

Front Porch Review



Volume 6, April 2014

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Beginnings
- Alan Swyer

“Biggest crybaby in baseball history?” Phil Stern quizzed a bunch of fellow sportswriters at a dive bar in Sunrise, Arizona.

“A-Rod for sure,” offered Frank Kunich, downing his beer.

“No way!” protested Juan Lopez.

“Stop protecting guys whose names end in Z,” said Joe Grillo.

“Biggest mooch?” asked Stern, moving on in the hope of averting trouble.

“Tommy Lasorda hands down!” yelled heavyset Walt Ziobro.

“He that bad?” Kunich inquired.

“Why do you think his nickname is Crime?” Ziobro asked.

“I give up,” admitted Kunich.

“Crime doesn’t pay,” Ziobro bellowed.

As the guys around him laughed, Jimmy Lewis shook his head. “Can't we ever discuss something serious?”

“Like?” Kunich asked.

“Syria... Iraq...”

“They American League or National?” Ziobro asked with false innocence.

While the others chuckled, Stern waved at their waitress, then winced when, at the sound of his iPhone ringing, he peeked at the caller ID.

“Your editor?” whispered Grillo.

“War Department,” Stern replied softly before heading toward the rear exit.

“What's that mean?” Lopez wondered, watching Stern depart.

“His ex-” Grillo explained.

“What's he done now?” Stern asked as, phone in hand, he stepped outside and gazed at the starry March sky.

“Mikey's a good kid,” his ex-wife Julie said defensively.

“Right, what's a little grand theft auto? Want to tell me what's-what?”

“How about a simple I need you?”

“While I'm covering Spring training?”

“Phil, he's in the hospital.”

“W-what for?” mumbled Stern, taken aback.

“They think it's – ” Julie stammered.

“Yeah?”

“Some sort of nervous breakdown.”

Having left some vague mumbo-jumbo about family trouble on his editor's voicemail, Stern embarked upon the long, lonely, nocturnal drive back to southern California. All the while, his mind revved even faster than his Toyota's engine as he wrestled with a toxic mixture of doubt, worry, and fear.

It was easy for Stern to imagine his son, who had emerged from the womb breaking things, finding countless ways to infuriate. But he had trouble envisioning Mikey, whose energy seemed boundless, clinically depressed. Nor had Julie seemed the least bit willing – or able – to provide a clue as to what precipitated the crisis. Lacking insight, Stern drove westward, possessed, stopping only when necessary for gas, coffee, and a splash of water on his face.

Still sufficiently youthful-looking to be mistaken for a UCLA grad student thanks to her sun-bleached hair, Bob Marley t-shirt, and faded jeans, Julie was pacing nervously back and forth across the lobby of St. John's Hospital when in stepped a man clearly in need of a shower, a shave, and sleep.

“You look awful,” Julie said at the sight of Stern.

“Nice to see you, too. Do I get more info, or do I have to call the CIA?”

“He's been distant the last two or three months.”

“Nothing new there.”

“Not that you've been around to see.”

“Am I here to be a punching bag?”

“You're here for us to pull together and help our son.”

“For once?” Stern asked unhappily.

“I didn't say that,” Julie replied.

Stern took a deep breath, then spent a moment studying his ex-wife. “Tell me what I'm supposed to do.”

“First let's talk about what you shouldn't do. No judging, okay? That's the last thing he needs.”

Stern gritted his teeth, then nodded.

“And no playing investigative reporter or private eye,” Julie added. “Clear?”

“So what the hell *do* we do?”

“I like the *we*.”

“But you didn't answer.”

“For now we wait.”

“And then?”

“We provide support every way we can.” Julie stated clearly.

It was not until noon that Julie and Stern, warned that their son was heavily medicated, were permitted to go into his room, which had a view of the Santa Monica mountains.

Through glazed eyes, Mikey, barely fifteen, smiled from his bed when his mother entered, then winced at the realization that she was not alone.

“No ballgame today?” Mikey asked Stern groggily.

“Maybe I'd rather see you.”

“Do I know this guy?” Mikey joked softly.

”Need anything?” Julie asked.

When Mikey replied with a shrug, Stern spoke up. “Anything at all. Just name it.”

“Like playing catch? Or shooting baskets?” Mikey replied sarcastically.

"It's not like we never did any of that," Stern said defensively.

"Oh, yeah?" asked Mikey, closing his eyes as he rested his head on his pillow.

"Nothing like feeling welcome," Stern said to Julie as the two of them stepped into the elevator.

"He doesn't mean it."

"Right," Stern stated as they began their descent. "He just says it so I feel appreciated."

As they reached the lobby, Stern followed Julie. "So what now?" he asked.

"We're supposed to see the shrink in a little over an hour," Julie replied.

Stern's only response was a grimace.

The psychiatrist, to Stern's surprise, proved not to be the kind of nerdy guy he expected, but rather a tall Texan with a firm handshake. "How much do you know, for want of a better term, about Michael's recent affair?" he asked Julie and Stern.

"Absolutely nothing," Julie replied.

"Which doesn't surprise me," said Dr. Cowen.

"Meaning?" asked Stern warily.

"What I've learned — " Dr. Cowen began.

"Is?" Stern asked when the psychiatrist hesitated.

"That Michael was, shall we say, involved with a teacher."

"Define 'involved,'" Stern insisted.

"Intimately," Dr. Cowen said softly.

As Julie bowed her head, Stern exploded. "You telling me some guy was — "

"No," said Dr. Cowen as calmly as possible.

"Then what in hell *are* you saying?" Stern yelled despite Julie's efforts to keep him from tearing the room apart.

"A female teacher. From what we gather, one who's young and quite attractive."

"B-but —"

"Our understanding," the psychiatrist went on, "is that for quite some time Michael reveled in the situation — "

"Jesus!" Stern gasped.

"Until — "

"Until what?" Julie asked when again Dr. Cowen hesitated.

"She started talking about the two of them running away."

"Sonofabitch!" Stern exclaimed.

"But the breakdown only came about — "

"Yes?" asked Julie.

"When words risked becoming a reality," explained Dr. Cowen.

"Who is she?" Stern demanded.

"That's not pertinent just now."

"To me it is!"

"The authorities have been notified," the psychiatrist stated forcefully. "Besides — "

“Yeah?”

“It's your son who needs every bit of your attention,” said Dr. Cowen.

Walking in silence from the psychiatrist's office toward the elevators, Julie stopped suddenly and faced Stern. “Don't even think about it,” she said firmly.

“What?”

“Going after her.”

“How do you know what's on my mind?”

“Because I know you,” Julie stated. “Anger's the last thing Mikey needs.”

“So what should I do?”

“Be a father first and foremost.”

“Instead of?”

Julie chose not to answer.

“I took an official leave of absence,” Stern announced to Julie over dinner that evening at a Cuban place in Culver City. “That make you happy?”

“This is not about me,” Julie replied.

“You know, it's the first time I've ever done anything like that.”

“Want me to buy you a trophy?”

“It's not like I'm not the worst parent.”

Julie frowned. “This is about the present, not the past.”

“I'm not sure how I'm supposed to take that,” Stern said, picking at some fried platanos.

“What I got from Cowen is that Mikey needs to learn – or re-learn – how to trust.”

“And you believe that guy knows what he's doing?”

“Better than you?” Julie asked. “For sure.”

After three days of awkward solo visits to Mikey's hospital room, once he and Julie had decided to divide time with their son into shifts, Stern was greatly relieved when Mikey was cleared to get dressed and take accompanied walks around the grounds.

Though there was still silence after uncertain attempts of chit-chat, somehow there was less awkwardness – and far less fidgeting – when the two of them were outside strolling. Still, Stern was surprised, late one sunny morning, when Mikey stopped suddenly and faced him.

“You don't really have to babysit,” Mikey said

“I don't do anything that I don't have to.”

“You mean you're not doing this 'cause you were told to?”

“What if I tell you I'm doing it 'cause I want to?”

“I'd say you're full of shit,” Mikey said.

“Think you're the first to say that?” Stern asked. “Or the only one? I can show you a zillion e-mails from guys who think they know sports – and life – better than I do. Look, I'll stop coming if you want.”

“I didn't say that.”

Father and son studied each other closely, then Stern smiled. “Think maybe it's time for a jail break?” he asked.

“Can I get that in English?”

“The hospital food as gross as it looks?”

“Worse.”

“Then let's hit that Thai place down the block.”

Four days later, Mikey, still medicated and expected to keep up twice weekly psychiatric sessions, moved back into the cottage in Mar Vista that Julie kept when her marriage to Stern collapsed.

Julie chauffeured for the Tuesday and Thursday counseling sessions, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays became Stern's days with Mikey, while weekends were divided on a come-whatever, come-what-may basis. Initially Stern's behavior was part camp counselor and part tour guide as he strained to organize official outings to places which held little interest for Mikey and even less for himself. It was far better, he ultimately deduced, for the two of them to amble along Ocean Front Walk in Venice or to hike the woodsy paths above a street north of Sunset called Westridge. Or simply to hang out over lunch at a taco joint, an Ethiopian place, or one of local Indian buffets.

Inevitably, what began as uncomfortable evolved into a pleasant, unforced, and natural relationship. So it was over bowls of gelato one afternoon at a little place on Washington Boulevard that Mikey brought up a subject conspicuously and carefully avoided. “That thing with the teacher —,” he began somewhat uneasily. “How come you never ask about it?”

“How many reasons do you want?”

“How many are there?”

“First of all,” said Stern, “the shrink said not to. Then your mom said not to. And then —”

“Yeah?”

“There was a part of me that would rather —”

“Take the law into your own hands?” Mikey asked when Stern failed to finish his sentence.

Stern responded with a grim nod.

“Make you feel better if I tell you that for a while — a long while — I really liked it?” Mikey asked.

Stern shrugged.

“But so that now, there's no need to worry,” Mikey added.

“About?”

“Me jumping off a bridge or doing something stupid.”

“That's comforting,” Stern said.

“I may be messed up,” Mikey added. “But I'm not crazy.”

“So rumor has it that you guys have been talking,” Julie said the next day when she and Stern met for coffee while Mikey was seeing Dr. Cowen. “Learn anything?”

“For one thing,” replied Stern wryly. “he was getting more than me.”

“Make that both of us put together.”

“So what's our next step?”

“These things take time.”

“Which I don't have.”

“What's that mean?”

“My editor's on my case.”

“To go back to work?” Julie asked.

“Or win the lottery,” Stern said.

Julie eyed her ex- closely, then finally broke the silence. “You okay?”

“I'm peachy,” Stern replied, not bothering to explain that to deal with his ever-mounting frustrations he got plastered the night before as well as the night before that. Or that he had spent both mornings that followed, once the pounding in his head started to subside, trying to find out if the teacher who had been shacking up with Mikey was being prosecuted.

