

Turning Fifty with Virginia Woolf

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image info

“Time, which is a sunny pasture covered with a dancing light, time, which is widespread as a field at midday, becomes pendent. Time tapers to a point. As a drop falls from a glass heavy with some sediment, time falls.”

—VIRGINIA WOOLF, *The Waves*

My mother died six months after her fiftieth birthday, having drunk herself to death. It was not pretty or peaceful.

I am about to turn fifty, and I feel the pendulous drop of time’s weight.

Something last March compelled me to the bookshelf. What I wanted was a guide, someone to help me make the transition between a life before and a life after this milestone that seems so threatening, so determinative, someone to help me navigate the waves and troughs of middle age. It is strange, therefore, to choose an author who never made it past the entirety of her sixth decade, famously filling her pockets at age fifty-nine with rocks and walking into a river.

Virginia Woolf’s own mother died at age forty-nine, when Woolf herself was thirteen. She too knew the early loss of the maternal;

she too knew the specter of living beyond one’s mother twice: once as a child, and once at middle age. That isn’t why I chose her, though, or at least not consciously. I didn’t even know about her mother’s death until after. So maybe it is that Virginia Woolf chose me, somehow.

I picked up Woolf’s *The Waves* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1959), her most experimental novel, about six friends who grow up and grow old together, each narrating their lives in stream-of-consciousness soliloquies. Jinny, Rhoda, Susan, Louis, Neville, and Bernard. And amongst them all, I find me, too.

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As a sophomore in college, I took a course on Willa Cather and Virginia Woolf. I sent a picture of myself in a bowler hat and button-down shirt, inspired by *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, to a boy back home I thought I loved. I certainly yearned for him, wished I

could be like him—rebellious and wild and talented, so talented—and I scrawled across the photo's back: "I am thrown over you like a net of light"—what Jinny says after she has kissed Louis in the garden the summer before they begin school.

I was nineteen, almost exactly thirty years ago to the month before I picked up Woolf again to see what comfort I could find there. As I read it this time, I kept pen in hand, as I have automatically done for literary fiction over all the years between then and now. The prior notations were written in a neat hand with rounded letters; the current ones are more of a scribble. A book historian would be able to tell the marginalia were written at different times, with different inks. Would they be able to tell it was the same person, thirty years apart? How much of that person is actually the same?

My nineteen-year-old self, in addition to taking notes on close readings of passages we went over in class (And now I wonder, without the context, why those ones? What was Professor Swift so intrigued by? Why were they the keys that unlocked the book's meaning for him? His own middle-aged consciousness is there, inscribed in my book too.) underlined passages I simply liked, almost all of them related to Jinny, the physical, sensual, beautiful being who could control men by simply thinking at them "come to me," or by making a simple gesture, and they would. She had that kind of presence. I wanted that kind of presence. That kind of control. I also wanted the freedom to be within my own body, to experience the liquidity of ecstasy, to have a fingertip touch explain me to myself. That would not happen for another decade. Jinny is the one who flings herself forward, who "Without illusions, hard and clear as

crystal...rode at the day with her breast bared. She let its spikes pierce her." How I wished to be so reckless, so spontaneous, so free of caring what everyone else expected, what everyone else thought.

Instead, I was much more like Louis, though I didn't recognize it then—always feeling myself the outsider, the one with the family, the childhood that wasn't quite right. Louis is constantly aware that his father is a banker from Brisbane, of his own Australian accent, of the ways that he does not fit into English society despite all his father's resources. I came from an alcoholic household, from free school lunches, and from a violent neighborhood. It is why Louis—and I—are so drawn to convention, to tradition, to routine. We like things to be predictable; we like to know where we are; we like the approval of others. It matters to us, that external validation. It makes us pompous and rigid, sometimes, this need to belong, this need to be right, to do things the right way. We are all strangers in a strange land, but some of us feel it more. Some of us are stranger than others. The strangeness motivates our need for camouflage.

It's Louis's sense of dislocation that draws him to authority figures. He reveres his schoolmasters, unlike his peers. The traditions, the rituals of school hold him together; they are the counterpoint to Louis's whirling mind. School holds me together as well. I know the rules; I know how to follow them; I know how to be a success. Louis finds his way beyond the confines of his circumstances, of his life, through learning, in the company of Virgil, of Plato, as I have done in the ideas and language of the sixteenth-century, though not brilliantly and not easily—with effort, with plodding

determination, and still, unlike Louis, not the top scholar.

