "twelve years ago now" the form of an actual body in air, in water, is vague, and the best I can do to buoy the body is *shirt-puffed-in-wind, corona-of-hair-floating-behind*.

Twelve years ago now. Where'd the story go?

One in which no one moved quickly enough. Because *he* was the athlete. Because she, such a practical joker, would surface any minute, any minute for sure. No one moved off the bridge, tearing a path through the tangle of milkweed and blackberry to plunge in and help. Or everyone tried, but she was under too long. Or he stood by himself in the early pink dawn, and the act, intended to purify—the cold water awaken, silence exalt—was planned as a private moment.

Around the sign, around the inconclusive *or*—because of the *or*, the pause it stirs, the space it opens—fragments and conjectures gather:

The last person was drunk. The last person, despondent, tied a brick to her ankle. The last person could swim but not well and didn't account for the rain-swollen currents, for a current at all, it looked so mild, as it does now, even in February. The last person was pushed, wasn't ready and twisted around to protest. The last person hit her head on the railing, unconscious before she entered the water. The last person trusted his body, young as it was and accustomed to pleasure. And below were the snarled, sharp nests of dumped cable. Roots of river plants tough as rope. She cut her arm on a broken bottle and fainted and fell. He misjudged the spans' distance and clipped the concrete. She didn't imagine construction debris. She thought the vertigo was over for good a long time ago. He looked up to say he was fine, just fine, but his mouth filled with water and he panicked and choked. She jumped, but mid-air turned it to swan dive—wanting the grace to set her apart, and to best all the plain summer cannonballers.

116 I'm not doubting it happened; I believe someone died. It's just that the sign complicates, suggests many competing things at once: by "last death," that there had been previous ones (but those aren't listed). And how to be sure if the sign-maker kept up with the project, if "last" means "final" and not "last recorded"? Or if the span of twelve years suggests precautions *were* taken—and they worked, problem solved. You might even assume, if you're inclined to optimism, that the sign, in a crude and grim sort of way, is reassuring: that it's now very safe to jump. Or—given the sign's plain-spokenness, its weird departure from officialese—someone got fed up with the jumping and used the occasion to blunt-force the message, to speak to kids "in their own language," and "to this day" (see how solid that phrase is, how it makes time behave and ties up the story) the tone is off-kilter and not to be trusted, since, as kids know, authority keeps its ear to the ground and cooks up new methods of sounding native. And so, ahistorical and inconsistent, chummy in ways that feel fake, the sign frays and unfocuses; offers, then snatches away. Which accounts for the queasiness I feel standing before it.

Without a story, the fragments won't settle.

Possibilities crowd in and distract.

Without the stability of a tale-handed-down, one rushes to make things, rushes the blankness as if it were naked, suddenly stripped—indecent, embarrassed. In need.

Conclusions assert.

Stances take root.

Here's one now, a very unpleasant stance that I'd rather let go—but I'm trying to stay alert, catch the forms of response coming in. So, though I'm cringing, I'll present it in full: there on the banks, in the sun, in June, however enticing, *I'd* have been careful. Judged correctly the depths. Known my strength and its limits. *I'd* never have taken such a stupid risk. Because look, right below, how the eddies gather. *Anyone* could see that means sunken stuff's present. It might have worked as a simple jump (I'm leaning over now, calculating: a feet-splayed or bicycling-around kind of jump, to soften the impact) but not as a dive. No way a dive would've worked—and here comes the stance's fullest expression, I feel it, the coo, the assuring, calm sense of righteousness-and-exemption firming up: *she* must have been drunk. That's the kind of dumb thing you do when you're drunk—just jump, crash through the conventional—childish, careless...

...as if I've never been careless, lit, held by an ocean, a force late at night erasing my path, rolling it, sealing it up behind me: *just come*. As if I've never been successfully beckoned. As if I'd never beckoned myself, oceanically forceful, convinced by desire and absolved by it, sharply alive and powered by very pure, bright shots of impulse.

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Such a sign, in all its uncertainty, opens up another way, too, so I might look again at the riverbank, how green and sweet, and tangled with blackberries. The milkweed taut and near bursting (I'm working toward a new attitude here, a mildness I hope to cultivate), the sun releasing the loamy, rich scent of days ripening fast. There's been rain and the river's high and quick, and only a little silty. Breeze lifts my hair, my shirt, reaches around, I'm in summer's good hands and some hasp is removed, latches unclicking, sun unfolding white handkerchiefs on water and other commodious tricks of time, flexing, cajoling *here, enter here*...