“With the Dodgers coming back to town, I'm going to have to start covering ball games,” Stern told Mikey over lunch the following day.

“Want me to come sometime?” Mikey asked.

“To sit and watch something you hate?”

“Who says I hate baseball?”

“You never talk about it. Or read my columns.”

“Says who?”

“You read 'em?”

“Sometimes at breakfast, sometimes online at school.”

Stunned, Stern gaped at Mikey for a moment. “So tell me,” he said at last. “You like 'em?”

“For the most part.”

“What's that mean?”

“Once in a while you get a little... what's that term?... self-important.”

“Anything else while we're at it?”

“Sometimes when you think you're funny — ”

“I'm not?”

“Not as much as you think.”

Stern took a deep breath. “How did I wind up with such a smart kid?”

“Must be from Mom's side of the family,” Mikey replied, drawing a playful frown from Stern.

Then both of them laughed.

Though Stern was apprehensive the first evening he brought his son into the press box at a Dodger game, Mikey disarmed him first with his affability while being introduced to the other writers, then with his appreciation of the game. But when, after countless pitching changes and other timeouts, plus a near brawl and a couple of lengthy disputes with umpires, Stern realized how late it was getting, he turned to Mikey. “I guess we better blow out of here,” he said.

“But it's only the seventh — ”

“I promised your Mom I'd get you back early. C'mon, we'll listen to the rest of the game in the car.”

“But I thought we were going into the clubhouse afterward so you could do an interview or two.”

“I've got a better idea.”

“What's that?”

“I'll tell you when we get to your Mom's.”

After greeting Julie, father and son went quickly into Mikey's room, where Mikey sat on his bed while Stern grabbed the desk chair.

“Who was the player of the game?” Stern asked.

“Kershaw.”

“Okay, Clayton. Let's talk about your preparation.”

“What?”

“So you can tell me about the game you pitched.” To Mikey's surprise, Stern pulled out a tape recorder and turned it on. “What was the key to your dominance tonight?”

“He was getting ahead of hitters and — ”

“Whoa!” said Stern, holding up a hand to stop his son. “I don't want you to tell me *about* him. I want you to *be* him.”

“You're kidding.”

“Says who? Okay let's start again. What was the key to your performance?”

“I-I was getting ahead of the hitters,” Mikey said awkwardly.

“And?”

“Changing speeds to keep 'em off balance,” Mikey replied, starting to grow more comfortable and confident.

“And if there's one difference between you now and you when you first got called up from the minors, what is it?”

“Making the batters mis-hit instead of always trying to make 'em swing and miss,” Mikey said proudly.

Thanks to what he perceived as a breakthrough, Stern felt little need to stop at a gin mill on the way home and even less to hit the bottle once he got to his apartment. His rare sense of elation carried through the night, then into the next morning as he dressed for what he hoped would be another good time with his son. So he was completely ill-prepared for the dyspeptic way in which Mikey greeted him. “Know what?” Mikey said after half-opening the door. “Let's just cool it with the trips and outings.”

“H-how come?”

“Because we both know it'll never last.”

“What're you talking about?”

“I don't know if this is supposed to be therapy. Or guilt. Or whatever. But no way it'll go on.”

“Why not?”

“Because you're you,” Mikey said sadly. “And I'm me.”

“Maybe things can change.”

“And maybe it'll snow on the Fourth of July,” Mikey replied. “Look, I'm sorry, but —”

“What about last night?” Stern asked. “It wasn't fun?”

“That's the problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“The more fun I have, the more it's gonna hurt once it's gone.”

“But what if — ?”

“Hear what they say about *if*?” Mikey interrupted. “If my aunt had balls, she'd be my uncle.”

Dejected, Stern walked slowly toward his car, then climbed in behind the wheel. But instead of turning the key, he sat there thinking. Ever so slowly he got out of the Toyota and trudged back toward the cottage that was once not just Julie's but his as well. A moment later, he rang the bell. “Okay, I was a rotten father,” Stern said when Mikey opened the door. “Self-absorbed, resentful, and much too full of myself.”

“According to Mom, you also sat with me for days when I was little and got really sick,” Mikey said softly.

“Well — ”

“And even though I don't have much memory of it, I think you did the same thing when I broke my leg skateboarding.”

“So maybe I wasn't all bad.”

“Or all good,” Mikey added.

“Okay, so I'm not easy.”

“And know what? Neither am I.”

“Then maybe both of us have some growing up to do. But what I'd really like — and if you say no, I'll get it — is a second chance. Think that's possible?”

Mikey studied his father for a moment that felt to Stern like an eternity. “I-I don't know,” he finally said.

“Then think about it. Okay?”

Mikey hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

“I'm not asking for promises,” Stern said. “Or making any. And who knows? I may just screw up worse than ever. But if you're game, I'd love to give it a try.”

“What's next? Shooting baskets or playing catch?”

“I can think of worse things,” Stern said.

“Know what? Me, too.”

Though father and son understood that both the odds and the past were against them, they hugged.

Brookside
- Felice Aull

Brookside, we had requested,
and now, weeks later,
we lounge in shade, mesmerized
by the flowing stream, its tinted clarity,
gurgling swoosh of its dart
over, between, stones and twigs.
Engulfed in summer heat
we linger, cooled by water's vapor.
Nearby the hills project a blur
of aspen, birch, spruce, maple,
bounding our space in silence.
The brook is at our feet
burbling its one-way flow
and as our holiday suspends routine
this bit of stream
is like our other life
that presses forward, forward
beyond our field of vision.

Aaron at Sunset

- Christopher Woods



Constancy of Sunday
- Davide Trame

Ah, the strolling.
On the stones of Venice,
a step and a stop, a step and a stop.
Strolling while
assessing whatever, this day and age...
And the old feeling,
never sure how pleasant,
of having nothing to do,
of just having to wait and cruise
through winter and its already
slanting light at noon.
You buy the newspaper
and put it into your coat pocket.
Rather absentmindedly you listen
to the scattered footsteps
by the many closed shops,
to the leisurely air's range,
to a harkening and lingering that never change.

To what extent can digressing go?
Being never sure
when morning becomes afternoon.
But let me expand
into any whimsical demand,
let me redress Prufrock,
I want to ransom his redundancy,
he has always been here, by me,
he is the master of strolling,
it might sound obvious but let me say
that ghosts never die,
they loom on the canal in the low tide
and are subtly glad of persevering
along the skewers of light,
on the old, thin Venetian glass,
on the watercolor of the window panes
that cast sunbeams onto whatever stage...
like words, like words,
that have always strolled beyond the body
and always loved a flourish out of control,
spacing in this blue hole
and distilling the permanent soul,
in tapping echoes of soles,
on this day.

Ditch the Keyboard, Pick Up a Pen - Phyllis Woloshin

I have a roll of lace hand-made by my grandmother. Every time I touch it, my hand is touching hers. I also keep letters from my husband; his handwriting was quick, tight and sloppy. When I look at those letters, I am in touch with who we were and what we dreamt of for ourselves. A modern-day text message doesn't compare. An e-mail peppered with emoticons, while cute, doesn't do it for me either.

Cursive writing now joins the ranks of other disappeared things: blacksmiths, barber/surgeons, monks writing illuminated manuscripts after Guttenberg's invention, pay phones, wall-mounted pencil sharpeners, and ink. Script is giving way to keyboards, and therein lies the tale.

My excitement was palpable on my first day of school. I already knew how to print my name, and I did it endlessly. True, some of my letters were sideways, some backward, but I felt like such a big girl. My name was important to me, and I wanted to print it beautifully. I was ready.

I could draw stick figures with five fingers on the end of each arm stump, eyelashes and eyebrows and even some toes. Educators call this "reading readiness." Being able to discern details such as eyelashes and digits signaled I could see the differences between "c" and "e" and "p" and "b" and so on.

We carried boxes containing our work tools: several yellow #2 pencils with erasers quickly rubbed away, a separate eraser, and a little pencil sharpener with which we shaved our pencils into nubs in search of a perfect point. In our copybooks we reproduced the abc's in big (uniscule) and eventually in small (miniscule) letters and were graded on neatness and legibility. Eraser bunnies appeared on tables, chairs, clothes. In fact we used up erasers much faster than we ran out of lead. Art gum erasers made the best mess. Practicing taught us to delay gratification, to focus, and some of us even learned patience. Some never learned to print neatly so they wrote arithmetic and such until medical schools came searching specifically for them many years later.

Copybooks were handed out in class, were ordinary in our landscape, and were available to the poor as well as to the wealthy when brass plate engraving made them cheap to reproduce. Prior to that, writing was the domain of the specialist, particularly those who worked in British and American industry. They wrote in one common script, Spenserian. The affordability and availability of copybooks was democratizing. Parchment was no longer required for writing, and everyone was put into reading classes. Reading and writing leveled the playing field.

It may seem a small thing but my school had lots of poor kids. We got free milk every day and hardboiled eggs and cheese at 10:00 every morning. They called it "Federal Subsidies." I didn't like the cheese and still don't eat it. Along with the food handouts we also received free pencils and copybooks.

I couldn't wait for third grade. There I would learn to write my name. This involved a new set of symbols – a new language. What was important to me was, as soon as I could write my name, I could get my own library card, so I was diligent. Script required learning two skills: how to write with an ink pen and how to join the letters to make words. Cursive is faster than printing because it links letters without leaving the paper, and it economizes on the amount of paper used. I found it hard to learn.

Recent studies on imaging reveal that the parts of the brain used for storage and retrieval of memory light up during this kind of learning. My brain hurt trying to remember the little “p” and the big “P”. The little “f” and the big “F” were a total mystery. Adults suffering from memory loss due to aging show significant recovery when they learn new languages and their alphabets. But third graders don’t have Alzheimer’s. It seemed as if we were learning a new alphabet every two years. Our only physical problems were the big, black ink bumps that formed on our middle fingers while we drew the row upon row of concentric circles the Palmer Method required of us.

This new language, cursive, meant a new set of tools: a nib known to us as a penny point, a wooden holder and ink in my very own inkwell in my desk. American classrooms in the ‘40’s had inkwells in the right hand corner of each desk. The ink delivery system consisted of ‘ink boys’ whose job it was to fill the wells each morning from a glass bottle about the size of a gallon of milk. That the teacher had the nerve to appoint any third-graders to pour permanent ink into an inch-and-a-half-sized hole for thirty desks each morning is still beyond comprehension. Yet they learned how to do it and thereby refined their space and depth perception. I can’t recall even one drop of ink every hitting anything but its intended destination. They had built-in bombsights accurate for the task.

My teacher, Mrs. Whitehead, made amazing capital W’s. Hers started like a capital “I” and went up and over from there. It took me almost a year to learn Mrs. Whitehead’s “W.” I had to be careful how much I pressed on the nib going down and of the amount of pressure to release on the up strokes. Even though my last name began with an “L” it was worth it. I eventually married a man whose last name began with a “W.” Maybe that was one of my requirements for a future husband.

