

Herbert Morris

Soldiers

Partial to books, to scholarship, distinctions
fine and, if need be, somewhat less than fine,
Temmy gave my brother the dictionary
I hold within my hands this autumn evening,
Webster's Collegiate, when he was ten,

"transportation," she told him, "to the future,"
bound in a lustrous brown Moroccan leather
he seemed to need to glide his hand across
over and over — memorable gesture —,
loving, instinctive, a long child's caress,

a fondling lavish, intimate, possessive,
the thing Temmy believed was called "the future"
said hello to or bid farewell to — which?
(perhaps a bit of both on a tenth birthday),
swept with omens whichever way one faced,

held to a moment, just a moment, longer,
before time passes, weather deepens, light
shatters the walls with evening, each of us
darkens, shifts in his skin, becomes another,
someone recognizable — look — no longer:

a weight, a volume, terrible, fixed, awesome,
I take within my hands this clear, cool evening,
needing to place the accent in soiree
(some things weigh what the years weigh, more, my brother,
rage down the dark with light, signification).

After unwrapping Temmy's dictionary,
 puzzled, perhaps, confronted with a gift
 not a game, neither replica nor model
 of something larger in the world — ship, plane —,
 a problem hands, not mind, might work on, fuss with,

he knew at once to find his way to S,
 illustrations, full page, depicting "soldier,"
 Roman, Greek, Frank, Assyrian, Egyptian,
 helmeted, gloved, caped, sandalled, sworded, booted,
 resplendently arrayed just to do battle,

armor, mail, plumes, brocades, silks, leather, velvet,
 just to contest the patch on which each stood,
 Grenadier, Knight, Dragoon, Hussar, Crossbowman,
 posing before him in full finery,
 hand at hip, knee bent, head cocked, spear poised, bearded,

my brother's eyes widening at the prospect
 of men long ago soon to clash on plains
 under dazzle of skies exotic, foreign,
 for causes pure, definite, clear-cut, just,
 archer, lancer, sentinel, musketeer, guardsman,

that terrain over which they fought, whatever
 the century, the weather arched above them,
 the state under whose flag they trooped to glory,
 bearing no marker, nameless, as expected,
 undesignated, of no consequence,

none whatever, its name brimming with music
 when, at last, its time would come to be named,
 two young soldiers, no more than boys, the caption
 German, once proud, erect, now stricken, wounded,
 by my brother's fierce pencil slash drawn through them.

(I will, he wrote to thank her, use this, often;
 each time I do, I'll think of you, I promise —
 knowing precisely what she wished to hear.
 Her inscription, of course, was never mentioned;
 "the future" had its own plans mapped out for him.)

Temmy, swathed in karacul, maiden, childless,
 by self-appointment our great-aunt by proxy,
 favoring lizard shoes for "grand occasions,"
 was asked, each Sunday, to have dinner with us,
 bringing gifts when she came, books, fabled texts,

each tenderly inscribed, ending with "Friend"
 no matter how begun ("For A," "For M"),
 each welling with such mysteries, such myths
 (why, of all books, *this* book?, where lay its secret?),
 her gifts seemed voyages to be embarked on

the moment we excused ourselves from dinner,
 sprawling beneath the hooded reading lamp
 to turn those pages, turn them slowly, savor
 even the turning of those still unturned,
 not even needing to begin the story

(some things for themselves, children, for themselves),
 merely to feel page-edges on the fingers,
 weight, texture, stitching's pull against taut binding,
 racked by fragrance of paper, thread, glue, leather,
 the whiff of promise lodged in fabled texts.

In her three rooms perched on Morningside Heights,
 facing the park, rooms under siege of light
 all day, each day, with no relief in sight
 until the moment, twilight dazzling, dusk fell,
 were scattered portraits of the man she worked for,

her desk positioned just beyond his door
 ("a true gentleman: oh, how I adore him"),
 her one hero, Nicholas Murray Butler,
 the only one she would permit herself
 ("except, on some days" — a sly wink —, "Clark Gable").

She loved Radio City Music Hall,
 took us, those Saturdays, to see the movies
 booked to play there ("films", she insisted, "films" —
 "Nicholas Murray Butler likes romances" —,
 distinctions intricate, unflagging, fine),

loved its lights, niches, alcoves, corridors
to nowhere in the dark ("some things exist
wholly for themselves, which may be enough"),
from any angle that momentous sweep
of vast proscenium — "a New York sunset" —,

paraded us — holy ritual — grandly
first up, then down, hand in hand, The Grand Staircase
("Nicholas Murray Butler would enjoy this"),
head aloft, back straight, pleased to be seen with us,
proud to be our great-aunt, even by proxy,

ascensions and descensions stately, slow,
lizard gleaming superbly at her feet,
burnished beneath those half-lights to perfection.
She loved words, learning, the idea of aunthood.
I think she loved, in secret, Dr. Butler.

When we reached her apartment she poured tea,
leaves brought from Shanghai years before, when travel
loomed first among the things she claimed to love
(since, for reasons unstated, guessed, renounced),
offered madeleines baked for her in Paris,

shipped in a small wood crate she let us open;
after seeing to finger bowls, hand towels,
would lead us through those rooms, battered by light,
books to the ceiling, book by book, in flames,
with a prim flourish moved to "introduce" us

to the one (had he known?) whose great bronze doors
she had positioned herself just outside of,
keeping vigil, guard, faith (what shall one call it?) —
each photograph, each portrait, painting, snapshot,
scrapbooks jammed with articles, interviews,

meticulously scissored from *The Times* —,
for those seventeen years (seventeen, count them)
of a bleak but devoted spinsterhood
thrusting that small, proud self between the man
and whatever chaos, disruption, harm

(had he known?) might visit itself upon him,
 might threaten, in an instant, to befall him,
 unswerved, unswerving, fixed, transfixed, astonished
 by the quality of her dedication,
 fearless, tenacious, constant, wholly selfless,

by the resplendence of the unavailing,
 the wait outside those doors, the vigil, faith,
 arresting, beautiful, in the end futile
 (some things for themselves, children, for themselves),
 walls flayed, besieged, afternoons, books igniting,

the trees, opposite, struck, scorched, seared, in flames,
 scrapbook by scrapbook spilling, overflowing,
 tea poured, crates pried, cakes passed, "Meet Dr. Butler,"
 processions on a staircase once called Grand,
 years passing, passed, dusk, darkness, inundation.

