



Agora

Agora

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Belmont Abbey College

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Summer Storm

by Sr. Jane Russell, O.S.F.

One of summer's homely thrills
is standing outside in a thunderstorm—
not completely exposed, but under
an overhang, gauging how far
I can pace without being totally

soaked. There was a delicious menace
in blackening clouds
and freshening breeze,
a game in trying to race the rain
back home before it unleashed.

Now huddled under the patio roof
I exult in the rain-cooled air,
the flashes and crashes a roaring beast
kept at bay by timber and art.

“Deep calls unto deep
in the roar of your cataracts.”
Wild the night that rouses
my untamed heart.

Remembering the Future

by Andy Silver

When my teenage daughter brought home her new friend from school, I noticed that there was something unusual about Sam. He seemed so tranquil and inwardly content; his eyes and face translucent, almost luminous. Sam was a talented sketch artist and had this in common with Susan's older brother, Andrew, but Andrew had always been rather indifferent about his art and rarely practiced. Andrew was at home that day, his moody frustration seeping through our house, as it had for months. (I had told myself that Andrew's moods were "part of being a teenager...normal for his age.")

I noticed that when Sam first picked up drawing pencils and began sketching something, Andrew, sitting across the large room, became very quiet. It was as if some sort of unusual awareness, perhaps telepathy, began between them. Sam was even built in the same lean way that Andrew was. They might have been brothers. Andrew, sitting elsewhere in the kitchen area, reached for his own drawing pencils.

With a few minutes of quiet work (I don't remember even if words were shared by any of the rest of us, who were all in our own little worlds), the two boys had sketched the same quirky scene of a house in a rustic setting in the autumn with the same afternoon shadows falling haphazardly across the outside porch furniture. They couldn't possibly have seen what the other one was drawing, and yet had visited the same imaginary setting.

Andrew, who always seemed so frustrated, was looking reflective and captivated, as if transported into his drawing. I had never seen him this way. The energy of Sam's presence, perhaps his luminous spirit, was a clue...was the vehicle, which had taken them both to this special inner place.

The boys finished their drawings at about the same time. Susan had been watching Sam out of the corner of her eye. That day at school, she had sensed Sam was different from other boys and had invited him home to meet all of us. He was new to her school—just transferred with his family to our town—and over the next fifteen days became like a family member to all of us.

Each weekday of the next two weeks was spent like every other with the kids hanging out after school at our house. My five children, each so different in their gifts or lack of them, had always been influenced by Andrew's moodiness, as if it were the axle in the wheel that we all rotated around. With the introduction of Sam into our family group (and his folks only too happy for their son to spend time with people who appreciated him), we were complete in some way. It was as if the energy that usually bumped and thumped around that wheel finally ran smoothly.

On the fifteenth day, which was a Sunday, we managed to round everyone up and take all the kids, including Sam, to the beach, a few hours from our home. I was sitting on the dunes, just enjoying seeing all of them so contentedly wading and playing in the surf. Susan and Sam were a few feet from each other when I noticed Sam thump his chest and cough.

The next thing I knew, Susan was screaming at me, and Sam was slumped on the sand, his eyes rolled back in his head. As I rushed forward, I could see his face. He was smiling beatifically. Then he was gone.

Andrew, who had been the farthest away, raced over, threw himself on Sam and started CPR, but it was obvious that Sam had died, that dear, sweet boy. We were all so stunned. Someone walking nearby called the paramedics.

The next few days were such a blur...the call to Sam's parents, Sam's funeral, and nights with my children. A death had occurred within our family and yet we were all very much alive...except that something had been born, a gift had been given that would remain with us, for us to cultivate.

A few days after the funeral, my children were all in the kitchen area, each doing some activity, when Andrew picked up his sketching pencils for the first time in at least a week. He had been so low. His grief in losing Sam was not anything that he knew how to put into words. During those fifteen days, he and Sam had sketched many identical scenes while being on opposite sides of the room, reflective of the inner bond they shared. And also in those past short weeks and for the first time since age ten, Andrew had become a quiet, confident, reflective guy with a pleasing disposition.

That day, Andrew found himself drawing a picture of a closet door with the light from within the closed closet reflecting on the floor under the door. This turned out to be an actual closet, and Andrew kept looking into the next room where the closet was with a pleading look on his face.