We learned to write with penny point nibs and wooden penholders. The point ended in a curved shaft somewhat like a fingernail that fit perfectly into a dug-out ridge made to hold the point. This formed the entire writing implement. On cheap paper the point, split in the center with a small hole in the center as the ink reservoir, would catch and produce an ink splatter on the line just written, or on me. Ballpoint pens were not yet invented, so the pressure applied to the point had to be controlled to avoid splatter and/or nib breakage.

Upward strokes were trickier. That was when most of the splatters happened. Press too hard and the point would flair open too far, and one side of the metal nib would bend backwards, get caught on the paper and break. When the pen point, the pen holder, the ink and the paper cooperated with the writer, leaving no snags, no splashes, and no holes, a glorious symphony of feelings was accomplished. Each letter formed perfectly, and the letters formed words, each made without once leaving the paper until the final upswing on the final letter of the word was completed. That feeling wasn’t replicated when I typed on my IBM Selectric; a faster, more efficient way to get the words on paper but not nearly as emotionally satisfying.

I was getting fewer and fewer embroidery flowers sewn over the permanent ink splotches on my dresses. What was really happening was that my brain was getting messages from these various hand pressures. It was reacting to vision and sensation, movement and pressure as a unit. I was learning spacing and positioning. The focus on the connection of touch and hand movement with brain function is called “Haptics.” No

keyboard presents the brain with these complex tasks. The letter is completed in a single press of a key.

My best friend, Lois, made the most luscious, well-rounded bottoms on her little “w’s.” Her handwriting perfectly mimicked the samples given in our workbooks. My handwriting was totally different. While hers was legible, nothing was added – no flourishes, nothing individual in her execution. My signature, however, was slanted with romantic flourishes and frills. Not trite little hearts to dot the “I” kind of frill. I’m talking penmanship. Eventually, with practice, my signature was worthy of the Declaration of Independence. John Hancock would have kvelled over my John Hancock! Handwriting became an expression of self, of individuality. A person’s handwriting is as unique and identifiable as a fingerprint.

My last name began with an L. What a curvaceous beauty. No flags for the capital “L.” Just two lovely loops on top of one another separated by a downward pass. At first I scrawled pages of attached L’s. I recently learned how to photograph an image of my signature and append it with a keystroke to my e-mail. The entire emotional investment in writing my name vanished when I acquired that technological skill. No doubt about it, it saves time – but does it really personalize my e-mails?

Dip pens gave way to fountain pens holding their own ink supplies; the plunger gave way to the screw-lever which gave way to the cartridge. Names such as Pelikan, Waterman, Schaeffer, Parker come to mind. Having a small hand, I became very particular about selecting the pens I used. It had to have a certain heft, a certain feel to be the right one. I still own several pen holders which I use in my small business addressing Bar Mitzvah and wedding invitations. Fountain pens with their fixed nibs became the preferred gift for special occasions. Prices soured upwards of \$300 for a Mont Blanc with a gold-tipped fixed nib and a white flower displayed on top of a black shaft.

Ultimately the fountain pen bowed to the more efficient, more economical ball point pen, and the idea of a “personal” pen gave way to the twenty-five cent ball point. My favorite is the Office Max TUL gel point. But even the TUL for all its market research doesn’t compare with my lady’s Mont Blanc. Fountain pens are personal as is handwriting. The right fountain pen is like a piece of sentimental jewelry endowed with its own jujū when well-suited to its owner.

I have changed keyboards for my Mac twice to get a good feel and to get a heavy enough touch not to respond to the two numb, draggy fingers age has given me. I applaud the ease with which my family communicates face-to-face via cell phones and the pictures I receive through Facebook. I am also aware that I have avoided including various researches showing that Finnish boys addicted to computer games learn English faster than those who do not indulge. More to the point, I just received an invitation to my granddaughter’s wedding in the mail. On it she included a handwritten note. It will go into the box with my grandmother’s lace, my husband’s letters and the Big Red Parker pen my grandfather gave me a long, long time ago.

Golden

- Kenneth Gurney

The woman who swims across the sky,
breast strokes toward the equator.

She swims with clouds wrapped about her ankles
like strands of seaweed.

Planes crisscross contrails beneath her.
Birds migrating south use her as a beacon.

The jet stream racing out of industrial nations
stinks with an unnatural, introduced quality.

She swims so high she appears to be a dot
against a blue so bright it hurts your eyes to look.

Some say she swims to forget a lost lover.
Some say she swims to expedite rapture.

High altitude weather balloons appear as buoys to her.
She touches the equator, tumble turns,

and swims north toward the stress
of deodorants and reality TV and car park traffic.

She speaks in rainfall, in torrents, in water
from faucets filling glasses for children's bedtime.

She returns as a woman who looks like every man's lover.
She returns as a woman who looks like every woman's sister.

She returns to the earth as the morning dew.
She returns to the earth as both ends of the rainbow.

Tangential Circles

- Richard Berns



Roseman Bridge

- Flo Hayes



Roseman Bridge spans Middle River, eight miles west and south of Winterset, Iowa, and was built in 1883 by H. Benton Jones. It is a flat-topped bridge 106 feet long using a Town/Queen Lattice truss support secured with iron bolts. The Bridge has never been moved from its current location and was renovated in 1992 for \$152,515 with help from a Federal Restoration grant.

Roseman Bridge gained fame as a 'haunted' bridge in 1892. A posse was trying to capture a county jail escapee hiding inside the bridge. In the gathering darkness the scuffle provided the escapee an opportunity to disappear. The confused posse returned to town empty-handed. It was later said that fishermen around the bridge often heard wild laughter assumed to emanate from the escaped man.

In 1995 the Roseman Bridge was featured in the movie *The Bridges of Madison County*. The southwest side of the bridge is where Francesca (Meryl Streep) tacked her note to Robert (Clint Eastwood) telling him to come for supper "anytime the white moths fly." You can see the little holes where she, and others after her, placed their love notes.

The bridge had been renovated and painted a bright red just before the company came to film. Clint, as director, wanted the bridge to look old and in disrepair and devised a plan to return the bridge to its former look. The crew mixed powdered milk, Karo syrup and another ingredient to paint the bridges that would be used in the film. After the paint was dry, a blow drier was used to crack the paint and make it curl and peel, adding to the weathered look. A few of the boards were also removed from the sides. The county was assured that, after a few rains, the mixture would wash off restoring the bright red color. However, a number of rains did not wash off the weathered look, and workmen had to come back and repaint the three bridges used in the filming.

Latitude: 41.29276955352782

Longitude: -94.14977431297302

Is beauty skin deep?
- Lois Greene Stone

Currently Madison Avenue focuses on our skin. Under halogen lights or beside flickering candles, perfection only needs cosmetics advertisers assert. No matter that health-tip provider Dr. Dean Edel was onscreen February 5, 2001, saying that moisturizers do not get absorbed, we can ignore him; he's telling fact, and ads sell magic.

A major brand mailed a promotional flyer informing me of its product's: "...intelligence. Quickest. Simplest. Best." Saying "best" is a common attention-getting device although no one believes it anymore since we hear it so often. And how could a vial of liquid have "intelligence?" I read the leaflet's Moisture-on-Call hype: "What skin did once, it can do again... unique new cream reminds skin of how it used to behave." I wondered why the people who regulate cosmetics didn't demand those sentences be removed. Then I remembered that there isn't a cosmetics regulator.

Supermarket shelves have moisturizers lined up. I'm encouraged to buy a product with alpha hydroxyl which "...works three ways to reveal supple, healthy-looking skin." There are printed guarantees stating unused portions may be returned if not "fully satisfied." A competitor's plastic bottle, next on the shelf, tells me it has a nutrient enriched with vitamins and antioxidants; this lotion will "heal" and "penetrate" and is non-comedogenic. But an adjacent tall bottle, still another label, insists its contents will heal and protect with the same formula "...of more expensive brands for less" plus actually "...prevent dry skin from coming back." That's quite a statement for water, mineral oil, stearic acid, glycerin, petrolatum, triethanolamine, magnesium aluminum silicate, glyceryl stearate, dimethicone, carboner, methylparaben, DMDM hydantoin, aloe barbadensis, and tetrasocium EDTA. A little Norwegian-formula squeeze tube standing cap-side down has fewer ingredients yet notes a dab will give results. Has anyone challenged these guarantees because dry skin came back, younger looks didn't happen, a healthy glow failed to appear, and so forth? Perhaps "guarantee" is like "best." so over-used we hardly pay attention to it.

Department store magic isn't in an aisle where moisturizers compete with ankle socks, razors, fruits and vegetables. A young woman in a pink smock approached me with a sample of "anti-gravity" cream. Politely, I mentioned that such a thing cannot exist but she refuted my comment with a memorized speech. With cosmetics centered in the main aisle and therefore passed whether trying to get to dresses, men's, infant's, sleepwear, or shoes, it's hard to circumvent the sellers of such wares.

My skin used to be young, tight, unblemished; it looked just fine once my newborn covering was cleaned off. Sun exposure, chemical pollution, injury scars, aging altered its composition. I'd love to stand before a mirror and remind my skin that it once had elasticity, freckles were foreign, and wrinkles were cute from giggling too much. Nothing can bring back puberty's pimples, a firm defined neck and jawline, creases which vanish as soon as scowling at someone stops. Skin can't be reminded "how it used to behave," frogs don't turn into princes, Rapunzel's hair can't be climbed, magic wands won't make diseases disappear. Even wishing hard can't make things happen.

What restaurant advertises stale bread, spoiled fish, Mad Cow meat, sour milk, limp salad, cheapest ingredients available? Why, then, the need for ad copy superlatives which camouflage the purpose of products? Maybe it's because you believe the hype and buy them?

How about learning what really makes your skin glow: sleep, exercise, diet. Chances are

with your knowledge of advertising's superlative est syndrome, you'll spend less money, have fewer bottles of magic around, and will become a sharp consumer.

In your heart and soul you know that beauty is skin deep. So work on the real radiance which will show in your daily living: take the best values your religion has taught you and live accordingly. Can you be your brother's keeper and reach out to someone regardless of color or creed? Can you do to another what you'd want from a relationship? Can you not envy or cheat or steal even if the theft is just an answer on a test or a resume? The glow our skin might show, even with blemishes reminding us that time alters our chronological existence, is from taking the gift of life and treasuring it.

Previously published in The Jewish Press, 2001

Life Among City Deer
- Michael Maul

They are resilient spirits, these city deer,
Forever trapped here between
native people who moved out,
And HOAs who moved in.

Once stealthy shadows on forest floors,
City deer now stop to visit,
Pausing between bird bath and baby pool,
To see the children off to school.

Yet between the horns and hooves
there is the ancient magic still
of hold-over beings
that stops us in our tracks.