At nineteen, I did not want to be Louis, did not even think about Louis. At nineteen, Jinny was my aspiration.

But this time through the novel, at nearly fifty, I found myself not as drawn to Jinny. Jinny does not settle, she does not attach herself to others. She is always running off to the next thing that attracts her attention, that promises sensory stimulation. She loves hats and dresses and wigs and gowns, the easy beauty, instead of ordinary things that one must struggle to appreciate, the rooftops and tarmac. She spends a great deal of time looking at herself, evaluating her own physical presence. She catches sight of herself in a reflection while in a London Tube station and remarks, "How solitary, how shrunk, how aged! I am no longer young. I am no longer part of the procession . . . I still move. I still live. But who will come if I signal?" While I recognize these meditations—witness the Avon deep moisturizing lotion and Neutrogena Rapid Wrinkle Repair on my bathroom counter—at nearly fifty, I am more impatient with the constant question: how do I look?

Now I am drawn to Susan, the maternity of her, her deep connection with nature, with the landscape: "I have had peaceful, productive years. I possess all that I see. I have grown trees from the seed. I have made ponds in which goldfish hide under the broad-leaved lilies. I have netted over strawberry beds and lettuce beds, and stitched the pears and plums into white bags to keep them safe from the wasps. I have seen my sons and daughters, once netted over like fruit in their cots, break the meshes and walk with me, taller than I am, casting shadows on the grass."

These nets, they are productive. They do

not stop at the self. They protect, they nurture, they save, and then they are meant to be ripped, and that's how we know that they've worked. Susan makes a home, she makes a life, she makes a family—the things I have always wanted to make, that I am still making, the things that I was not given in the beginning, in my childhood. Back then I survived. Now I live, and I have brought other beings into life: literally, a child, and figuratively, a marriage, a community, friendships, intellectual and creative exchanges.

And yet, Susan is not only one thing, not only the earthmother extraordinaire: "Yet sometimes," she says, "I am sick of natural happiness, and fruit growing, and children scattering the house with oars, guns, skulls, books won for prizes and other trophies. I am sick of the body, I am sick of my own craft, industry and cunning, of the unscrupulous ways of the mother who protects, who collects under her jealous eyes at one long table her own children, always her own." It has been a gift, and may become a curse when it is time for my child to leave home, that I have not yet tired of the activities and energies associated with mothering—the tennis camps, the friends' sleepovers, the craft projects, the school projects, and all their associated paraphernalia. But I do sicken of craft, of industry, of those times when I work to create an image of a stable household, a stable self, that looks more glorious from the outside than it feels from the inside. I suspect that those who do not know me well look at me and say: A perfect life. Some days it is a perfect life. Some days the craft, the industry, is for its own sake, for the pleasure that it gives to yank the weed, to bake the bread, to read the book, to write the poem. Those are the best days. But some days the appearance is not the

complete truth. Sometimes I am scrupulous; I remember to think through boundaries and weigh consequences of intervention in my daughter's life. Other times such scrupulosity is absent, and I protect out of instinct, out of self-preservation, protect the self-in-the-other in a way that can never be true between adults outside of the parent-child relationship.

Bernard describes Susan as the one subject to intense passions, the one who says "I hate, I love." I find my emotions take over more often during this second adolescence of menopause: anxiety, nostalgia, anger, and joy. I understand having both this feeling and that feeling, a contradiction held in tension but within the same vessel, the same person, the same identity. To both enjoy the work and be tired of the work. To feel the zing of solving problems, but not want to solve any more problems. To not be only ever one thing, but to have the baseline, the essence, to which one can return to remember oneself. To remember oneself as distinct, as apart from some other. To remember oneself as connected to the other, as the other's mother, or the other's lover, or the other's daughter, or the other's teacher. Woolf says, "I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am." There is an interpenetration of all the people I have known, all the people I have met in fiction, and all the people I have been.

