

Taedong River Bridge

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Retreating, Walker's 8th Army torched whatever lay in its path, battered Pyongyang with rockets & mortars till the whole besieged city crumbled in flame. Blew up the granaries, too, & the bridges & roads, so that those who didn't freeze to death would be sure to die of starvation — vengeance against the Chinese Red Army & the peasant armies of North Korea for pushing them back to Inchon. The U.S. command shelling that city till nothing remained but that one standing bridge: tangle of girders with hardly a place to find footing & nothing to grasp as it swayed in the wind-driven sleet over those waters — Taedong River Bridge, the only way left, short of death, to cross out of Pyongyang. Ten thousand terrified souls swarming over its splintered ribs. On their backs, in their arms, whatever they owned or could carry. Women cradled their infants. Men strapped what they could to their shoulders. The crippled & dying & blind inching their way, for to slip — & hundreds of those fleeing slipped — was to vanish into the icy hell of that river. Then the ones who watched, horrified, would clutch one another & wail in that other language of theirs while they kept moving. What else could they do? For what it was worth, those who fell through saved the lives of those inching behind them, letting them know where not to step next.

Jerry, you saved my life
in much the same way. Now & again, in my mind, that awful black limo pulls up at the curb in front of our house back in Flatbush, & Henrietta, your mother, steps out, gaunt as death in that black cotton shawl, while I watch from an upstairs window. At which moment my own beloved mother slips into the room, lays a hand on my arm, & tells me quietly, lest I say the wrong thing when her dearest friend steps through the door, what she had hoped never to have to tell me at all: that you had been killed at the front. I was twelve. Forty years later I remain stunned. Now & again, something triggers it back & I drift out to Kelly Park & watch you fast-break downcourt — that long, floating jump from the corner. The swish of the net.

Jerry, I don't know you'd care,
but when my number came up for the next imperial blood bath, I gave my draft board the finger — for us both. And for every last terrified soul on both sides. I can't tell you how grieved I am still that you're gone. Or thank you enough for the warning: your death letting me know where I stand, who my real enemies are, what the heavy money had in store for me too. In a way, then, I owe you my life: more than anyone else, you were the one who showed me where not to step next — the one up ahead, in the bitter wind of the past, who fell through.