Sometimes from places deep within
I think of swapping lives with them
to snort out mirrored clouds of smoke,
or don buckskin, winter-thick
and blood-warm across my back.

I could live inside their habitat,
in the wild patch behind my lot,
untouched save for distant motor whines and tower lines;
there learn to low, in deep grass,
and to feed among the tender vines.

Ancestors once etched graceful lines –
fluid forms in soot and coal – of running deer.
Some with the shadow of a single man,
hunter perhaps, but member maybe of a hybrid herd.

That could be who I am.
But would they trade
their deer life to me,
for one day, or not at all?

Maybe they already tried and left our track, far back,
before evolving on to something more.
Done with us now, but living near to not forget
how far they've come, or little things they once found dear,

which would require daily monitoring

through impossibly black convex eyes,
and unfathomable understanding.

Mother and Child
- Anne Whitehouse

A gray mid-March day:
the bare branches lean
across the blank sky.
All colors moved indoors

where my daughter and I
play with her toys
laid out on the rug:
rattles, dolls, and trucks,

nesting plastic bowls,
a flock of yellow ducks.
Shakily she stands,
her tongue darting like a snake's

between her pink gums,
she smiles, claps her hands,
and bangs the shell table
made by Great-grandpa

of rare wormy chestnut.
Its submarine treasures
are sealed under glass.
Her palms leave sticky smears.

She reaches for my face,
her hands stroke my ears
and clasp round my neck,
her cheek against my skin.

I breathe her mild scent,
I take it all in.
My baby pulls me hard,
she is so insistent.

She turns to press
her forehead against mine,
and the world seems to shrink
as if it held just us,

a game that lovers play.
Did babies play it first?
Now in my arms she lies,

her mouth at my breast,

a soft, avid pump.

She clutches me, and then

relaxes into sleep.

Night falls. The minutes spin

away in the dark.

Now I'm forgetting this;

I must have dozed off, too.

She sucks in dreamy bliss,

as her sweat gilds my arm:

matted hair, cradled head.

Love flows in me like a

river in a muddy bed

that roars around stones

shedding mist and spray,

and swells to meet the sea,

forever carried away.

Ephemeral baby

whose growth will replace you,

shadow and memory

till time will erase you,

To show you as you were,

my quicksilver daughter,

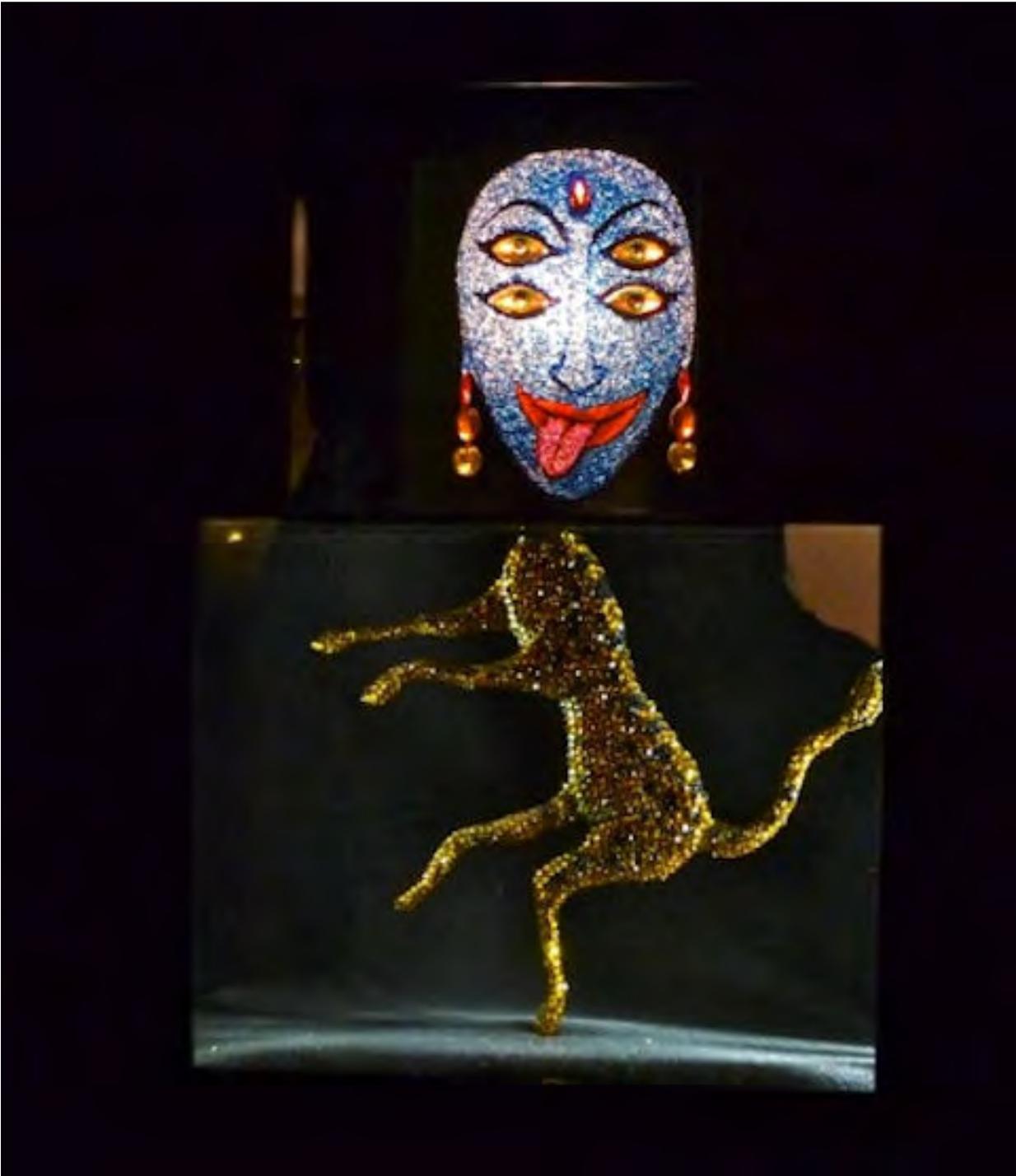
I fix you on this page:

Claire, eight months of age.

All That Glitters

- Joseph Glaser







Man In Blue Nail Polish
- Pamela Blake

He stands before the class, so young,
hands trembling,
morphed from the *poetic jailbait*
of his resume photo
to *Professorial*,
via buzz cut and a pair of glasses.

Under Southern courtesy
a wild energy moves along thin wires,
and plays behind his eyes.
We gaze across the great unknown,
each underestimating the other.

Defensive boundaries are set
to protect the creative innocent,
an intellectual platform put in place,
packets of poetry dispersed:
child's play will be the means.

We will, he hopes, unloose ourselves,
and wander in the New.
He is wearing deep blue nail polish,
first clue in the scavenger hunt of
personal revelations.

We will follow his enthusiasm gladly,
week by week, becoming bolder as we can
Safe in the nest of his construction
we expand and contract
like the belly of a young animal.

The end emerges from the beginning.
He wears his heart on his sleeve,
it slowly bleeding out,
such is the nature of his gift.

In another life, away from us,
he is pinballin' in the stratosphere, back flipping
off Mount Everest, leaping for the Eternal;
beautiful master of words.

Ardently maneuvering the
forked path to Salvation in this life,

he says: *That is so beautiful!*
And, *groovy.*

Real Time
- Ray Scanlon

Movies allow us to perceive discrete static slices of time as a continuous flow, an artifice in which our brain conspires. Slow motion, ubiquitous in sports television, expands minuscule pieces of time to a more humanly perceptible span, just as time lapse photography compresses long periods. The camera is a time machine of sorts, and not just in the sense of retrieving and refreshing old memories.

Digital technology makes it orders of magnitude easier to create, store, disseminate, and find video. We have a virtually infinite supply of reeking video offal in this age of YouTube; Newton Minow's "vast wasteland" of 1961 television pales. Yet the competent can also use digital tools to create a corresponding plethora of compelling, even breathtaking, video. The Gregory Wilson/National Geographic video, *Cheetahs on the Edge*, is such a specimen, an antidote to the usual YouTube cute kittens and grotesquerie, an appropriate and not at all flashy application of technology, a sign of hope that the power of the Internet can do more than make us stupid.

In *Cheetahs* a slow-motion camera serves as an anti-gravity device as well as a time machine; by definition it lies, and we revel in it. In life we see a flash of long, lean, muscular legs, a hint of amazing power. Through the lying camera we see the cheetah glide through a world where the clocks are slower by a factor of 50%, and there's only enough gravity to keep us from flying off into space. We see everything: a stride that just won't quit, terrifying intensity, and grace that intoxicates.

This example reinforces my appreciation of slow motion over time lapse. You may well guess that I sympathize with the school of thought which holds that the typical modern attention span is a disgrace. I suspect that recalcitrance in the face of speed is the natural effect of a phlegmatic personality, but I just don't think there's much that needs to be speeded up, including major league baseball.

Sometimes I like to give my attention span sanctimony full rein, so I deliberately indulge in events the benighted consider insufferably long and boring. From the vantage point of a grand porch looking west over a valley toward the Catskills, the widest porch on which it's ever been my pleasure to park my sorry butt, my niece and I are going to spend an hour of our vacation watching the sun set. We have only our unaided perception, with no artificial compression or expansion of time. This is not a movie.

This evening my grandchildren, their mother, and Gram are in our resort's gift shop. The porch is not crowded, so we can reasonably expect, if not solitude, some calm. The resort's motto, after all, is "slowly and quietly, please." Even at our modest altitude the horizon extends halfway to forever. The color palette is muted, no gaudy spectacle, just pastels merging into each other barely fast enough to be noticeable. As the sun recedes, the varied greys of stacked Catskill ridges fade to a single black silhouette, and in the valley points of sodium light prick the darkness. There is no flat-screen TV wide enough, nor hand-held device smart enough, to capture the essence of this. With the safe, well-lit comfort of the hotel at our backs, our hearts are easy; the night holds no terrors.

But tribulation does arrive in the form of an extended family encroaching upon us on our left. Loud, rapid voices betray elevated spirits. They don't strike us as ordinarily low-key, though, and one guy in particular, the loudest, fails to show the proper reverence in the face of natural grandeur, and just won't shut up. I can't close my ears like I close my eyes, and I

unwillingly eavesdrop on inane family minutiae. They're here because they've attended a wedding. The man inflicts some sort of stomach-tickling child abuse he calls "horsey bites" on a youngster protesting in full voice, and delivers to all in earshot a heinous load of contemptible braggadocio about his intimate familiarity and fearless dealings with the putative water moccasins which frequent his neighborhood.