Small black tabs placed evenly through the volume,
 one for each letter, down the right-hand margin,
 easing the chore confronting the night scholar
 as he turns, turns at once, to T, to A,
 with least delay, little waste, undistracted,

in the pursuit of all he would pursue,
 head bent beneath the glow lamp at his task,
 difficult scholarship, no doubt, momentous
 undertakings, monumental in aspect,
 richness, privacy, scope, of crucial import —,

the book has come unglued across the spine,
 its pages splayed at random from the core,
 where once the core had bound them, loose-limbed, spastic,
 flying off at odd angles, at a touch,
 white stitching ruptured, frayed, the paper brittle,

showering from the binding to the floor,
 to be assembled, reassembled, nightly,
 after one has turned it beneath the light,
 weighed what it is, what it was, shaken by that,
 turned it, held it, held it again, replaced it

on the high shelf (I the inheritor)
 where (years, the years) Temmy's books have been stored,
 as though it were to me the task had fallen —
 the burden passed to me, keeper of books
 (impossible, my brother, visionary,

fraught with the utmost danger, swept with risk) —
 of, from the beginning, piecing together
 the Book of Words, this intricately fashioned
 Book of Ultimate Meaning, stitch by stitch,
 page by page, small black tab by small black tab,

the secret of one's tongue, one's life, lodged in it
 (hold it, turn it, assemble, reassemble),
 if not this text, another, and another
 (*Lambs' Tales from Shakespeare, Robinson Crusoe, Kidnapped*),
 presentations to my brother, to me,

Sundays, birthdays, on the first day of spring,
 days touring three flame-gutted rooms, tea poured,
 cakes passed, "meeting" Nicholas Murray Butler,
 book after book bearing the loops, the swirls,
 the nests of curlicues, gnarled yet free-flowing,

of those small, trim, immaculate inscriptions
 ("For A, the future, From his friend, Love, T";
 "H, keep this, cherish this, Love, Your friend, T"),
 each stroke lovingly rounded, balanced, shaped,
 each taking care, such care, such pains, impassioned.

Tonight, clear, cool, an evening late in autumn,
 the sky starting its long, slow climb to winter,
 the stars knowing little but to begin
 (again, again) the course of those ascensions
 as momentous as ours on The Grand Staircase,

I have my brother's gift from her at hand,
 Emma Marie-Claire Saks, Morningside Heights,
 Webster's Collegiate, bound in brown leather
 ("For A, dear A, at ten. Love, your friend, T"),
 I, the last of the three on whom the years

have yet to work their final devastation,
 I, the inheritor, keeper of books,
 partial to words, wordlessness, fine distinctions,
 to the splendor of all things unavailing,
 the arresting, the beautiful, the futile,

walls besieged, rooms in flame, pure inundation,
 turning at last to what if not to S,
 letting the book fall open to that page,
 his page, which would attempt clear definitions
 (as though that might be possible) of soldier,

filled with sketches of youths arrayed for battle,
 helmeted, bearded, booted, caped, resplendent
 (the resplendence of all things unavailing),
 letting my eye, feigning sheer inadvertence,
 wander to the two at the very bottom,

still standing bearing rifles, after decades
 having changed their expressions not at all,
 still youths after so many nights have fallen,
 their beauty still untarnished, their cheeks glowing
 just as they glowed, "the future" whole, intact,

their single flaw (had they known?), their misfortune,
 merely to bear the caption which they bear,
 stricken, grievously marked, their wounds still fresh,
 wounds one knows, when inflicted, were expected
 to take forever to heal, could they heal.

Needing to place the accent in soiree,
 I turn to pages which I turned before,
 nineteenth letter in a fierce alphabet,
 letters alive with the dead, with the lost,
 needing to place my brother in my life,

Temmy in ours, Nicholas Murray Butler
 (seventeen years, seventeen years) in hers,
 pacing, not pacing, on that Oriental
 carpet (full moon, cloud wisps, willow, pagoda)
 she may, may not, have given him one Christmas

(those massive doors of bronze she sat astride of,
 sentinel at the gate, stander of guard,
 polished almost to the point of reflection —
 had he known, seen, had inklings, sensed, suspected? —,
 about to close, closing, finally closed),

offering her dictation in return,
 letters, bulletins, speeches, memoranda,
 as he stood, sat, paced, repaced, turned, returned,
 fulfilled (seventeen years) the obligations
 of the presidency in flawless style,

she with pencil and pad propped on her knee,
 small, shy, proud, prim, stammerer-in-his-presence,
 nothing less than devoted and most humble
 principal secretary, our Miss Saks,
 partial to learning, books, my brother, me,

turning, returning, each night to three rooms,
 scrapbooks, portraits, interviews, snapshots, clippings,
 rooms from which (had she known?) a shrine was carved,
 each night, each night, that vigil at French windows,
 ash trees, opposite, plunged in darkness, flooded,

a commonplace occurrence by this time
 (some things for themselves, children, for themselves),
 positioning herself to best advantage
 (each night, mind you, each night) to watch the dark fall
 wholly without pity on Morningside Heights.