

Defining Moment

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“Television, that final light that saves you from loneliness and from the night, is reality. Because life is a show, the system promises those who behave themselves a comfortable seat.”

--Eduardo Galeano, *The Book of Embraces*

Those supposedly *in the know* about *moments*
say this one was ours -- the televised explosion
just after lift-off, a million round faces rounding a million mouths
into rosy o-rings of shock, the teachers panicking
and fumbling for the remote. The principal
over the P.A. system. The aftermath
of group counseling and memorials.

I know this moment is supposed to be mine,
and I've tried to own it, like we try those things
we know we should try: like loving the right person,
like being yourself, like discarding self-destructive habits,
like starting the project early instead of late.

I've tried to cultivate it, like plants inherited
from friends who've moved away.
I've tried to invent it and believe it,
fusing TV with memory and fiction . . .

Picture this: pan across a classroom --
desks filled with pre-teens, all eyes
glued to the tube on the AV cart.
Maybe it's your seventh grade biology class,
and it's not clear just now whether
you're remembering it, or remembering
something you saw later on TV, or both . . .

And maybe that's your teacher
watching TV with you, leaning slightly
against the chalkboard that will leave
its telltale chalkprint on her shoulder,
the mark that always made you think
Miss Kellogg had a friendly ghost-guardian.
So maybe that's Miss Kellogg watching TV
with you and seventh grade biology.

Me? We weren't watching TV that day,

or if we were, I don't remember -- don't remember what class
we did or didn't watch TV in; don't remember
what grade, don't remember when you ask me to remember.
You should know I'm always faking
when I nod my head and widen my eyes,
pretending to share a vivid memory.
And you should know: I'm not the only one.

But I suppose we should take what's offered --
our Titanic, *our* JFK, *our* "where were you?" --
and I suppose we should all agree not to admit
we can't remember whether it was Mrs. Beardmore
and Algebra I -- the mess of equations on the board
and the glint of her metal chalk-holder;
or Mr. Mueller, who made us square-dance;
whether it was Marine Biology or the purgatory
of study hall, or gym class; whether it was
TV real, *real real*, real TV, or just another
collective dream, which is to say
mytho-national mini-series,
which is to say

I've loved the wrong person in the worst way.
I've smoked things. I've had both the cheapest
and the most expensive vodka in embarrassing excess,
and I have killed every plant ever bequeathed
by every friend who trusted me and left.

Don't ask me about the Challenger, don't tell me
that was you, that kid in the front row, that kid
in that desk turning left and right for conformation,
for comfort; and don't you tell me that confirmation
is comfort. And don't make me name my moment.

The thing is -- I missed it.