Soon my niece and I can't help diverting precious brain resources away from the horizon to plot a tragic accident for this bozo. Maybe a lingering thunderbolt from earlier storms will strike him down. Maybe the porcupine we saw in the parking lot will savage him and deliver us from this sonic nightmare. Our greed for an undisturbed sunset idyll has driven us to this alarming extremity. Soon enough, though, my bile ebbs, and I soften. A good wedding excuses a lot of exuberance. I reflect on recent weddings I've partaken of and find some fellow-feeling despite myself. Perhaps, I think, there is sunset enough for us all.

Previously published in *Gifts from a Winter Dying Unlamented*, February, 2014

The Chair
- Edee Lemonier

It sits in the corner unused. Anjanette Guthrie's daughters come, want her to get rid of it. An eyesore, they say. Matches nothing. But it was his chair: tattered, ripped, faintly tinged with the sweet burl of Sir Walter Raleigh, barely perceptible now that he's been gone eighteen years. If she curls her small, frail frame just right, she feels John's arms, strong to the end, holding her. Lean in and press her face against the back, and she feels his hands, calloused by time, gently caressing her cheeks.

She hears her daughters upstairs. *They sound like chickens clucking away up there, plotting to get me out of my house and into a "home," one stick of furniture at a time. Good luck, ladies, good luck.* She doesn't say it out loud – they might accuse her of talking to herself in a fit of dementia, further proof she can't be left alone.

They never really talked about it with her, only between themselves, then softly informed Anjanette of their decision.

"We've been thinking," Marjean said. "This house is a bit big for you to rattle around in alone, don't you think?"

Beatrice chimed in before Anjanette could answer. "We found a really nice place for you to live, Ma. Nice community, lots of activities, clean."

"Yeah," Marjean finished. "Food smells great. You won't have to bother with dishes anymore. And they come and clean for you. Imagine that, Mother! You'll have a housekeeper, just like you always wanted!"

"We're going to help you with the transition," Beatrice said. "We've got some brochures for you to look at. See what you think."

I never even said yea or nay, but here they are, divvying up my stuff like I'm dead, trying to get me out of my own home. Their father wouldn't have let them do that. Oh, how I wish he were here! He'd know what to do. He always knew what to do. Like that time Principal Dennison tried to send Marjean home because he didn't think she was wearing a bra.

Anjanette opened her eyes and looked toward the heavens. *You remember that, John? That man wanted to stick his hand under her collar to make sure she actually had one, and she wouldn't let him do it, so he called and said to come and get her, she was suspended. And you marched right into that office and told him he better not ever lay a hand on one of our girls. Remember? Gosh, when was that? '67? '68? Something like that.*

And what about when Beatrice got caught skipping class? I wanted to whup her a good one, but you didn't. You were too smart for that. Took her down to Marvar's shrimp factory and talked old man Marvar himself into letting her pick for a day. Ten hours of standing in six inches of salt water and shrimp juice and not even bringing home enough money for the newest Elvis album was all she needed, and she never skipped again.

Something heavy scraped the floor upstairs and reverberations flooded the living room.

You hear them up there, John? They're arguing over whether to take that front porch glider to the Salvation Army or just put it out on the curb for anybody to take it. But they forget that's where I was sitting when you proposed. I'd rather hack it all up for firewood than let somebody else take it.

Marjean wants to sell her own house and move her brood in. Something for nothing. Don't know where we went wrong with that one. Beatrice wants to sell the house. Says they need the money to pay for that place in the brochure.

I ain't going nowhere, John, how about you?

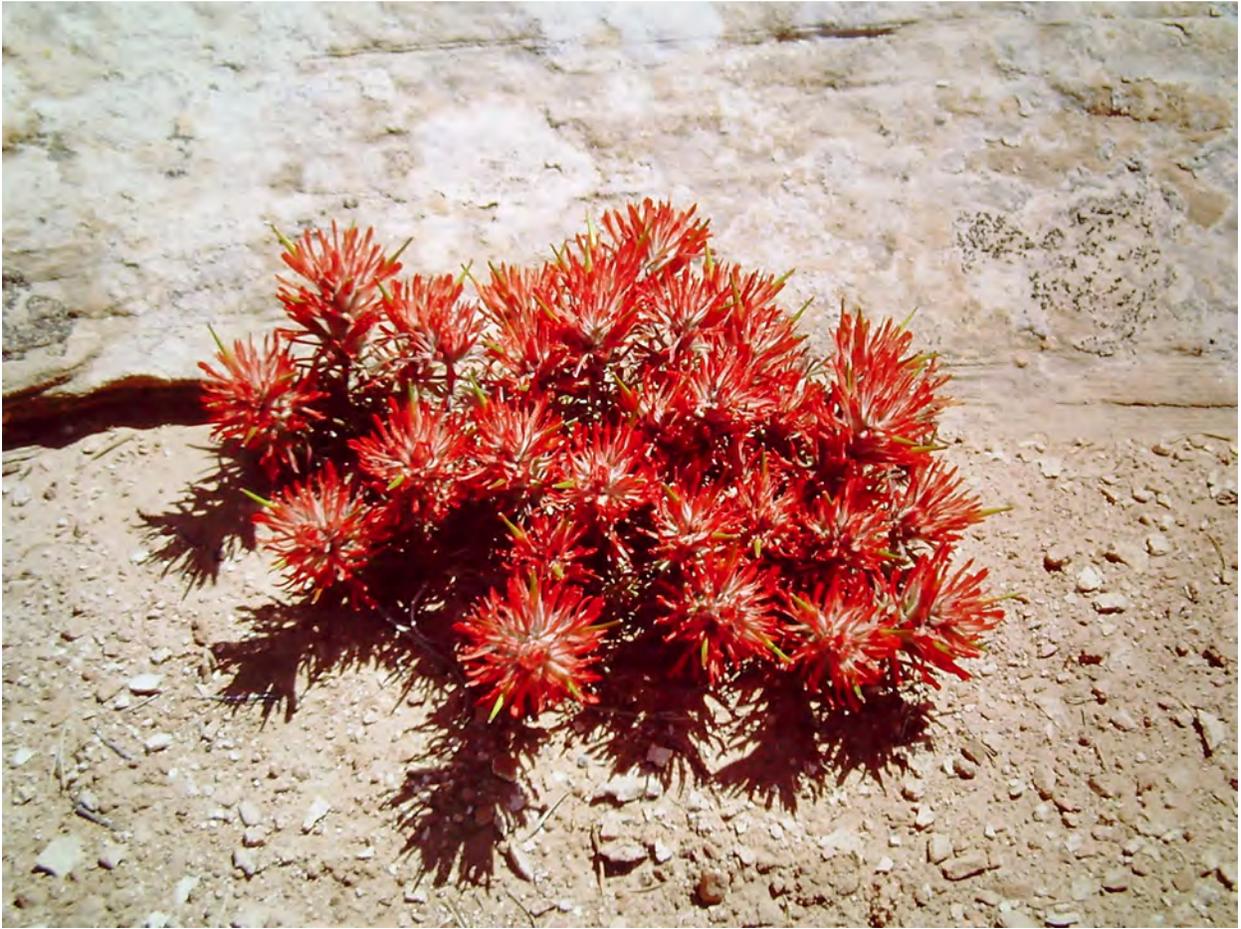
Anjanette Guthrie pulls knees to chin, sinks into the faded green corduroy, and breathes him in.

Splash of Color

- Len Kazmer







Still Friends
- Mary j. Breen

The store speakers blasted *I'll Be Home for Christmas* as Lynne hurried across the parking lot to a row of shopping carts under a flimsy canopy. She pulled on the front cart, pulled harder, and then realized they were chained together. She didn't need more strength; she needed a quarter. She began digging through her purse and pockets when an arm in a leather jacket reached across, inserted a coin, and the chain fell away. Lynne looked up, and there was Elliot.

A gust of wind caught the end of his silk scarf, and when he took hold of it, she noticed his ring finger was bare. She quickly reached for her ring, intending to remove it, but after twenty-three years, it wouldn't budge. She tried to look casual as she covered her left hand with her right. Elliot didn't appear to notice. He looked older, she thought, a little less sure of himself, but it's hard to look the part of a big shot criminal lawyer pushing a shopping cart and wearing an old Leafs tuque right down to the top of your glasses. She was shocked by how happy she felt seeing him again, but she was not going to let on.

"Nice to see you, Lynne. How are you?"

"I'm OK. How are you?"

"You look a bit tired. Are you sure you're OK?"

She nodded and smiled.

"So," he said, "I didn't know you shopped out here." He pointed at his bags. "They've got a great deli counter, don't they? I've just got myself some things for our bridge club tonight."

"Bridge?" Lynne said. "You always said bridge was a waste of time."

"Well, it turns out I love bridge," he said. "And, look, I got some great sushi."

"But, but you hate fish."

"Ha! It turns out I love sushi, and I love playing bridge! I guess you were right all along." His laughter sounded forced. "Willard's wife – remember her? – she organizes things. Not duplicate or anything serious, just fun. You know she asked about you the other night, and I told her you were fine, and our separation was amicable, and we're still friends." Before Lynne could reply, suddenly, as if he'd just thought of it, he reached forward and hugged her over the length of her cart. In doing so, he pushed her and the cart back so she was now wedged in between his cart, the other carts, the wall, and a garbage can brimming with broken Halloween pumpkins.

"Say, you'll never guess who I saw a few weeks ago! Gus and Louisa! I was at the hospital picking up Pete from squash after he broke his wrist, poor guy, and there they were. Gus was in a wheelchair. Actually, they didn't look so good, neither of them. They were deep in conversation with a doctor so I didn't interrupt."

She shook her head. "Ah, poor old dears."

"Maybe we should go and see them some time."

She nodded. "I'll do that. I'll drop in after work one day next week."

A rusty old car drove by, its muffler dragging behind, and Elliot said something Lynne couldn't hear. She hoped it wasn't about the muffler problems they'd had with their first car, problems he always blamed on her driving too quickly into the driveway.

"So, how are you *really*?" he asked. Overhead neon lights snapped on, giving their faces a sickly blue tint.

"Fine," she said. "Just fine." She tried to make her voice sound sincere enough not to invite too many questions.

"You look a bit –"

“Yes, I am a bit tired. Just coming back from a funeral.”

“Oh! Anyone I – ”

“No, no. The husband of someone I used to teach with at King George years ago. That’s why I’m wearing this proper suit on a Saturday afternoon.” She pulled at the edges of the jacket which was now a little tight, and then quickly covered her left hand again.

“Hey!” He smiled. “I know that suit. I always liked it.” She’d forgotten that she’d worn it to his law school graduation, and she very much wished she hadn’t mentioned it. He peeked at his watch.

“So how are *you*?” she asked.

“Well, not so great, actually,” he said.

Lynne watched her right hand lift up and reach towards him all on its own. She managed to stop it before it reached his arm. “Oh, what’s the – ?”

He frowned. “It’s no use, Lynne.”

