

BRIGHTER THAN BRIGHT

poem_j/crazy-p/superconductor_14january2000-FINAL

SUPERCONDUCTOR

We are but a network of interlacing nerves
tangled beneath a veneer binding
tendon to bone, muscle to mind.
Caress or cudgel, slap or sigh,
the kinetic charge quivers down tactile wands
through blue-veined rivers and crimson corridors
and spasms - at last - in synaptic bliss
to await the next impulse.
But those of us gifted
with silver-sheathed neuronal highways
hum along, thrum along,
rapturous with our super sensitivities,
each hedonistic spark
a celebration,
an electric riff of zapping,
exuberant exaltation
of sentience.
Unsullied by any elemental metal,
undaunted by inevitable end,
we soar higher, faster,
brighter than bright
until, fiery and frenzied,
receptors overload,
sizzle, smoke,
and dive-bomb
to predestined desolation.

Benjamin M. Taylor
Cambridge

CHAPTER ONE

The world stops. A whorl of white surrounds us, feathers suspend in air, kicked up to the shocking blue. A whistle shrills--

“Ben.”

The voice tugs me back. In the green glow of a solitary lamp, my shrink is a shadow behind the hulking desk. He fingers a file. “You drifted off.”

“Sorry.” The cool leather slides under my palms as I sit up.

“Please, pick up where we ended - soccer finals.”

I rub my eyes with the back of my knuckles. “Hey Bruce, I don’t remember, that was so long ago.”

“Let’s try again.”

He commands me to lie down. My eyes close, hands settle on my abdomen in casket-viewing position. The hemp smell of the kilim-covered pillow wafts over me, familiar, soothing, like the rhythm of his voice. My body surrenders and the couch enfolds me, a soft, safe glove.

“Breathe,” he says. “Take me back to the game.”

My eyelids flutter shut. Images flash, my mental Kodacolor box of moments, and I rewind to the cool, morning haze muting the ochre trees, the way my legs pumped hard, pushing through a sea of lanky, shin-guarded limbs. The ball rolled out from our tangle of boy bodies and my feet followed, bounding down the dewy field smelling of grass and mud. I was nine. I was invincible.

“We were in OT, but my team controlled the ball. Someone passed to me.” The field was wide open, weird because the other side had such a strong defense.

“And then?”

“I stopped.”

“Why?”

“Everyone was at the sideline, yelling, kicking something white.” But not a ball. Whatever it was fell apart in small chunks and gossamer wisps.

“What were they kicking?”

“A bird. One of those rare ones, the kind you see in marshy places. Snowy egret, I think. They punted it to me – God, they were laughing. Laughing! - and yelled at me to score with it!” My fingers curl into my stomach. “It was... cruel.”

“Yes, it was cruel.”

“Then the coach hollered at us to get back to the game.”

“But you didn’t.”

I open my eyes and cock my head towards him, surprised he knows. “The bird was hurt. I picked him up.” He was lighter than I thought he’d be, and sort of rigid except for his neck, which flopped over. Not soft.

“And then?”

My eyelids tremble. "I walked across the field." I see myself shrivel to a black and red pinpoint against the green of the turf, wrapped in a roar of silence even though mouths opened and closed, fists waved, the whistle dangled from the ref's lips. The bird didn't move - I kept jiggling him in my arms, trying to make him flap his wings, open his beak. Almost invisible rust-brown dots swarmed up my fingers, to my wrists and I remember wondering how can blood crawl until I realized these specks were bugs and the bird was dead. The carcass thudded at my feet and the day shattered.

"What happened?"

Fingers quiver against my thighs. I cup my hands tightly but the shaking telegraphs up my arms. "I screamed, called them assholes."

The pencil scratches. "And?"

"The coach benched me. The game was over. We lost." I snort. "And I didn't play in that league again."

"What a horrible thing to happen."

I shrug. "It was embarrassing."

"How so? A dead bird can be traumatic for a young child."

I look into his placid face, wishing he'd stop asking these stupid questions. My shoulders scrunch up, then collapse. "My folks came down from the stands. Mother kept apologizing, kept saying I was high-strung, too sensitive. In front of the team! Jesus!"

"And your father?"

