Lunge For Love As If It Were Air

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A young mind combing over the Guinness Book of World Records in an attempt to unlock its secrets, with Patsy Cline as the insistent soundtrack, can produce something truly odd. Brain wiring gets tangled just so, like Houdini and his manacles. Tragic optimism takes root. But I didn't really have a say in the matter, as my mother was the one controlling the radio. And so it was that her favorite country music station played on in the background as I searched for clues to mysteries that always seemed just out of reach. One mystery, in particular, comes to mind. The memory of it is both dense as lead and vague as fog. Sometime in the late '70s or early '80s, maybe on the television show *That's Incredible!*, maybe in the *Ripley's Believe It or Not* section of the newspaper comics, maybe on the inside wrapping of some bubble gum, but somewhere, I'm sure I read about the day a mother, after a terrible accident left an over-turned truck on her son, somehow called forth the strength to lift that truck off of him in one desperate, love-induced fury just in time to save his life. I sat there stunned that such a thing was possible. That love could physically alter the world and upend all normal expectations. The Guinness entry for "World's Strongest Mother" was sourced with record-like speed but to my disbelief no such feat of strength existed. I was awestruck with the possibility that love could have a quantifiable strength in proportion to how much you loved someone.

My mother never knew it, but she was now under severe scrutiny by my wondering eyes. If that moment came, would she be able to lift that truck off of me?! Was she staying in the shape

needed for such a moment? Doesn't she know it could happen at *any time*? It's natural for a child to wonder about the limits of parental love. For many of us it is our first encounter with the incomprehensible, seemingly super-human type of love that tears muscles, rips open clothes, moves your blood to where it's most needed, and changes the color of your skin. I was fortunate enough to be raised by two women, my grandmother and mother, who always convinced me that that truck would be in some serious trouble, even if I sometimes questioned their preparedness. With time, eventually the child learns to ask if he could be the one to lift the truck off someone he loves. Deep-seated, improbable, strength-defying love has to be rediscovered with each generation. And when the day came that I could finally answer this question for myself, I had to ask: Why did it feel like it was always, already *in there*, hiding in some not fully formed pathway of a body I thought I knew?

Reflecting on that mother's fury and seeing my own mother's on occasion, I learned something else that would prove to be invaluable as an artist, something maybe painfully obvious with age but quite mysterious in one's youth: *With nothing to risk, love can't exist.* Somehow strength, induced by passionate love, also makes one incredibly vulnerable. With muscles straining, that mother had just announced to the world that something was more important to her than her own life. To a young mind, maybe with a flare for the magical, this vulnerability and contradiction at the heart of love seemed like both a fundamental truth and an alien equation, ancient yet undiscovered. Realizing the strange entanglement between extreme tests of love and tragedy was important because through this knowledge we get a glimpse of what the edges of life are and how willing we are to peer over them. The secrets to Patsy Cline's voice and words would remain locked for years to come but no longer seemed unfathomable after witnessing the depths of motherly love.

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As an artist, I have tried not to lose touch with this mystery, and to never be jaded by the unease

love or emotion raise in the "modern" mind. It is an opportunity to reflect on some complex things about ourselves. I have often asked myself the questions: What was the first sign of tenderness in human evolution? When did we first draw some line in the sand that said from here forward we will love and we will become selfless for that love at the cost of our own survival? When did love first become *dangerous* to our own wellbeing?

Anthropologists have long searched for the first signs of creativity in humans. That key moment when someone, somewhere, altered a cave wall with pigment, realized their shadow was a dark mirror, decided a seashell was worth carrying far from a shoreline and carving into, or that their dead were worth adorning and putting into the ground. Most speculative, but artistically fascinating of all is this question: could the first bodily response to loss through guttural cries and heaving have been the origins of human singing and rhythm? Could this deep and painful loss have pushed pre-language to the ambition of poetry? We never reflect on the very first time a mother couldn't lift a weight off her child. Is it possible that the loss irrevocably altered life so much that at a neural level, synapses had to find new pathways to attempt to make sense of it all? Was this the tipping point for human loss as we understand it today? It would not be long before a creative response was demanded to combat this new type of pain. And in that reorganization, maybe also for the first time, human memory was asked to do something that had never been demanded of it before: to not just recall but to *bear the weight* of one's loss and love and carry it forward. To feel the urgency that forgetting would be a betrayal or second death to the lost and that this was unacceptable, unthinkable. Remembering finally had some teeth. It represents something fundamentally human—the need to know we are in this together and an aching to know we will be remembered. The first time someone held the lit torch of memory as an act of love and rebuttal to loss, the world could never go backwards.

The arguments for fire or tool-making are hard to argue with, but the artist in me likes to think perhaps the greatest invention on this planet, as far as we know, was the birth of human loss. Arguably, love and creativity begin here. The ability to register loss could not happen without that first embryonic concept of love and the threat of losing it. *With nothing to risk, love can't*

exist. Wonder and awe seem the only appropriate responses to reflect that our humanity, love, loss, remembrance, and creativity are perhaps intricately linked at an evolutionary level. Even if these ideas will forever remain speculative, it is important to ponder the origins of loss, creativity and love because when you ask these questions, you are inevitably asking about the origins of what makes us human.