“I wasn’t,” she said quickly. “I was just – ”

“Oh, well then,” he said, “I’ve got another sinus infection. You remember how miserable they make me. Throbbing headaches, throbbing sinuses. I saw Don twice last week, and he says it’s viral so he can’t give me anything for it.” He took a huge cloth handkerchief from his pocket, shook it out, and made a production of blowing his nose. “So, how long’s it been? August? September?”

“August. August the thir – sometime in August.”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

A man and two women were heading towards them, wanting to return their rattling carts, so Elliot and Lynne moved to the other side of the garbage can, out of their way. One of the women had a baby in a car seat. Elliot gave her a courtly bow as he moved to hold her cart steady. She picked up the baby and her grocery bags, and the smell of supermarket rotisserie chicken wafted by. The woman smiled at Elliot, and Elliot smiled at her. She didn’t even glance at Lynne.

He turned back. “And, your little grade, um, twos, is it? – how are they this year?”

“Grade four, Elliot. Always grade four.”

“Oh, right, sorry. And what about the piano? Are you getting any better, that is, I mean, are you improving? Enjoying it?”

She nodded. “Some. Look, it’s cold, and I left my coat in the car.” Her sensible self was whispering that she should cut this short. “I need to go.”

“Yeah, it’s getting really cold. Damned winter,” he said, zipping up his jacket, and pulling out his gloves. “But you, soon you’ll be able to get back on those god-awful, freezing ski slopes, right? That reminds me. I was going to call you.”

She could feel a smile forming around her eyes, so she looked away, trying to remove any trace of it. A country version of *Joy to the World* started up.

“Why do they have to have these cornball Christmas carols everywhere?” Elliot said.

“Where was I? Oh yeah, I wanted to ask you about our electric blanket.”

“Our electric blanket?” Surely she hadn’t heard him correctly.

“You don’t use it, do you?” he said. “I really need one.”

“Well, I do use it. It’s on our – the – that is, my bed.”

“But you never liked it.”

“But I do now. I – ”

“It’s not like you to be petty, Lynne.”

“Fine, Elliot. Take it,” she said, her voice formal and quiet. She’d never be able to use it now anyway without thinking of Elliot and Penny huddled in a cold bed. Why, she thought, couldn’t she have just shopped at the store closer to home and avoided all this?

“Great. Thanks. One less thing to get. I’ll come by for it.” He smiled and then replaced it with a solicitous frown. “So, you’re alright, right? You do look tired. Admit it, Lynne. Divorce is stressful, and these things take time.”

“I said I’m alright.” The urge to chat with him continued to evaporate.

A gust of wind blew a store flier against the side of his cart, and then off and out of reach. Elliot’s scarf lifted again and, as he caught it, Lynne said, “Why don’t you just tie a knot in it?”

“Don’t start, Lynne,” he said. “I don’t need help dressing myself.” He smiled to try to soften his words. “God,” he said, “that wind goes right through you. Don’t worry. Give it time, and you’ll achieve closure and be able to move on.”

She just managed not to snort. “Who did you get *that* wisdom from?”

“Penny. She said that after a divorce – “

“OK,” she broke in. “I should get going. Cupboards are bare.” She forced a laugh in case he thought she was serious. The last thing she wanted was his pity.

“Oh, I understand bare cupboards.” He said ruefully. “I should tell you that you and I are both single now. I’ve got my own place. Penny and I, that is, Penny, well, she went back to Bill last month.”

Lynne looked up with surprise. Playing across her face was that nasty pleasure of learning that someone who’s hurt us has now been made to suffer in a similar way.

Elliot saw her little smile and shook his head. “Now, Lynne. Don’t get any ideas.”

“I wasn’t – “she said, too loudly at first. “I’m just surprised, that’s all. So where are you living?”

“Still on Carlisle, near the park. Penny’s husband made a big fuss with flowers and chocolates and promises, and she caved. Not that they get along any better now. Poor Penny, it’s all been very hard on her. She – “

Lynne signaled him to move his cart out of her path.

He moved back an inch. “Yes, I should get going, too. Bridge calls. One of the firm’s partners will be there tonight, and I don’t want to be late. Ah!” He made a that-reminds-me gesture. “Maybe you can help me. I’ve got this completely annoying problem at work. I’ve been getting crazy e-mails, and they come to the general office address, so God knows who all is reading them. I have no idea who they’re from, and I thought maybe you’d know.”

“Me? How on earth would I know? Can you move aside?”

“Well, this person knows all kinds of things about me, like that I’m getting divorced from a woman named Lynne, and where I work, and that I play squash, and I have a brother who’s gay. And he – or she – signs them Cupid, if you can believe. Cupid222@hot – wait a minute!” He stopped. “What’s Bonnie’s email?”

“Bonnie444@ – “

“A-hah!” he said. “That’s it! It’s that crazy sister of yours. Did you ask her to write to me?”

She sighed. “And why would I do that?”

“You know what the last e-mail said? It said I looked like a man desperate to fall in love again, and didn’t I know I had a perfectly wonderful wife who still loved me.”

Lynne knew Bonnie was quite capable of sending a letter just like that. “This is absurd, Elliot. I’m sure it’s not Bonnie,” she said. “Look, I have to get my shopping done, and it’s really

cold out here!" She shivered and crossed her arms over her chest, tucking her hands in behind them.

"But wait. Listen to the rest. It said I'll never find someone as wonderful as you – unless I'm gay, too." His smile was no longer so friendly. "I'll bet it is Bonnie! She's such a match-maker, and she thinks everybody's gay. What have you been telling her?"

"Nothing, Elliot. She knows we're not in touch. Last time she mentioned you was to tell me that the arthritis in her hands is better now that she drinks some kind of weird tea concoction, and she thought I should tell you about it because of your shoulder. And, you'll notice, I did not."

He snorted a little. "Next she'll want me to try crystal therapy." He shook his head. "Actually my shoulder is much better now that I've been getting massages from this great gal at the gym. You should try her. She'd be good for your shoulder –"

"Knee," Lynne said.

"Knee. Right, whatever," he said. "She has magic fingers. I should send you her –"

"Listen, Elliot. Bonnie was just trying to help you. There's nothing odd about that."

"Everything your sister does is odd, have you forgotten? You were always saying that she was nuts: 'irrational, unreasonable, and impossible.' Your words. Face it, Lynne: your ... sister ... is ... crazy."

"She is not. She just had some problems adjusting when the boys left home, that's all. It was not a 'psychological problem'."

"But you were always saying that –" he broke in.

"I can't believe you're still picking on her!"

Elliot stopped and took a deep breath. "Never mind. Lord, you should have been a lawyer, not me."

She felt a sudden wash of fatigue. "Just one more thing; speaking of mental health, how's Brian? I thought I spotted him at the mall last month, but when I went looking –"

"I doubt it was him. He doesn't go out much. He's not very well. Now, there," he said, "I'm not afraid to admit that someone in *my* family has mental health problems. He's deep in another depression or I'd suggest you give him a call. Brian always liked you. That reminds me, you didn't come to Karl's Labor Day barbecue."

"I wasn't invited."

"Really? Everyone was there, even the Murphys." He lifted his bags out, and passed his cart on to an old man who was heading towards them. He waved away the man's offer of a quarter. Lynne pushed her cart forward so they were now side by side.

"Remind me next year," he said, "and I'll make sure Karl doesn't make that mistake again."

"No, don't. Just never mind."

Elliot looked at her, eyebrows raised, finally detecting the edge in her voice. "O-K. Just one more thing," he said. "How's Mr. Cat?"

"Like always," she said, looking upward as she put together the list: "arrogant, self-centered, affectionate when he wants something." She raised her eyebrows. "You know the type."

He laughed. "Well, I must be off. I'll be in touch. And don't forget to get the snow tires on. And did you ever get those rusty bits by the trunk touched up? For heaven's sake, don't be so cheap. Spend the money, and you'll be able to keep the car much longer."

She stared up at him not smiling at all, and he raised a hand to stop her. "OK, OK," he

said. "It's just that you never – OK. Well, bye, Lynne. Take care of yourself."

Without answering, she turned and headed towards the store, and he towards his car.

"Wait!" he called back to her. "You could come with me to our Christmas party at work. Would you like to?"

"Ah, no. No-no, I don't think so."

He walked back towards her so they were face to face again. "Don't be so hasty. You never know; you might, you might meet someone. You're still young and –," he hesitated, "– and, and pretty. Or we could go out for lunch sometime. Or I could make us something at my place. I'm turning into a pretty good cook; you'd be proud of me."

She looked straight at him, silent now.

"Look," he said almost using the kind voice he used to use when he was actually fond of her and not just sorry for her. "I worry about you, Lynnie, all alone with only Mr. Cat for company. You seem so –"

She stood up a little straighter, a wry smile playing around her mouth.

"What?"

"Never mind," she said.

"I know that look," he said. "What is it? Tell me, Lynne!" He was starting to be cross.

"Alright," she said. She took a deep breath. She could hear how cold her voice had become. "You're not going to like it."

"Tell me!"

"OK. I've just realized something. Now I know why I feel worse after talking with you." She stopped to take a breath. "Do you know how often you asked me if I'm OK?" Her voice was getting louder.

"Well, of course," he said. "That's because I care. That's what friends do. And hush. People will hear."

"I don't care."

"OK, OK. Alright, so what did you want to say?"

She was aware of her heart beating rapidly. "I've finally figured out that you don't really care how I am. Not really. You just want to hear me say I'm OK, so you don't have to think about how I might not be OK. God forbid you should ever feel guilty about anything!" Another gust of wind pulled at his scarf.

He grabbed at it. "That's not what –"

"And *then*, after I say I'm OK, *then* you say, 'Well you don't look OK.'" Her voice was even louder now. "In one breath you want me not to be sad so you won't have to feel guilty, and in the next you seem to suggest I must be doing badly – poor Lynnie, too bad, so sad – because I don't have you or, or, any man for that matter."

"Dammit, Lynne. That's not – that's absolutely not fair. As always, you're making a mountain out of a molehill." Lawyer or not, Elliot did not like anyone to argue with him. "Not fair at all! I care about how you are, and I don't see any reason why we can't still be friends. We're both rational adults! I still think of you as a friend, an *old* friend."

Lynne's breathing was faster, and tears were starting behind her eyes. "Elliot," she said, "for God's sake face reality. We are not just old friends!" She turned and started towards the store again, and Elliot took a few steps to stay even with her.

"Well, I think of you as an old friend. And if you ever need anything, anything at all, just call me. Look, here's my card with my new cell number, just in case." He reached into his breast pocket, and handed her a card and then a second one. She pushed them into her pocket without

glancing at them.

She knew in the deepest part of her that there was no point in talking with him any further. As much as she would have liked him to see how angry she was, she was nearly in tears, and she very much didn't want him to see that. He'd be solicitous, and he'd want explanations, and that would only drag it all out longer.