And here's the new edge I walk up to, new stance to counter the impatient, first one. I'm trailing it, picking through marshes and dunes. It comes forth in this way, by recalling the lighthouse at Cape May Point, New Jersey. The 275 stairs inside are steep and twisting and once you start climbing, you can't turn back, it's too narrow and there are others behind you. In the heat, the scent of iron lifts, scent of all who have rested cheeks, laid foreheads against the burnished handrail, wishing it into a better one, a familiar one along the

boardwalk (there, far below on the beach they can't see, leaning as they are against this one, praising its steadiness, hoping it will go on reliably holding).

Last year, after climbing to the top, I couldn't make myself step through the door and onto the walk. Things break. All the time. Unhinge and unbolt. Hairline-crack. Salt air scours and pocks and gnaws-down. Hail full-throated. Sun dries to dust all it touches.

Why must I consider this, daily?

This summer, though, I stepped right out with my son and walked evenly all the way around. I did not look straight down, but neither did I focus on my safe and near cuticles, wrist, wrist hairs, jacket zipper. I walked out and caught the wind, full in the face. No back to the wall, no inching and praying. Last year, I couldn't bear to see my son out there, but torn, wanting to encourage bravery, I said nothing and stayed inside and got busy reading a plaque so he might go freely around holding his father's hand, happy in the fierce wind.

118 But this year—just fine. I don't know why. Except that I've let go of a lot recently. I think it's made me lighter—which might have meant more easily dizzied, more easily lifted and blown away. But instead I got one of those good, solid paradoxes, one you can hold and gaze at, like *the-emptying-that-fills*, and feel more certain for it.

And here, my first stance, the ungenerous one, mingy and full of judgment gives way. Releases. So I might imagine things differently: that he wanted to fly; she was eager to change, not mince through her days; he followed a spoor hopefully, silently—as I have, spoors of thought, wily ones, supple and leading away, leading to all kinds of precipitous points; she wanted to slip the foundering pace of routine; that which overcast him he was ready to shed, or to drop through and be cleansed of; she meant to restore all that was gnawn, festering, impacted and let regret go, into the soft and aureate breeze.

Some stories are so much a part of a place, that the place is singed, stained, impressed with their very particular light. A story gone to lore constructs atmosphere, makes up “the place where X happened” and people will, or decidedly won't, say they live near it. Will or pointedly will not tell such a story. Such a story is very much like the biggest tree in the yard, voicing weather, dropping its envelopes of light through windows and onto the living room floor—you *own* it but don't think in those terms, until someone says “that's a nice tree you have” and then it hits: how strange to consider “I

own a tree,” a presence you live with, beside, under. Are shadowed by. That shadows you in. *Real* lore, I mean. Not like the characters and their spectral antics you hear about on touristy ghost walks in old port cities—stories a guide tells for a fee. Of ghosts, I imagine, who are worn thin (thinner than usual ghost-gauziness) by the same nightly shtick, the guide’s delivery paced to group shuffling, mystery dosed out, creepiness tuned to hang in the air: “and to this day, no one knows exactly where X...” Stuck in a story gotten not-at-all-right, night after night, ghosts who would otherwise knock about and rattle some rafters for kicks, might think it best to stay quiet.

So how to read a sign like this, bent on recording and telling *something*, but not a story. And even now, if I say “recording,” I realize how careless the sign is with facts: if it listed fatalities over the years, with zeros included to account for times when no one went over, then it would be clear: *someone* was watching, the toting up would be real. Ongoing. Believable. And “June 15” would register relief, and be more truly a memorial. But the sign is so sketchy, it feels, instead, like attention dropped off and interest waned. And in that way, the jumper/diver, the subject of one particular moment—a moment en route to being tale-worthy—passed out of mind.

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But it hasn’t passed out of mind. Not for me. The moment, the story, the last death has been nagging.

It’s June now. Four months have gone by since I first stood on the bridge and imagined some stories, tried out some stances. The sign’s small, no bigger than a sheet of paper; its simple red letters on white metal, its modesty and starkness read differently early or late in the day: when strolling and I know to anticipate it; when hurrying past and it startles. All this time I’ve been thinking it over, trying to figure out how to read it, trying to locate what’s been lost and unsaid.

To that end, my field research might go like this:

As soon as I jumped, I regretted it. I could hardly breathe and kept last-ditch praying: “Please be over, please be over.” The freefall was awful; it went on forever, though it must’ve been only seconds. I felt my brain rise against my skull. I felt my ribs shift, my stomach unmoor, my cheeks go loose. I teared up and couldn’t see. I heard nothing but wind and couldn’t scream.

Or: As soon as I jumped, I hoped it would last. The freefall was amazing and over too soon. The horizon appeared; we regarded each other as brief, still points. I thought *here comes the water*, then everything went blindingly white in sun, the water met me, and disguised as silver pleats in air, waves

of late afternoon held aloft, that steepest, most restorative time of day took me in.

