

Travels, Observations, and Prayers

Poems

by

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Chapter 1

Snapshots In Time

Only A Waitress

(This lady waited on me at a restaurant in Bridgeport. You could tell she had been doing this job for years. 9/23/13)

There's lots of places that won't hire her.
She's not young enough
Pretty enough
Perky enough.

But she still has her smile,
and her soft southern accent
makes it shine all the brighter.

She's good at what she does-
smooth,
timely,
attentive.

She has to be,

For it's the only thing she knows.

Reason to Live

(written in a diner in Fairmont. This is the image I got from the elderly couple sitting across from me. 7/26/13)

He looks older than he is.
Corpulent, tired loose skin
hung over a worn out frame.

Swarthy face, eyes dimmed
and hands trembling ever so slightly
as he lifts the salt shaker
and taps it over his dinner.

The watch on his arm,
tighter than it used to be,
will mark the time until
his next doctors appointment.

His wife of thirty-eight years
is there to remind him
sometimes too often,
to take his medication,

"Because you know what happened last time."

and he grudgingly complies.

Because football season's not far off
and he wants to see
how the Mountaineers will do this year.

Tim

(Written trying to understand what would make a sixteen year old murder the only people who ever really cared about him.) 11/1/12

Don't you dare call me a murderer
Don't you dare call me a killer.
A Destroyer.
A taker of life.
I Gave.
After all that was taken from me,
I Gave.
After all that I have lost,
I Gave.
After all that was never given to me,
I gave.
I gave.
I GAVE.

Mother gone I see her now
a lost and lonely and broken child
Never grew up
Never grew out
Never reached out
to hold and comfort and care.

But she could hide
hide very well
in the bottles and pills
in the pipes and bowls
in the bedrooms and cars and back alleys with MEN
who I never called Father

Father-
always just a ghost of a
whisper of an image
somewhat reflected back at me
in my mirror
He has to go.
No more specters,
No more haunts
No more almost memories
that died a lonely death
before they were ever born.

Two elderly people

beyond their age of Duty
trying
striving to do what cannot be done
It's not their place
their job
their right
to save me.
They cannot do now what
has never been done.
Their Task of Tasks has already been done.
time for them to rest.
In Peace.

And so my Task is this--
to purge
to cleanse
to clear away
the taint, the stain, the smell
the feel--

to break away
to cut the connections
to do that One Thing that needs to be done
To be Free--to set Free
to live Free--to die
Free.

To cut away all that is useless
all that is past
all that is dirty
old, and already gone.

Like the turkey at Thanksgiving it must be done
Death gives life,
and death is honored
as life goes on and so I must
do what must be done
For them.
For me.

And so I wait,
and wait,
and wait,
and darkness falls
and the house goes quiet,
and all is still...

Time to act...

The knife blade is cool in my hand
it's power terrifying
and comforting
and it is mine
to use
to cut
to carve
to slice
to separate
to End
to Begin...

Silently slowly up the stairs
every nerve on fire
listening for that single sound
that call in the night
that would interfere and stop
my Task of Tasks---
Nothing...

The bedroom door opens easily
noiselessly
as I knew it would.
It's handle cool against my sweated palm--
I smile...

The moment is upon me and I
the hand of God
the hand of Fate
of what is good
of what is Right
must continue on...

My eyes adjust to the darkness
once my enemy and now and forever more
my only friend.

I stand over their sleeping innocent forms,
I pick my spot and tighten my grip...

Let me give this gift to you
my only gift to you
my most precious gift to you

and don't wake up
please don't wake up
and you'll never have to face
another day

of pain
of service
with me
for me
because of me
ever again...

And my gift to you is
FREEDOM!
FREEDOM!
FREEDOM!

So, don't you dare call me a murderer
Don't you dare call me a killer
A destroyer,
a taker of Life.
I gave.
After all that was taken from me,
I gave
After all that I have lost
I gave
After all that was never given to me,
I gave.
I gave.
I GAVE.

Old Man's Life

(written listening to an old man complain to another in
a restaurant 11/26/07)

"I'm sick of living!"

The old man said as he limped slowly down the aisle,
his shoulders bent with the weight of years of worry and care.

His eyes are world weary and tired,
his hands calloused, hard, rough and scarred from
many seasons carving out a living from the land.

In his voice the trembling rage, frustration and despair
longing for friends and family now gone away,
knowing that a life that he has loved
is slowly turning to dust.

Only one more doctor's appointment this week,
and he knows already what they'll tell him.

"Slow down!", they'll say. Stop working so hard.
Stop doing the things you have done all your life.
that has kept you going, given you a reason to get up in the morning,
and given you a sense of pride, dignity, and honor.

Now, watching his health fade and medical bills mount,
Rising prices on everything, and a limited monthly income to support
the dozen or so pills he takes each day...

You know,
He's just about ready
to take their advise.

Purpose Driven

(There are always those little old ladies in the supermarket who are determined to get what they want, who thrive on their independence while they still have it.)

