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Flash Nonfiction by Robin L. Flanigan

On Reincarnating the Past



When I was in my twenties, my boyfriend and I lived in the caretaker's mansion of an East Baltimore cemetery. We stayed there rent-free, as long as we opened the gates in the morning and closed them at night. A sweet gig—until a year later, when I said I was moving out.

B. was the lead guitarist in a rock band that rehearsed in the basement, a former morgue he'd transformed into a recording studio. Friends and strangers would show up for afternoon practice and stay well past midnight, long after I'd whiled away the evening writing upstairs and gone to sleep alone. Sometimes, before bed, I'd pull back the curtains and stare at the stillness, at the headstones in jagged rows beside a vacant hot dog factory and clusters of prostitutes and drug dealers.

I felt dead inside.

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I started dating B. when I was a freshman at a small liberal arts college. I danced in the front row at his gigs, mouthing every word. We slept at his place, even when my roommate said she missed me. He wrote a heartbreaking love song to get me back after one of our breakups (the cassette is still in my attic with a strand of his hair I once taped to a sheet of notebook paper), which landed me back on his couch, night after night, drinking Milwaukee's Best and listening to other people's conversations.

We were one of those on-again, off-again couples, miserable together, miserable apart. I loved his long blond hair and soft voice, his dry wit, and the way other people wanted to be around him—how his fingers meandered over every inch of his guitar neck, then me. I wanted us to work, even brought up marriage, convinced a major life decision would clear up the complications. He was too smart, or too focused on pursuing a music career, to let that happen.

Instead, we ebbed and flowed and crashed and stagnated, until I told B. I was leaving. The decision came while watching some forgettable movie on TV in our living room, at the exact moment a drunk groupie outside exclaimed, with expletive-filled glee, that he was urinating on a church.

We didn't talk much before I left. There was no closure. I'm convinced that's why, after more than twenty years, B. still shows up in my dreams. Sometimes, he's evasive, and I work hard to be noticed; sometimes, he's affectionate and begging for another shot. Whatever form he takes, I usually agree to give us another go.

We should have said good-bye.

I once interviewed a photographer who kept a picture of his mother in a desk drawer. He hadn't seen her since she left when he was six. Tortured over whether to search for her, he told me, "Sometimes, the knowing is worse than the not knowing."

Not for me, though. I want to know what keeps seizing my dreams. What did B. think of me after the split? What does he think of me now? Why do I care?

Although we hadn't spoken in a decade, seven years ago, I found his contact information online and emailed a request to talk. Hours later, B. wrote back with a phone number and two words: "Sounds scary."

The next afternoon, while a friend watched my toddler, I pulled into a cemetery three miles from my house in upstate New York to make the call. Talk about closure—I'd be hard-pressed to find another place that screamed such finality or evoked the spirit of our lost Baltimore graveyard so well.

I followed a narrow road alongside a hill and parked beneath a cluster of thick red-and-black oak trees. I started to dial, hesitated, took a deep breath, and completed the call. B. was clearing his throat when he picked up the phone. We made small talk, until I cried and apologized for the way things ended.

The tears threw me—still do. They were mostly about my regret, I think, not regret that we were together but that I spent so much time losing myself in order to find a way through.

B. told me he was happily married and wanted to be a father. He ended the conversation by saying he didn't fully understand why I called, but was glad I did.

On the way home that day, I felt more space inside. But the dreams haven't stopped. Maybe these nocturnal vignettes are reminders, emphasizing that symbolic gestures—like trying to tie up loose ends in a graveyard—can't always overpower a deeper need to reincarnate the past. Maybe there's hope in the haunting.

During the semester I studied abroad in college, while B. used the distance to ignore our relationship, I photographed a bridge arching gracefully over the River Thames. Moments before, I'd only been able to walk halfway across; the midway spot had suddenly become an allegory for my place in the universe. I was stuck between two worlds—B.'s and mine—and because I hadn't forged ahead on my end, I thought I didn't deserve to cross to the other side.

I keep that picture in my office as a reminder that I have unfinished business.

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Art Information

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Robin L. Flanigan is a freelance writer living in Rochester, New York. Her work has appeared in national magazines and newspapers, as well as several anthologies, and she spends mornings on a creative nonfiction manuscript.

You can see more of her writing at Robin's website, [The Kinetic Pen](#) [4].

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