When Bernard is in college he tries on different identities. He writes letters to a young woman and flings his coat as if he were Byron. He is Shelly, he is Hamlet, he is Napoleon. He tries on all these people. I tried them on too—tortured, melancholy poet; jealous lover; pretty southern California secretary; outraged feminist. As I age, I feel that imitation, that interpenetration, happening less and less. It may be that it

happens less. It may be that it happens just as often, and I simply don't perceive it, I'm not as open to it, I am used to myself in varied contexts by now. I don't often surprise myself by my choices, anymore.

There seem fewer choices to make. Neville, considering the past when all choices were open to them, in assessing the present says, "We have chosen now, or sometimes it seems the choice was made for us—a pair of tongs pinched us between the shoulders." Those unchosen tongs of the world—I am familiar with those. I did not choose my mother's alcoholism or her death. I did not choose the failure of my first marriage as a result of my spouse's bipolar disorder. I did not choose the sociopathic colleague who threatened to kill our department faculty members and meant it. I did not choose to be driven from my beloved home by a stalker. I did not choose the pain that has hounded me for the last twenty-four months, that has kept me hopping from doctor to surgeon to physical therapist to acupuncturist to grounding mats to a Kung Fu master's energy medicine. The hot tongs that press between shoulder blades, turn us this way and that.

And yet, right after this meditation, Neville declares, "I chose." I have chosen too—even in these circumstances—choices I have made in response, and choices I have made more actively: to remarry, to write, to learn, to devote my time and energy in some ways but not in others. Those choices are made, now. There are more to come, of course, but the field is not so open. I shall not become a physician or scientist or computer programmer or teen drummer in a rock band. I shall not become the parent of another child. I shall not become the free-spirited Jinny. Perhaps a benefit of middle age is that I no longer want to become her. I can recognize that is not really who I am.

I am a planner, like Louis. I am someone who flourishes in rootedness, especially in places, in nature, like Susan. I am an intellectual, and while I may become friendlier with my body, I suspect I will also always be uneasy with it.

Later on that same page, Neville captures something that makes me catch my breath: "love makes knots; love brutally tears them apart. I have been knotted; I have been torn apart." As I turn on the fulcrum of middle life, of fifty, it is the torn parts I feel most. Those places where I have been torn, places that will not be knotted together again, that will not somehow be made more beautiful for their weakness. Sometimes what has been worn through is simply worn through, and we can say little about it except that it once was. It is not always like the Japanese art of *kintsugi*, where broken pots are mended with gold, becoming more splendid with repair, fault lines gleaming and gorgeous. Sometimes there are only pot shards that tell us what once existed; sometimes even they are unrecognizable.

When there are veins of gold, they are habits, routines, the ordinary stuff of life that occasionally burst into awareness as joy, as love. Unloading the dishwasher. Doing the laundry. Mowing the lawn. Cooking the food. Offering the kind word, even when it will steal the energy one wants for oneself (and yes, sometimes kindness steals). Love as action, rather than as feeling. Love as action despite feeling.

Bernard cogently describes this rhythm of modern life, the rhythm that holds the world and ourselves together: "There is a sound like the knocking of railway trucks in a siding. That is the happy concatenation of one event following another in our lives. Knock, knock, knock. Must, must, must. Must go,

must sleep, must wake, must get up—sober, merciful word which we pretend to revile, which we press tight to our hearts, without which we should be undone."

We cannot fly on our own. But we occasionally ride the crest of the wave, briefly, briefly.

Must is not just a signpost of civilization, a means of society's oppression and imposition upon the individual's wild soul, though it is that too. Must is a support in the trough of the wave. Must is what gets us out of bed in the morning, what brings us back into the light of our relationships with loved ones and with strangers, until we actually want to be there. Desire is a fickle beast, and sometimes it needs to be prompted. Discipline is what does the prompting. Every famous writer's advice is the same: if you want to write, write. Sit down and do it. Every day if you can. Inspiration and genius, they show up when they have been invited by the structure of effort, when they can be sure they won't be turned away because they are demanding. Even then, though, they only show up when they feel like it. And that's not just artistic inspiration, that's inspiration to live, to be aware, to see and to be. The thing that deadens you is also the thing that saves you from being lost among the waves: gravity, energy, and the predictable laws of physics. We cannot fly on our own. But we occasionally ride the crest of the wave, briefly, briefly. ∞