An old lady charges by me in the local grocery store
back bent
hands firmly gripping her shopping cart
her knuckles white against her brown mottled skin

Head held high, eyes bright and shining,
laser-beam focused
on her goal just down the aisle,

And the brightest smile you ever seen
spread across her face.

One day she may be dependent
upon others to do this simple task for her
but not today.

Definitely, not today.

Small Business Owner

(Written at a diner, watching the owner shuffle back towards the bathroom. It was obvious he'd had a long hard day. I imagine there's small business owners just like him all over the world.)

His clothes are tired
hanging off of his drooping frame
grudgingly pulled along by his
shuffling feet
as he makes his way
down the aisle towards the bathroom
to sit and rest
and catch his breath
just for a little while.

Fast Food Counter Girl

(Written at a fast food restaurant, where this young attractive woman waited on me. She looked like someone I could enjoy talking with, but her mind was somewhere else.)

"Hi. Can I take your order?"

"Well, hello there, Starshine!
You have really pretty eyes.
Captivating, they pull me in
and entice me--

I want to sit with you over a cup
of coffee and
watch you smile
as you tell me about your dreams.

And I wonder, dear one,
what you would say to me--

What do you want to do?
Where do you want to go?
What do you want to create
with this vibrant young life that is yours?

But you will leave me wondering
an empty space left unfulfilled
answers left only to my imagination
and my pen.

As you take my order,
ring up my sale,
and walk away.

Without looking at me again.

Woman/Child

(This young waitress was particularly bright and bubbly in her work. I almost felt sorry for her, knowing the harsh life lessons she has yet to learn)

The young waitress
has crystal clear blue eyes
full of the light of youth
unscarred by the cares of the world.

Auburn hair pulled back in a pony tail
a quick easy smile
complemented by a quick and bouncing walk

It's easy to see
she likes her job here.
Probably her first.

A bit shy with the customers still
Which makes her all the more charming.

Caught between a girl and a woman
That uncertain faltering step
And parents certainly caught between worry and pride.

I hope her years are kind to her
and she gets to keep that youthful spark
as long as she can

I left her a five-spot
Just because
I'm a nice guy
and I know how little she makes.

Camaraderie

(It struck me how strangers make eye contact in public places, acknowledging each other's presence without saying a word)

When you meet someone's eyes
while sitting in a diner
you are usually greeted with a nod
a half smile, a "Hello."

A bond is forged at that moment
one that has existed for generations
in restaurants and around campfires,
saloons and trails and river streams

Co-inhabitants of this world
this particular time and this particular place
engaged in common ritual

with a contract of respect and peace between them
a simple recognition of Brotherhood
even among strangers.

So, What Do You Know?

(written at a restaurant, while observing a wheelchair
bound mentally handicapped child enjoy his meal 11/14/07)

Hey, Kid!

What the hell do you have to smile about?
sitting there in your wheelchair,
obviously incapacitated
locked away forever from
the walking, running, and jumping world

Forced for the rest of your life
to look at the world from waist height
while everyone else towers around you
looking down

You will always need someone to push you around,
to bathe you and groom you
and change your damn clothes.

To me your life is miserable
and maybe not even worth the trouble.

So why the hell are you so happy?
What's the secret that you hold?
One that someone like me,
healthy and hardy and whole
can't even begin to image?

Is there a light, a love, a strength, a hope
you have that I cannot see?
Is there an answer that you have found,
something that you have figured out
on how to beat back this world of worry and care?

So speak to me then, wise one,
sitting there smiling in your chair.
How do I free myself
from anxiety, depression, resentment, and fear?
Go ahead, dammit. Tell me. I'm listening...

Women Who Smoke

(I've always thought smoking was nasty. I dated a smoker once and it was like kissing an ashtray. Yuk! I've never dated a smoker since, and see it as a real turn-off.)

They dabble on their makeup
put curlers in their hair.
They wear the right accessories
adjust their clothes with care.

They try to be attractive
they strive to get that look
or sideways glance from strangers
by pretty hook or crook.

They exercise and diet
and watch just what they eat
and cover every single flaw
with details oh so neat.

They act so prim and proper
with such poise and etiquette
but I'll dismiss them out of hand
when they light that cigarette.

Sunday Dinner

(Written sitting in a diner watching families come to eat after their Sunday church services. 7/9/09)

They gather together in threes and fours and more
at the local family diner
on a Sunday afternoon

to share casual food
casual laughs and
casual conversation

A true "Norman Rockwell" experience
A time for respite
for rest
for re-creation

A gathering together
with those that share
the common bonds of love
trust
and respect.

Where a Family once again
manifests itself
in its truest, most holy form.

The Lady at the Fast Food Joint

(Written while watching people's reactions to a rather unkempt woman who was standing in line waiting to order.)

Oh. My. God.
Will you look at that woman?
I bet she hasn't washed her hair
since the Kennedy's were shot.
Her face looks like she's lived outside
most of her life-
smoked a lot, too.
Bet that's where her money went.
It sure didn't go toward her clothes.
Faded, ragged plaid shirt
torn, dirty jeans.
Old work boots too, for Christsakes.
Sweat and stale cigarettes,
God—I can almost smell her from here.