Hands shoved under thighs, the trembling stops. "He didn't say anything." But he glared at me, his face pinched and red. Mortified, the way he always looked before he blew. My hands ball into tight fists. "I think I've had enough of this topic."

“Why?”

“It happened ten years ago.”

“We’re almost done. Let us finish this story.” His swivel chair squeaks. “You left the game. Then what?”

I grumble, but ever the dutiful patient I answer. “In the car, he let me have it. The whole way home he kept picking on me, ‘Stop sniveling! Start acting like a man!’”

“What? He showed no compassion?”

“I was a frigging wuss.”

“At home, what happened?”

“More of the same.” My hands clench, then unfurl.

He stares at me, waiting.

“He had quite a temper. Still does.” I squint at the antique Seth Thomas ticking on the bookshelf. Five more minutes. Damn. I roll up, reach for my shoes.

Bruce glances at his watch, frowns. “How did you feel when he yelled at you?”

I inhale. “Scared shitless. Of course.” I meet his gaze, still calm. Barely. “I was just a kid.”

“You were scared. Anything else?”

Tugging on one shoe, the lace snaps. Jesus. “Uh, I was a mad.” My voice sounds funny to me, faraway, like it belongs to someone else.

“Why?”

The spot behind my right ear begins to throb. Out the window, white flakes, almost invisible against the dusky grey, waft downward in gentle arcs. Shut up, shut up, I scream in my head.

“Was there more?” He leans closer.

The snow continues to fall in slow motion, the world unhurried and deliberate. But inside, in my head, everything accelerates; the hallway floor looms closer, the swirly pattern of the wood still embedded in my memory as my hands stretch before me to break the fall. My knees collide with polished oak, fingers grab my shirt from behind, drag me back up, then shove me down again. “He hauled me upstairs.”

“And?”

“He... ah... um...” The pencil twirls back and forth between his fingers, a yellow blur. A sudden heaviness presses behind my forehead.

“He hurt you?”

My head jerks.

A small puff. “Oh.” The pencil stops spinning. “How?”

The muscles around my eyes twitch and his face smudges around the edges. “His hands.”

“Anything else?”

Oh Jesus. Jesus. This is too close. The air thins, I need to leave, go outside. Breathe. The clock chimes. “It’s time to go.”

“In a minute, Ben. What else?”

I blink fast to push back the hot, sudden fullness, the memory, but the small grey-pink patch of gum wedged in the groove of his black sole zooms toward me anyway. My fingers grapple for the railings, but they strobe past, fluttering like spokes on a bicycle. Anger flickers, then sputters into a familiar gray puddle. “Just his hands.” I stare at my shoes, watch them blur, then melt into the crimson Persian.

“And your mother?” he says after a long silence.

“My mother?”

“Yes. What did she do?”

Jesus, I wonder if I’ll ever stop crying. I’m fucking nineteen, you’d think I’d be over this by now. “She wasn’t there.” A jagged, hiccupping sob rips from my throat, a lunatic’s cackle. “She was never there!”

The room collapses; walls fold into themselves, the desk and chairs and books cyclone around me as I slide again into my damned abyss. The heft of my fury lets loose, surprising and scaring me with its fierceness. The couch floats in the chaos, a life-preserver, and I sense the weight of him settling beside me, pushing tissues into my hand, patting my back. Words wash over me, a numbing mantra; my bawling withers to a pathetic whimper.

Nerves sucked hollow, I straighten up, shove off his hand, pissed I said anything, pissed I lost control, wishing nothing more than to disappear. But he keeps shushing me, “It’s all right, it’s all right”, like I’m some sort of animal, some dog, and it annoys me because it’s not all right, it’ll never be all right; we’ll talk about this garbage for the rest of my life. Inhale, exhale on his blasted counts of five. *I. Will. Not. Lose. It. I. Will. Not. Lose. It.* Never again. The vow calms, helps me regain a tenuous grip on normality. Whatever the hell that is.

“Benjamin, I’m sorry, I know this is painful. But when you verbalize your memories, it helps you move past your anger, your grief.” He eases the tissue box into my lap. “Have you ever told anyone else about this? Your sister Izzy or your Grandmother? Althea?”