"God, Lynne. I was just trying to be nice!" Now his voice was the louder one, and a passing couple turned to look at them. Lynne smiled and nodded that she was OK, and they kept on. Elliot didn't notice. He started for the parking lot again. "Well, take care of yourself. And don't forget," he called back over his shoulder, "you can always call me. And talk to Bonnie about those e-mails, OK?"

Lynne kept walking until she was near the doors. She stopped, and moved to one side. It was so like Elliot, she thought, to just close his eyes to the damage and walk on; so like him to delude himself that there were no debts or broken dreams or shattered promises left between them. It came to her then with some surprise that although she was sad and angry, angry and sad, she was also hugely relieved. It was done. They were done. And so was the lingering hope that Elliot might reconsider. It was now the last thing in the world she wanted.

She waited until she saw Elliot's car pull out onto the street and drive off into the growing darkness. She pushed her cart over near the others and turned away from the store. There were tears in her eyes as she dropped his cards on top of the withering pumpkins in the garbage and headed to her car.

The Five Geese Death Poem
- Al Ortolani

1

You butchered a goose,
wings spread on a chopping block.
An old woman in a scullery cap
plucked by the fistful. She worked
without a word to you, dipping
the bird into a boiling pot.
Your grandchildren danced among

the feathers, splitting the wishbone,
sopping bread into grease bowls
with their small, wet fingers.
You walked the narrow streets
with your hands in the air,

2

honing your death poem.
The goose, a dream symbol,
part of a perfectly ironic
5-7-5 haiku—a blade
at the throat of sentimentality.
At bedside

you scratched each syllable
on a debit card receipt, still rich
with the wood-smoked sauce
from last night's ribs –
another cliché, another rub.
You sat with the pencil

3

in your teeth and remembered
rising to honking geese
in October, leaping from bed
before your parents, pounding
after the noisy V, shoes
like clubs in the wet grass –
the domed skull of a puffball

kicked into a cloud of spores.

You pumped your BB gun
into the sky, wings everywhere
over the neighbor's maples –
the yellowed oak

4

a reminder to gather
before winter. You pictured
the cardboard racer, perched
like a goose wing at the top
of the overpass. The faster
you pushed, the more pieces flew
into the street – corrugated fenders,
newspaper hood, broomstick

steering. Two skinny bird dogs
ran inside the neighbor's fence –
incisors slicing the air, muscles
shouldering the chain link.

5

You climbed the ladder to paint
the eaves of your house, the timbre
of children's voices in flight
above the playground. They were
not unlike geese. You dipped
your brush into the bucket,

feathering the excess paint
from the tip of the bristles.
There was always more
than you could reach, goosed
at the top of the ladder,
leaning into the sky.

The Sangwich
- Brian Sullivan

On Route 1 in Washington, DC, the Porsche hit the pole square on, cutting the car in half. The couple, not wearing seat belts, was thrown from the car head-first on either side of the pole into the embankment. They died instantly. There was no pain, except for that of their spouses.

As for breakfast, it was light, just as he had requested the night before. One egg sunny side up, one slice of toast with real butter, a small glass of OJ, freshly brewed black Sumatran coffee, and the Wall Street Journal. Lily had prepared it as she did every morning for her dad. At age seven, she knew his morning routine, and, as the only child, she was a pleaser.

Marshall sat down at the small table in the breakfast nook and began to eat and read while his wife, Beth, and Lily made his lunch. It was awkward in its way; they assembled it on the counter and put it into his lunch box, the kind that factory workers and construction men used: big, black, rugged, manly. While Marshall read, heaping praise upon praise for his appreciation of morning breakfast, Beth and Lily assembled his lunch, with a sangwich, as they called it, usually ham and cheese with a side of coleslaw, seven baby carrots, exactly one dozen Pringles, and a home-made cupcake with a different topping for each day of the week. Lily squiggled a cat, a tree, a happy face, or some other decoration on top of the frosting.

"Honey, can you make me a roast beef sangwich today, maybe with some spicy Mexicali mustard?"

"Sure honey. Lily can you start it? Don't forget that he likes his roast beef sangwich with the mustard smoothed on the bread."

"OK, mum. Coming up."

When they were ready, Lily and Beth divided the lunch into separate Tupperware containers and placed them neatly on the bottom of the lunch box, and tucked in three paper napkins, just in case he needed them.

With practiced precision, Marshall rose from the table, hugged and kissed his family and left for the office with his lunch. Once outside, he put the lunchbox into his oversized briefcase, and off to Wall Street he went.

Beth drove Lily to school, and to her piano and ballet lessons, and returned home to coordinate and make dinner for Marshall at whatever time he would arrive home. His appreciation of her tender, loving care was boundless. She was, however, blind to the on-goings of the corporate and legal worlds that were his lifeblood. She knew not of affidavits, torts, and *forma pauperis*. But, as Marshall knew, she was without parallel as a wife and mother; a keeper, definitely a keeper.

Liz was new. She had come from the prestigious law firm of Howard, Fine, and Howard. She would be a great asset to Spence, Fink, Cogliano, and Murphy as she had just won a high-profile case against the Grey Corporation for illegal use of patented ethanol processing. She was a rising star in the legal community; assertive, aggressive, charming, and a looker to boot. A natural by any standard, and an asset for any firm, an achiever without bounds. She had been assigned to work on the Havilland case with Marshall, she the investigator, he the statistician.

In time they became great friends. Without awares, they synced and vibrated into methodologies and resolutions with remarkable symbiosis. They conferred and concurred on solicitations, briefs, writs, and *corpus delectis*. Sometimes during long days, they took lunch at the Ritz, and dinners at the 21 Club, and before long they each looked up and found themselves

flying at the same altitude, singing at the same pitch, marching to the same drummer, and discovered, with great surprise for each of them, that they were in love.

They denied it at first, but time worked against them, and for them. They conversed about it, denied it, accepted it, and finally celebrated it. The details of their marriages hovered and loomed. Marshall's home life was a dream with his ever-loving and caring wife and daughter. Her husband, a professional golfer, was the charm of the city.

As time went on and their infatuation grew into true love, they began leaking disappointments of their marriages to each other. Marshall knew that he was less than a perfect husband, though he tried. He intimated to her that on one day he asked Beth this question: "Will you marry me in the next reincarnation?" He waited for the answer; she raised her eyebrow, but she was not forthcoming. He took this reservation as a joke and waited for two weeks before he asked her again: "Will you marry me in the next reincarnation?" Again, no reply.

Liz, of a legal, logical, infatuated and loving mind said to him, "Well, if she doesn't love you enough to marry you in the next reincarnation, why wait to end it at your death? Why not end it now? I will marry you now and in the next reincarnation, too." Marshall was at a loss; loving two women, but infatuated with this woman and now loving her more. Liz's logic was unconfutable, as usual.

In short order a case required them to travel to Washington, DC, to research patents; one to investigate patents, the other to investigate claims against. They booked separate rooms at the Hyatt, and occupied only one of them. Romance abounded. Love flourished. The stars in the heavens blushed for four days and four nights. When their time was up, they packed themselves into his rented Porsche and began their trip back to New York City. In a giddy and euphoric state, Marshall lost concentration and drove the Porsche straight into a telephone pole. Her bags were packed with exotic lingerie, his heart-felt gifts, and a diary of the beatings of her heart.

Time, fate, predestination, and love cast them into the next incarnation simultaneously. They met in the first grade, and by the seventh were locked in love. They knew, though they could not explain, that their love had always been and always would be. Numerous places and occurrences sent unexplainable shivers of joy through their bodies and souls. When walking past South Church on their way to school, torrents of love flowed through them; they knew they would marry there one day. Their mutual abhorrence for sports cars was nearly overwhelming. Later, whenever they heard the name Hyatt, surges of currents, volts, and watts electrified their crazy bones. Over time, their friends, and classmates, and colleagues marveled at their adoration for each other. "Blest," they would say, the envy of all lovers.

As with all love and marriages, the rudiments of daily living come to bear. Marshall's life and Liz's life were aggressive and successful. For dinners, they dined out as often as possible, ordered pizza and Chinese regularly, and left the dishes to pile up in greasy towers till the house cleaner arrived at the end of the week. Breakfast, they bought at Starbucks on the way to the office. Lunch they bought at the Ritz, and dinner, if not part of the work day at the firm, was a moaner: canned, frozen, leftover Indian if they were lucky. Liz, as a rising star, spent more time flying to distant cities than at home, and when at home, spent more time researching and planning than loving. Communication by technology became the norm; cellphone, IM, and ultimately text messaging managed their love. With much distant flying and her supercharged career, their romantic boudoir was usually half empty; their pillowing conducted over the Internet.

One morning, while sitting in the breakfast nook that Marshall had spuriously created as

an addition to their kitchen, his languor was rent by an irrepressible pang. When Liz rushed in for the cup of coffee and English muffin with marmalade and cinnamon that he had made for her, he stood up almost in shock and exclaimed, "I want a sangwich! Will you make me a sangwich?"

A sangwich? You want a sangwich?"

"Yes, a sangwich."

"I really must get to the office, honey. A sangwich? You mean a sandwich?"

"Yes, a sangwich. I must have one. Will you make it for me?"

"I will, of course I will. I'll make it for you tonight, OK? Oh no, I can't tonight, I'll be up all night tonight preparing a brief for the Crowne litigations. How about tomorrow morning? Oh no, not tomorrow. I have an early flight to Miami and I'm going directly to San Diego on Wednesday. I'll be home on the fourteenth. That's our day, honey, Valentine's Day. Oh no! I'm presenting at the AIPLAK conference all day. Why do you want a sangwich?"

"I don't know. It's one of those things like South Church and the Hyatt. You don't feel it, too?"

"No. I'll think about it though."

"I must have one. I must."

"Well, can you make it for yourself?"

"I cant' explain it. You must make it for me. I don't know why. Will you make it?"

"I will. I promise I will. As soon as the conference is... Oh no!"

"What?"

"Nothing. I'll work it out."

Marshall, seriously forlorn and consternated, went to bed that night craving a sangwich and someone to make it for him.

Previously published in *Midwest Literary Magazine's Off Season Anthology*, 2011

Standing Still

- Alan Shiner



Transparencies
- M.J. Iuppa

Whenever I pass your barn, I wonder
what it was like in the Fall of 1988?
Did I notice it back then, or just drive
by, unaware that its hand-hewed beams
were weather diaries & its gable roof
was shedding shingles, one by one,
without a second thought?

Pigeons fly cautiously in your yard.
They have lived in your barn for years,
ignoring its incoherent poverty.

Now twilight's indigo wings come
& go through smashed panes
to roost in the loft's ancient hay, waiting
for the cracked beams to pull apart, inch
by inch, another year's fraction closer
to that split roof leaking its dangerous
light for all of us to see.