This narrative of loss and love evolving together has never vanished. As we all know, it has become more complex as the reasons for loss have grown immeasurably. Perhaps no reason is bigger than our ability to wage increasingly devastating wars. And while we all seem well versed in our destructive capabilities (as we should be when it comes to war), what is usually less known is that the creative response to loss, through brave acts of love, are constantly co-evolving and mutating in remarkable ways. There is what you could call "the logic of loss" that continues this form of creative invention. There are countless stories of groups and individuals who bear witness to life's tragedies and injustices, some by choice, some unwillingly. It is out there, a land foreign to some but one we will all eventually know, where love can truly get strange. I always like to argue that if you could lay out on a vast table every object that someone has made in a state of deep loss, this would tell as remarkable a history of creativity and invention as does the proper art history we all know. Creativity and invention here do not have to mean ego and ambition at the grandest scale, but rather something as unassuming, but no less magical, as how individuals learn to remain loving in the face of sorrow.

From our earliest origins to our modern battles, the creative response to loss, especially in a time of war, is often the struggle between meaning and meaninglessness. People seek to understand the schism between humanity and atrocity, and they frequently do it through acts of what can only be called love. History is full of such strange moments and gestures: the volunteer women stationed at makeshift hospitals during the Civil War, who would take dictation and write letters home for double amputee soldiers when they physically could not, to notify another mother or wife that they were alive; or another amputee soldier who took it into his own hands to literally carve himself a new leg out of a stump of wood, all so that he could fulfill his role of walking his

daughter down the wedding aisle; or the French WWI soldiers and civilians who would rummage across Dante-like, corpse-strewn battlefields looking for any fragment of missing soldiers' bodies or uniforms, some developing the strange skills to recognize a corpse underground by the vegetation and shades of color growing on top, all motivated by the desire, the love, to combat the sorrow that was drowning a nation in uncertainty over their missing. The modes of creativity in response to loss continue on and on: trench art, mourning art, POW art, mourning hair-work and jewelry, memorial photography, funerary art, convalescents' art, spirit photography, defiant gardens, makeshift roadside memorials, elegy, requiem, and the Blues. That earliest guttural cry set in motion a remarkable lineage.

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More recently, we have been slowly moving through a time especially suspicious of passion, love, sentiment, and outward displays of grief—tools that have linked us for millennia. Our culture views overt displays of mourning, for example, as unseemly or overly morbid and macabre, not being able to "let it go." Postmodern eyes generally see sentiment or love as a threat to the ironic distance needed in a world constantly blurring the edges of what is "real" or "authentic." No one wants to risk being fooled. Ironic distance is a luxury of our time and place and has produced some stylistic innovations, but it is ill suited to explore age-old problems of how love and loss are intimately intertwined.

This age of irony has a contradiction. The critical spirit of engagement by Postmodernism – of challenging power, intolerance, a single "truth" – unfortunately, in some instances, swung the pendulum over to cynicism, suspicion, and irony as a distancing mechanism. When the world is reduced to surface-deep "referencing" and speed, the outcome can rarely be anything but disengagement and historical amnesia. To simply "quote" in a disconnected, stylistic manner that is more interested in the contours of the past, but leaves unexplored the depths, origins, pains, and triumphs of the recollective act, and, worse, remains unchanged by it, is to not really have

remembered at all.

It is always important to remember that the way we interpret words like sentimentality and sincerity are modern constructs. Time inevitably mutates words and their meaning, but we should never lose sight of the *intention* behind such words, which link us across generations. The universal moral lineage of "bearing witness," – so important to the history of human rights and compassion – has direct ties to another era's notions of sentiment and love. The historical tradition of sentimentality during the American Civil War, for example, had a moral dimension; it was a tool against the relentless force of forgetting that was based in a loving response to loss and grief with a community-wide sensibility of shouldering that weight. Writing a poem, braiding a locket of hair, carving motifs in shell casings, or stitching a loved one's clothes into a memory quilt were all authentic, creative responses to love or loss that are easily misjudged from our modern point of view.

There are exaggerations of sentiment for sure that to jaded eyes seem horribly outdated if not manipulative. These exaggerations should not be confused as an argument for the saccharine or melodramatic. They should be questioned but not at the sake of complete disengagement. At what point does an honest openness to the ramifications of loss and grief become "sentimental" in the modern, pejorative sense? And why do we need a referee on this point at all, either inside ourselves or from others when dealing with loss? For fear of the maudlin? Perhaps, but our time calls for taking that risk if apathy is the other option. We can never let one era, and its idiosyncrasies of judgment on acceptable displays of emotional authenticity, dominate something that belongs to all eras. Profound loss demands a profound response unencumbered from the pressure of cleverness. We must each be able to decide how to deal with our loss. If fear of sentiment means risking a deep relationship to the past, then it is time to reclaim the emotion and its power to bind us and to confront loss with invention and creativity. To accept the repression of ironic distancing pertaining to death, loss, and love in a time of war, environmental devastation, and an unprecedented aging population, is for me an irresponsible stance that art should challenge.

When that first human paused to acknowledge death and loss on some long ago eroded terrain, she set in motion a pact with the dead, the living, and the yet to be born, that love and memory would be our primitive weapons against this realization. As the story evolved from howling around campfires, to laying wreaths on battlefields, to super-human mothers versus trucks and the mysteries of Patsy Cline's voice, it has revealed how deeply interwoven love and loss are to the human condition. As loss re-invents itself so does love. There is no freeing ourselves from either. The creativity of love needs the pain of loss. *With nothing to risk, love can't exist.*