I shake my head, blow my nose.

“Not even Sam?”

“Of course not.” Soggy shreds fall from my fingers to the floor. “He’s already done enough for

me.”

“Maybe you should.” He stands and retreats to his mahogany fortress, behind his books and stacks of psychiatry journals and scientific treatises. “You can’t repress these memories forever, they always resurface – and at the worst possible time.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Snot and tears are all over my sleeve. Another tissue, this time to wipe the slime off. “I process this stuff. I dream about him, work it out.”

“Your father?”

“The bird.”

He scratches away, biting his lip; I wonder what pearl I just handed him. “Sometimes, in my dreams, he flies away.”

“Hmmm.” He nods from behind the desk, not looking, pencil still scrawling. “Dreaming is not enough, I’m afraid.”

“Of course I write about it.”

“Good, good, writing is cathartic. Still, actually articulating painful memories has a funny way of purging them. So if you want to talk, call me - anytime.” He shuffles papers, rolls open a filing cabinet. “You are taking your medication. Any problems?”

“No.”

He scribbles again. “How did finals go?”

“Straight As.”

“Excellent. And how are classes now?”

“Uh, they start tomorrow.”

“Anything else?”

“Yeah.” I snuffle, striving to end on a higher note. “Welcome to another season of the lifestyles of the rich and famous.”

#

This is the first time I’ve been on the other Harvard campus. Unlike Cambridge, the medical complex is a sprawling stone and steel oasis devoid of green. Hospitals – Children’s, Dana Farber, Beth Israel Deaconess - tower over the street, darkening the sidewalk. Siren wails punctuate the honks, backfires, and pings of snow-rusted mufflers on idling trucks. Not a practitioner or student of medicine, only its recipient, I wander down Longwood Avenue, feeling insignificant and lost and rattled.

At last, I stumble upon an unexpected expanse of snow-covered white and, at the end, the pearly and imposing building I am searching for – the medical Mecca of the world. Inside is dim, cool, and smells antiseptic, like a medical school should, I suppose. I find my classroom on the second floor, crack the door and peer in the darkened auditorium.

Empty. Except for one girl. The soft beams of the recessed lighting fall on her in such a way she appears suffused in gold, almost ethereal, a misty, muted dream. At the sharp intake of my breath, she glances at me, then down to her book.

I climb the stairs to the rear of the stadium-style hall, staring back every two steps. While my laptop powers up, I study my classmate. Her long braid cascades over the back of the seat, left hand twisting a stray lock of hair as she reads. In profile, she has a classic facial structure: small nose, high cheekbones dusted with a promise of pink, and a rounded chin. Her skin glows, a translucent ivory. She looks wholesome, a Midwestern farm girl, but also fragile, like an old-fashioned porcelain doll.

Her expression seems pensive, sad even, matching the way I usually feel. Alone. But she also

looks peaceable, a calm, still pond before the stone is skipped. Looking at her, my usually frenzied heart slows. Relaxing into the seat, I imagine drifting with her on my downy river of a bed, my fingers tangling in her undone hair, those blonde silken strands splayed across my pillow, a snowy thigh peeking out from under rumpled sheets. My body throbs, but she continues to read, oblivious to my growing fascination.

The door flies open, breaching my fantasy, and dozens of people pour in, talking in animated voices. Most are med students, you can tell from the white coats they wear or drape over their arms. Sprinkled among them are a few biology pre-docs from the labs. A couple notice and acknowledge me, but no one sits beside me.

A low hum of anticipation fills the packed hall. I lean forward, fingers drumming the sides of the desktop; this is my first graduate-level course. The professor strides in, lanky, youngish, bursting with energy.

“Good afternoon!” His voice booms over my head. “My name is Professor Stanley Martin and this is Neurobiology 200. Here, you’ll learn so much about the brain, the mind, and the peripheral nervous systems, you’ll get a headache.” The brown-nosers laugh. Suck-ups. He reviews the syllabus, textbook and readings, and the mandatory laboratory.

“Because one of the best ways to learn is from your peers, your grades, with the exception of the mid-term and final, are based on collective efforts.” Everyone groans, even me. There’s always at least one free-loader in every group. “So assemble yourselves into teams of four by this time next week.”