With the Long Stick
- John McKernan

My mother broke
From a backyard maple

Then peeled of bark
To a thin whip
And switched my legs

For lying and lying and lying
I built a small kite
Tied with white thread
In the shape of a bizarre Euclidean triangle

White gift-wrap paper
Stars & Crosses & Eyes
I wanted to lift my pain high
Over Omaha
To see it in blue bright sunlight Distant

True Art
- Adam Restinow

During the summer when Claire was ten, when her world was a Garden of Eden, she lived on a farm miles and miles from Omaha. Weather permitting, as part of her getting-ready-for-the-day ritual, she rose earlier than necessary and sat at her upstairs bedroom window to watch freight trains creep across the prairie. Her child eyes saw multi-colored snakes move through the grass, and she delighted in the image.

Back then Claire believed that the best part of a freight was the sound the locomotive made as it approached and then receded into the distance – a mournful, beseeching wail that stirred a primal memory and evoked an image of wolves drawing near and then flowing past her as they pursued a deer. Not that she had ever seen or heard a wolf, but she was sure that this was how they howled. Once, while sitting at the breakfast table, she mentioned the sound to her parents. Her mother had replied that she didn't recall the last time she'd heard a locomotive. Her father, as always, was to the point, "Ain't any locomotives. Just the wind and your imagination, girl. Now finish your breakfast and get to the barn. Cows won't milk themselves."

If the air was especially clear, Claire counted the cars because that's what you do with freight trains. Unfortunately, cabooses had disappeared before her time so it was always a surprise when the train just ended with a tanker or a flatcar. It was as if someone had forgotten to put a period at the end of a sentence.

During the following years Claire inhabited a marvelous world of unfettered fantasy in which she did not see her father struggle to work the land or her mother make do or do without. She sensed that her father was usually angry and that her mother's prolonged silences hid sadness, but she never questioned, she adapted. When it became obvious that Claire was more than just a reluctant student, several doctors agreed that she had a genetic abnormality impossible to cure.

Her parents, being Nebraska folk, listened politely but held their own counsel. As always, Claire's father had the final say, "She is what she is, no more, no less. We're not going to wring our hands about what might have been or what will be. Don't have to be a genius to drive a tractor." They went about living as best they could.

Thus while we all have our moment in the sun, and most are hardened by the experience, Claire remained serene, creative, and accepting. Her mother noticed that, whatever her limitations, Claire drew detailed pictures of the objects around her; perhaps not with the talent of the truly gifted, but well enough to be remarked upon.

When Claire was seventeen, she was a special needs high school senior with short red hair, dark blue eyes, slim figure, unblemished skin, and dimples that cried for attention. Indeed she proved true the saying that those born on the Sabbath are blithe and bonnie and good and gay. Were it not for her mental state she would have had many boyfriends. But because she had a modicum of artistic talent, and because the Nebraska State Board of Education mandates that special needs students be placed in the least restrictive environment, Claire's one "normal" class was Art Appreciation 301.

And so on a Friday in October Claire and other members of her art class visited the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha. Intimidated by the grandeur of the building and the numbers of adults milling from painting to painting, they silently stared at works by Degas, Cassatt, and Titian. And while they accepted that the works were important – that

was what their art teacher Ms. Ward had told them – they could not grasp why this was so.

For example, when they looked at Monet's *Across the Meadow* all they saw were grass, trees, and flowers. And, oh yeah, there were three kids. They did not see a mélange of colors masterfully arranged to create the impression of a summer's day. Ms. Ward even prompted them with, "How does this painting resemble our own Meadow Lane Park?" Absolute silence. Their apparent lack of understanding irritated Ms. Ward but she told herself that a day with these masterpieces was the most any of them would probably ever get for the rest of their lives. Which of their parents would bring them back here? Certainly not Claire's.

There was little physical resemblance between Joslyn's cafeteria and the one Claire used at Burke High School. Here the tables were white-and-chrome circles, not beige, foldaway rectangles decorated with graffiti. Here conversations were taking place between men and women, not food fights between sophomores seeking recognition. But there was one similarity. After collecting their lunch bags left in the Museum depository, the students grouped themselves into their customary cliques. Geeks and nerds here, jocks there, popular girls somewhere else, and Claire alone. Claire often ate lunch by herself. She knew she was different and that for some reason her fellow students were uncomfortable with the difference. Now no one was ever rude or mean to her at school. Indeed, any abuse of Claire would have resulted in being cast out into social darkness. But as one of the popular girls said when asked by a teacher why no one ever had lunch with Claire, "What would you talk about? She doesn't know anything about boys, she's not in any activities, and she lives on a farm. Besides, what would my friends think if they saw me with her?"

After lunch the students assembled in the first of a series of galleries containing a traveling exhibit of modern artists. When they gazed upon a Warhol soup can, whispers circulated, even a "Cool" was spoken. Here was something clearly unambiguous, something from their kitchens. Ms. Ward sensed that the day would be profitable after all. Emboldened by the realization that ordinary objects could be made artistically significant, they quickened their pace, the tour becoming a scavenger hunt for the commonplace. Claire was the first to find treasure – a two-foot square oil of an old steam locomotive, a coal car, and a boxcar.

This miniscule freight rested on weed-infected tracks, receding into the background and moving forward into a wood frame that looked like railroad ties. Vines entwined a wheel and a vista of yellow dragon lilies formed a backdrop; rust blotched the tracks and the train. The windows were cracked, a faded 72 was on the smoke stack, and dents in the boxcar suggested the pummeling of wind-tossed rocks and branches. The piece was entitled *How the West was Won*.

Claire did not understand the title but she knew this was one of the trains of her childhood. She saw the wheels inch, she saw a wisp of smoke. And she heard the whistle, she was positive she heard the whistle. She sighed in response to the remembered sound, and she felt joy at returning to a simpler time. Then she leaned forward and tilted her head to the right, the better to hear it. In doing so her body touched the rope that separated the viewer from the painting. Figuratively she touched a strand in a spider's web. Instantly a guard shouted, "Hey, kid, stay on your side of the rope!"

As Claire didn't know she had sinned, she continued to lean. But then the guard

was in front of her, blocking her view, and repeating his demand. “Stand back. Do not touch the rope. Do not touch the painting.”

Claire flushed. She clasped her hands and looked around for Ms. Ward and the others, but they had moved to another gallery. “I’m sorry. I wouldn’t hurt it.”

“Sure, kid. That’s what they all say. Just back away.” Six-foot Dave, the name etched into the plate on his chest, folded his arms, widened his stance, and assumed a blank expression on his forty-year-old, bald-headed face. His white shirt stuffed into black pants covered a stomach ample enough to hide his belt, and his black tie was tight enough to add color to puffy cheeks. The only incongruity was the headset microphone that Dave also wore; it belonged to a technological age that Dave was uncomfortable with. If Dave were a portrait, the work would be entitled *G.I. Joe Grows Up*, assuming the artist had a dry sense of humor.”

Unlike Claire, Dave was the middle of three children, all reared to believe in personal salvation as espoused by their evangelical preacher. Thus, when Dave was ten, his fantasy was to do something significant when he came of age: convert his heathen neighbors to the truth. Thanks to generous helpings of the Bible and a willingness and susceptibility to believe, Dave developed a moral code which proclaimed absolute right and wrong. His parents, both employees in a Kansas City meat processing plant, diagnosed Dave’s fever as curable but were pragmatic – there were worse ways to make a living than by being a preacher.

And Dave was cured. Without a discernible skill or aptitude, the day after barely graduating high school, Dave enlisted, completed two tours in Vietnam without valor, and returned to a civilization which wasn’t seeking salvation and wasn’t offering jobs. His code was eroded but a residue remained.

Pride prevented him from joining his parents in the plant but not from inhabiting his bedroom. He attended his church, a hard-wired routine, but the preacher’s words were less vibrant, less compelling. Dave might have spent his remaining years driving a moving van between Kansas City and Omaha but for a brother-in-law who, as a member of the Joslyn’s board of directors, manufactured a guard position for him. To his credit, Dave recognized the generosity and vowed to perform with distinction. Unfortunately, it is difficult to exhibit righteousness when faced with the vagaries of youth.

Claire stepped backward but did not move otherwise. Neither did Dave. Then, in an attempt to see the painting again, Claire moved two feet to her right. Dave moved the same distance to his left. Claire, who had been denied many things, was not going to yield. She feigned to her right and then with the agility of youth moved quickly to her left. Dave, not used to such defiance and lacking physical dexterity, froze. Claire was rewarded with another glimpse before Dave, truly red-faced, was all that she saw.

Dave squinted at her and in frustration said, “Are you crazy? You’ve seen the picture, it’s nothing but a crummy train, now get out of here.”

Claire, who had never defied anyone in her life, answered, “No.”

No, Dave thought, no, he wasn’t about to let this young punk get her way. For once in his life he was going to win. He was sick of compromising, of accepting someone else’s views of how things should be done, of not doing the right thing because doing so was a struggle. He was going to save this girl.

Dave knew he dared not touch her. Doing so, especially these days, would cost him his job and possibly time in jail. Hell, if she even started crying, he could be subject

to a sexual harassment suit. He thought about using his headset and calling for help. But he didn't really know how to use it. He could end up talking to himself, and wouldn't that look great. So he did the only thing he could think of. He did nothing.

Claire might have left at this point if Dave hadn't said, "crazy." A small word, not worth much as words go, but to Claire it was a slap in the face. So she, too, did nothing.

Now there was quiet, no one else was in the gallery, and they gazed at one another. At first their looks were of anger, then resentment, then understanding, and then acceptance of each other's role – one the art patron, the other the protector. Suddenly, as if the gods had decreed that the contest should begin, Claire and Dave reverted to that most ancient, most true, of art forms, the dance. Their bodies moved back and forth and side to side in patterns that harkened to those performed by all the tribes that ever were. Unknowingly, Claire, bending and leaping, Dave, shuffling and stomping, told stories of the changing seasons and the travels of people across the deserts and plains of the earth. Claire was a feather, and Dave was a great oak, both swirling in the same variant wind. They expressed themselves through their motions, actions and reactions, and a truer story was never told.

The dance ended when Ms. Ward entered the gallery. In the process of gathering strays, she stared open-mouthed at the display of youthful determination and aged obstinacy. Perplexed and anxious she called, "Claire, what are you doing?! Come here now!"

The reverie broke. Claire hurried toward her teacher but stopped at the gallery exit.

"Claire," Ms. Ward said, looking at the trembling girl, "I don't know what you were thinking but I want you to apologize to that guard right now. You are in a museum not on your farm among the chickens."

Claire pirouetted and fixed on what she had danced for. Then she gazed at the old man still protecting his art, curtsied, and smiled.

Dave moved so as to afford her a better view and then had the wisdom and good grace to bow.

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-
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-
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