So where did she come from?
How does she live like that?
Doesn't she expect anything better?
Doesn't she care about how she looks?
Does she have a family?
Parents? A husband? Children?
Do they all live like that?

In any case it's easy to see
she's had a hard life.
Harder perhaps, than I can imagine.
Yet here she is,
standing tall and straight, a survivor,
where perhaps others would have
laid down and died.
And even now
she holds her head up high
and smiles--briefly--
as she hands the cashier
her hard earned, crumpled smokey dollars.

The Lady Behind the Counter

(Again, at another restaurant. This lady looked so typical behind the counter, like so many others I have seen.)

The lady behind the counter
tries to smile
and greets me with a friendly
"How are you?..."
But the warmth of her smile
can't disguise
the tepidness of her lukewarm life.

Her face is lined by too many forced smiles
held up bravely until she is alone
only then to shudder and fall
into the quiet despair that haunts her days.

The puffy evidence around her eyes,
speak of too many long late nights
spent in useless struggle
trying to recapture what was left
of her long ago dreams.

Too many cigarettes,
too many dance hall beers
all of them paid for
with her own money.

Gone is her hope
of the tall dark stranger
on a charging white steed
and left impotently in his place
is only the whispered rumor of a raise.

Why Do You Pray, Old Man?

I sat in a restaurant today, and saw
a man bow his head and pray.
Such an unusual thing, prayer in public nowadays,
and just for a moment, I wondered what
he was praying for.

Was he thanking his God for his health? His wealth?
Food in a land where so many don't have enough?
Was he interceding for his children, or other loved ones?
Praying for their safety and security in these troubled times?

Perhaps he wasn't praying for any of these at all--
perhaps he was praying for me— I who
sat in the corner and ate my food--
and didn't pray at all...

Stevie at the Coffee Shop

(Stevie was a local character at a coffee shop where I hung out. He never said much, but always seemed to enjoy being around the lively, talkative crowds, and of course, the music.)

Poor old Stevie shuffles in
his clothes all askew,
a nervous glance around the room
and he slowly makes his way
to the back
where the musician
strums his guitar.

Bright red suspenders cover
a sweat stained shirt,
dirty worn jeans
top old black scuffed shoes.
A watch on each arm to tell the time
and pockets stuffed with cigarettes,
and a single cup of coffee,
free of charge.

The song is soft and quiet
and rhythmic in its beat.
Stevie sits in rapt attention
chewing softly along with the tune.

He's the only one
who in his innocence and joy
claps for the singing minstrel.

Time Marches On

(This old lady came in with the assistance of her son, to one of those new and modern restaurants, where she sat down and looked around her in bewilderment, almost as if she was looking at an alien planet. I felt sorry for her, and wondered what must be going through her mind.)

An old lady struggles
with shaky hands and uncertain step
as she climbs a single flight of stairs

The dimness of her eyes
are haunted by only memories of a
life fitfully lived

She watches the people go by,
as she tries to take in a speeding
and ever changing world.

The blaring music barely heard,
so different than the simpler
melodies she has known.

And I know my time is coming--
perhaps years from now,
but it is coming.

And suddenly, now in my safe
healthy active world,
I find myself
very
afraid.

The V.A.

(I had taken a friend to the VA for a medical appointment, and waited outside in the parking lot. I was watching all the people, young and old, enter and exit the facility, and thought about the massive, heart wrenching struggle that must go on inside.)

Shattered Souls
Marching in to face
Hope and Care
Fear and Despair
Within the Hallowed blood-red Walls

And inside the Battle rages
For Life and Breath
Dignity and Peace
Against Death and Not-Yet-Death

And in temporary Victory,
or perhaps in utter Defeat
Old Soldiers slowly leave this Battlefield
Of the Mind and Body and Soul.

Some to go home,
and some to go Home.

February 13

(I've been guilty of this myself...)

The men make their holy pilgrimages
to the card store and flower shop
on a desperate last minute quest
to find for their one true love
a meaningful symbol
of what is rarely spoken.

Old Men at the Mall

(One of the first people watching poems I wrote. The two men sitting on the bench looked like they had been placed there as statuary, as if that was where they were supposed to be.)

Old men sitting on a bench
in the mall outside the
Strawbridge and Clothier store

Waiting patiently for their wives
to complete their quest
for their Holy Grail.

Slumped,
a carved drawn look
of desperation,
frustration,
aggravation,

molded by the years
into patient resignation
quietly waiting,
watching
as life goes walking past,
happy and content,
with their packages,
purchases,
and purpose.

Old Man Homeless

(I don't know why, but it seems as if old men are a subject of a lot of my poems. This was first published in Whetstone, Issue 27.)

Old man homeless
standing on the street corner
grinning from ear to ear.

He's got a great secret
to life, love, happiness, and wealth.

And he's not tellin'.