The drawing finished, he got up abruptly and went to that closet, which was closed, and lay down on the floor outside it. I followed and was amazed watching him slide one outstretched hand under the lower edge of the closed closet door. The closet light came on.

We were dumbfounded, but Andrew got this joyful look on his face. He whispered, "Sam is right here, Sam is right there. He's gone but he lives there behind the door." The light blinked off and on twice. We were speechless.

Sam had gone home and yet had returned in some invisible but real way. Andrew seemed to be the only one who could make contact with Sam in this way, lying down on the floor outside the closed closet door, reaching out with his fingers, and having the lights blink.

Fortunately this didn't become some sort of parlor game to attract the neighborhood kids. Instead, Andrew, who needed reassurance occasionally from getting the closet lights to blink, started to carry the experience of his connection with Sam throughout his day. His drawings reflected scenes that were not of this world. His personality became consistently thoughtful, considerate of others, exceptionally patient and loving towards me and his siblings.

The effect on our family from that short gift of Sam's presence was remarkable. We experienced a deep sense of gratitude for each other. We each no longer felt challenged to defend ourselves, or criticize someone else. Everyone in the family felt assured of their unique and valued place in our family. Afternoons in the kitchen together after school became the best part of the day for each of us.

At school, my five kids, ages ten through sixteen, still play sports, are members of clubs, run for elected offices, and act in school plays. I still carpool as much as ever. Sam's name doesn't come up every day. Yet the peacefulness we find within ourselves when we are together emanates from us when we are apart. At the end of the day, being together quietly in the same room allows us to recharge our batteries. The television just never seems to get turned on.

Andrew continues to draw the kinds of drawings the rest of the world could relate to, but at home with us, his sketches fill many books and convey a lot about the world that Sam now lives in...the shapes, the lives of people who are in the world next door.

Sam's parents moved away. He had been their only child and somehow they had never gotten to know their son the way we had in our short fifteen days. They were in their late forties when Sam was born, so his childhood had been spent alone or with a few friends from school. It was as if we had adopted Sam just before he made his transition. Really, though, he adopted us.

Just like an orchestra tunes up before a performance, he taught us, as his powerful parting gift, to value our instruments; our spending time together has helped us remain in tune.

Garden Walkway

by Mary Moses



December Memory

by Stephen Miss

All that remains
 of the cedar
Farmhouse by the
 side of the road
Is a rusting
 tin roof at rest
On a glazed patch
 of burnt orange earth

Struck by lightning
 three months prior
The oak tree, its
 leafless branches
Spare hangers dangling
 in an empty
Closet, provides
 neither shade

Nor cover for an
 orphaned pine sprig
Visible only
 at second glance
To those driving
 indifferently
Beneath a drift
 of blue-gray sky

Against an Ottoman

by Ted Cooke



Bumping Off Barbie

by Mike Hood

When Bobby Sellers pulled the wings off a butterfly in third grade, it made me angry. His skinny little arms were sticking out through the short sleeves of his khaki shirt, and I wondered what he would do if someone yanked them out of their sockets. When my dad threw two kittens across the creek because he didn't want to deal with them, I never quite trusted him again. And when Joyce, cussing like a sailor, would kick the side of her Arabian horse to cinch up the saddle, I wanted to give her a swift one in the gut too.

All I want to say is that I'm not a cruel person. My tom cat sleeps with me every night and I treat him right. And I love my stuffed animals too. I'd feel bad if anything happened to any one of them because you could say I've numbered the hairs on their head. But the deal is off when it comes to Barbie.

I still get them for Christmas, birthday, and special occasions. My friend Taylor must have a hundred or so, but she's not allowed to take them out of the boxes which line the shelf that goes all the way around her room near the ceiling. I take mine out of the box immediately.

The historical Barbies are the easiest. Take Joan of Arc Barbie. My friend Lauren and I cut off her hair, tied her to a stake in the back yard, put kerosene soaked kindling under her feet, and the rest, as they say, is history. With Queen Elizabeth I Barbie, we painted her face with white nail polish and

watched her die a slow, painful death from lead poisoning. The Marie Antoinette Barbie was really the most fun. Lauren held her by the legs on the chopping block (where many a chicken had lighted the way to dusty death as my mom says), her long golden hair cascading over the edge. Then whack! I brought the hatchet down on her extra long neck and her head dropped into my little Tiny Tim Easter basket.

