

October Elegy for One Who Died in Another October

by Charles Semones

In Memoriam: H. D. C.

I was thirteen the wind-grieved night you died in a city you had rarely been to, if at all. Now that you've been gone for decades into some permanence where our wispy Indian summers go for good, an underland conversant with the course of seasons, giving ground to that final season of the long forgetting. I am here where remembrance is strong around me like the cloying smell of too many overripe persimmons. If I could, I would tell you how things in this new century are up to nothing good. Take my word for it. You would not feel at home in this world that I call *addled*. I call it that because no other word will do. Nothing is like it used to be when you were alive in that country place with its run-down clapboard farmhouse and a few scrawny roses on the backyard fence that made summer beautiful for you. I'm free now to say I found nothing beautiful about it. I remember how it droned on and on into what seemed to be the never-ending, and how your nubby roses hung on into fall. They were dwarfish, short on virtue, little short of being laughable, whereas the neighbors gloried in an opulence of antique roses, nodding in their elegance on princely trellises. I was but a half-pint boy the day you told us you'd be going soon. I didn't know how soon you meant by *soon*. And going soon to *where*? It was a God-freighted moment when your words weighted down my shoulders like gunny sacks chock-full of swarthy, firmly-fleshed potatoes, with their pungent earth-smell, we'd only finished digging and storing in the cellar the afternoon before. When they got me out of bed one night and told me that, decimated by an exotic fever your doctors thought you'd brought back from that Pacific war, your numbness had finally found your heart and killed you, I was gravestone-mute but thought I was too big for tears. My ears belied the real: each clocktick seemed to be a hammer-blow on steel. I hated you for dying. I hated all those faces changing shapes and sizes in the too-warm room. It was unnatural—that second summer. Outside the open window, insects kept on rehearsing their insidious music, full of an Ives-like dissonance that showed no signs of letting up. Your family had been told there'd be no taking you inside the church. The fear of what had killed you allowed only the briefest graveside service early the next morning—and no time wasted as those soldiers, forgoing ceremony, hustled your sealed military casket underground. I remember thinking how that woman poet in my American lit book got it right: *life goes on though good men die*, even when we do not think it can, even if we do not think we want it to. But days and seasons pass, and other years bring us other reasons for being glad to see Octobers go. Now, I'm on the knife blade's edge of being threescore years and ten—all the Bible has allotted me. Beyond that, everything's on loan. I saw young manhood come and go like a rained-out July carnival that couldn't take the time to hang around but had to get a move on to the next scheduled town and it seems now that the better part of my adulthood happened when I did not take the mirror at its word. It's pointless to wonder where those good years went and, for that matter, whatever happened to what seemed to be a thousand nights of apples ripe for plucking in the orchard, no farther than a stone's throw from your kitchen door. If I could be certain you would hear me, I'm fairly sure that I would try to tell you how much it meant, just being there with you. Our friendship was not an April and November

screwup of frazzled memory's making, but something rare that *happened*, subsumed forever in an autumn mix of mist and stone. You have no way of knowing it, but I still see your clammy garden that, each year, became more difficult to tend, a patchwork of scraggly vegetables on worn-out land, hard as hearts sometimes get when they are denied one time too many. Being so young back then, I could not have known that I would miss you more than some I *thought* I loved—since you were simply there, someone I took for granted, someone to sit down at the table with for three square meals a day. What bitter schooling these decades of your absence has been. Now that I'm twice as old as you were when you died, I can finally remember what I never would have thought to tell you. But I would not call you back now when trees are moping, shrugging off their leaves. Would it mean anything if I were to say what needed saying years ago? Or has the mercy of your grave's ineffable solicitude taught you that being dead is largely a serene indifference to the living? Have you lain there over half a century not caring that when the last of your apples are picked each year in old October's blaze and blur, I find it harder to remember how you looked and spoke, yet mourn you more?