The room dims, the first slide hits the wall-sized screen, and Professor Martin launches into the substance of the class. Most of the fast-paced lecture is a rehash. Even as I diligently tap out notes, my attention drifts to the flaxen maiden below. I muse about her, about us: studying in the labyrinthine bowels of the stacks, holding hands in a hushed theatre, dancing at Ryles, clothes clinging to our overheated, sweating bodies. The lights blaze on, dissolving my daydreams, and the professor

concludes with a reminder for us to form groups or “he’ll do it for us.”

I load up my stuff, bound down the steps three at a time, and take my place at the end of a short line. She’s still there, talking to a girl wearing a tight black sweater and a silky drawl.

“So, Phoebe, I’ll see you back at the house, ‘kay, hon?” The golden one, Phoebe to me now, waves away her friend. She packs up her books, loosened hair curling around her face. She finishes packing her books. Only one more person in front of me - do I have time to talk to her, ask if she’ll be in my group? She looks up, staring through me. I stop breathing. She frowns. Professor Martin interrupts my trance.

“And what can I do for you?”

I introduce myself and tell him Doctor Littell, my advisor, recommended his class.

“You’re an undergraduate?” he says.

“Yes.” I glance around, hoping no one hears.

“This is a graduate course.”

“I’m finishing my junior year. I’ll be in Advanced Standing status this Fall.”

He frowns. “Have you taken the prerequisites? You normally wouldn’t enroll until your senior year.”

I assure him I’ve passed the necessary courses.

“Going for honors in biology?”

“Neurobiology.”

“Correct answer!” He extends his hand and pumps mine with enthusiasm. He pens his name on the required form and hands it to me. I thank him and turn to leave. Phoebe the Fair is gone.

Outside the cool dark of the building, the January sun assaults me. My shadow precedes me across

the expansive courtyard to the Starbucks down the street. It's early for lunch, but I overslept and missed breakfast.

While the laptop boots up, I chew on a sesame bagel. Running through my directory of journals, I hit my 'daily_j' file, type January 18, 2000, and contemplate my new obsession: Phoebe, golden-wreathed one, Goddess of the Moon. Probably a passing infatuation - there's no such thing as love at first sight - I'm just hard up, it's been months since I've slept with anyone. And that was a disaster. Damn med.

Food forgotten, my fingers fly. How to finagle myself into her study group? Perhaps sit up front in class, next to her. Come in late. Yes. Journal entry finished, I click on the 'dream_j' folder.

That deep wood ends. The only direction is straight ahead, across the slick, icy surface of the never-ending lake. Wind howls, a blizzard of soft flakes that don't melt. I teeter on the edge, deliberating. In the gloom, twigs snap. Leaves rustle. One foot treads the ice; a rending crack, and my arms lift, float me heavenward...

Jesus, I hate this nightmare, *gratis* fallout from my session with Bruce and his stupid, nosy questions. This dream haunts me a lot, whenever I'm stressed, which, lately, is all the time. A chill leaks from the words. I shut down the entry and scroll to the 'poem_j' folder.

The poem I'm struggling with now deals with the substance of my father: venture capitalist extraordinaire, deal-maker for the powerful, *Money* magazine's Top Hundred Most Influential, and frat brother of our President.

Are we alike?

Blood, a few common alleles,

does this a bond deserve?

We, as different as night and day,

I dark and deep, you light and shallow...

The words fall flat, cliché, the meter off kilter. The verse fails to get at the fundamental nature of our affiliation. Warmed by the light streaming through the window, I work over this bud of an idea, but my mind wanders from him and our mutual rage and back to Phoebe. Is she kind? Does she like Italian movies, hanging out in coffee shops, Rilke, and star-gazing? I wonder what moves her to joy. But most of all I worry that she's already taken. Probably, probably... beauty like hers doesn't stay unplucked for long. Jesus, I am so smitten. And even though I suspect my musings are futile exercises, I take comfort knowing I'll see her next Thursday in class, unless the gods look kindly upon me and intervene earlier.

My watch beeps – high noon. I pack my things to return to Cambridge and the lab. Doctor Littell and I are outlining my honors experiment - time to meet my mice.