Let me assure you, I did jump (or dive, specification is no longer the issue), but not like this; I didn't go over. That *used* to be me. I used to jump in all kinds of ways, from trees and roofs, into slippery scenes, off edges of the known world thinking *let's see what this brings*. But this isn't me now.

I jumped anew. Really far in. I figured the story itself, if found, would offer some solid occasions for reviewing stances I never imagined. Which is really what's most at stake when standing before a story. So to that end, here:

120 Students used to leap off the bridge all the time, then swim over to a dilapidated dock outside a boathouse on shore and dry off in the sun. The grounds manager I talked with at the university tells me the kids felt it was a romantic, collegiate kind of thing to do, a rite of passage. But the dock was a mess, falling apart, and students kept tripping as they hopped from the dock to the bank of the river. One day, years ago, while taking a walk, the president saw this going on and ordered the dock removed. It was never replaced, but the bridge jumping continued. And one summer someone *did* drown. My contact doesn't know who. But in trying to think of how to stop the jumping, someone (also unknown to him) came up with that sign as a deterrent. Now that I reminded him, he said, since it *is* in kind of bad shape, he'd talk to maintenance and see if there's a value in keeping it up there or not. He didn't know why kids kept bending it. Why were they so drawn to it? he wondered aloud.

And here's the story I was most looking for—the one that ought to overcast the bridge, crackle down doom like a slash of lightning over the spot, accompany the hunger of overhead ravens, plait through passersby with the threads of fear, loss, gratitude. At least a small wire of sadness ought to work its way in, or breeze lift hair and chill necks, or scent settle into everyone's sweater to mark the occasion: the story of June 15, 1995, from the *Daily Iowan*, written up the following day goes like this: At 5 p.m. in the afternoon, Jonathan V., 19, was hanging out on the bridge with friends. He left his work boots and tie-dyed Doors T-shirt on the bank and went up and jumped. When he didn't surface, a friend leaped in to save him, dragged him toward shore, but lost his grip in the steep drop-off close to the bank. Jon was a roofer and lived with a friend's parents, who treated him like their own son.

He sort of filled in for the one who died huffing butane.

He liked adventure, poetry, art. Was kind to the children. One of the girls in the family spoke for the friends, that crowd on the bridge, laughing and drinking in the late June, long summer afternoon, and gathered again at his funeral (which took place, I checked the weather report, on another perfectly composed day). She said that, to everyone there on the bridge, “it seemed like he could get out of the river if he could get in.”

I’ve made a point of moving through the world with very few markers—no tattoos, latest haircut, religious trinkets/charms/icons (no religion, for starters), no messagey T-shirts, brands, brandings/piercings (except ears). These absences, of course, are signs in themselves, but like a turned field, I believe something more nakedly essential fills in the space, suggests things below, stirring. Suggests empty space isn’t empty at all. When the body is blank and distractions are few, gestures reveal: without a tattoo, an arm turned shows exchanges of shade and light, the internal swells of exertion/release. The way muscle tightens to counter resistance is available to the eye. Without a tattoo, one can read tilt of head, set of shoulder, tension rising or falling, and not be stopped at the surface by an ever-present joker’s grin/dagger/dragon with tail curling forever under a sleeve. A lack of signage enhances mystery. If the sign on the bridge is a bad tattoo, then even a bad tattoo has its interstices, its fleshy moments of relief, though you have to linger and look harder to see them. Even a bad sketch calls the eye to look, to stay, to ask for the story trying to surface.

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The land is seeded with incident, marked imperfectly, but even in imperfect signs, stories go on vibrating.

That little “or” set this in motion.

And the absences the sign offered were exactly where I formed my stances: found my scorn, found the lighthouse which softened me. Found myself lacking. Found I could be bettered. Made the edges of those two stances meet.

Thought about ghosts. Showed you my research.

Assembled the terribly brief facts of a death.

Most moments of the story called “Last Death from Jumping or Diving” are unmarked still, not fully gathered, barely asserted. Only lightly sketched in. And, too, the moments I’ve offered, moments constituting this piece (my own foray into jumping) also remain ill-marked. Broadly imperfect, still largely unfurled. Without even *imagined* dialogues. Without extended think-

ing on “risk.” And that whole part about my letting stuff go, and what that might be, what *else* that might mean—that’s not really filled in. I know that.

But you can stand before it nonetheless, whatever is still partial or resistant herein. You can stand before it and read, such a sign (memento mori-like, as in “there is much work to do, Lia, keep at it”) as I could come up with, here, Baltimore, MD, June 21, 2007, and I’d not be completely ashamed.