NASCAR Barbie was easy too. I got two of them from my West Coast relatives who think we're all rednecks cuz we live in the South. I tied the first NASCAR Barbie behind my dad's pickup with heavy duty nylon twine. When he came home that night, all that was hanging from his tailpipe was a frayed piece of twine. I wedged the second one behind the rear tire of my mom's car. The only part that didn't resemble a pancake was her left arm. But when Lauren and I prepared her for burial, I accidentally dropped the twenty pound rock we were going to use as her headstone on her good arm.

Beach Blanket Barbie was also a kick you might say. We buried her in the dirt up to her chin and then Lauren kicked her head off, soccer style of course. We played in the backyard until I finally scored a goal.

But the one that gave me fits was Mermaid Barbie. She was Barbie from the waist up and fish from the waist down. I left her in the sun for days, but she still had that vacant look on her face. I put her face down in the wading pool and left her there till Friday. Nothing. Then Lauren suggested a fish fry. I know my dad is going to be furious when he sees the bar-b-cue because part of Mermaid Barbie is still stuck to the grill, but the tail, which we served on the plates to my Mad Hatter Tea Set, was very tasty. Lauren says we'll have to do it again soon.

Rosary

A Poem for Michael

by Rebecca Munro

“Hail Mary,
full of Grace, the Lord is...”

I am Catholic,
but do not know the Rosary.
Perhaps you will teach me
To tell the beads.

“The Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou...”

You drink iced tea.
Moisture beads on the glass,
shines and runs like tears.
The sugar is half gone.
My house knows you.

“Blessed art thou among women,
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb...”

We prick our fingers;
blood drops like ruby beads.
We press them together.
blood brother, blood sister.
Remember me.

“Blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus.
Holy Mary, mother of God,
Pray...”

At the Cross's foot,
the blood dries: brown beads
in dust.
His wounds press against mine,
against yours:
our veins, our life.

“Pray for us sinners,
now and at the hour...”

The old native woman
makes beads of juniper.
Hung in my room,
They tell the years,
the lifetime it takes
to learn to love.

Squawk Box

by Mike Hood

“Yeah, they wrote me up once in Parade. You know that magazine in the Sunday paper. ‘Fructophobia doesn’t stop Bobby Stobbs from serving smoothies to thirsty teens.’ Or something like that. They wrote it all down. And I been on the radio too.”

Bobby leaned back on his cigarette-burned couch in his tiny beat up tract home and cradled the back of his neck in the palms of his two big hands. His elbows shot up along with his t-shirt revealing a very d-e-e-p belly button. Could this be the third eye, Edward Dills wondered? Edward was conducting an interview with Bobby for the Morning Standard. Some freaking standard, he thought.

Bobby closed his eyes and began a story he’d told often enough.

“They didn’t know what it was at first. Maw would be chopping up an apple or peeling an orange and I’d get this swimmy head feelin’. And then my stomach started twistin’ and turnin’. The next thing I was haulin’ ass to the outdoor facilities. Hangin’ your head over a privy is enough to make you puke anyway, but it’d get my mind off the fruit. When Maw put up peaches or made preserves, I’d head out and fish for a couple of days until she was done. Daddy said that no kid of his was gonna be afeared of no fruit. The Stobbses, he pointed out, was God-fearin’ people, not no goddamned fruit-fearin’

sissies. He made me pick strawberries and raspberries in June, peaches in July, and plums in August. I'd get about a carrier filled with strawberries before I'd puke in the row and have to crawl into the brushes to recover. By the end of the day," Bobby said with a straight face, "I was plumb wore out."

Bobby pulled himself up and let out a big sigh. His hands were now palm down on his knees.

"After I fell off the ladder a dozen times or so, Mr. Deitering put me to work repairin' peach crates. But pickin' plums for a month or so before school started really got me lookin' muley. When I wore my black and white striped shirt after school got underway, I appeared to be like one of them concentration camp folks we'd been studyin' on. Wilbur Hansen put some numbers in blue ink on my left arm and everyone thought that was real funny. By spring I was lookin' and feelin' better, but I couldn't go back to the fields, so that's when I run away to join the army."

Edward heard the static and the intermittent raspy ejaculations coming from the squawk box in the next room. It reminded him of the reason he was here in the first place.

"In the army after basic," Bobby continued, "they made me a pastry chef. Go figure. Join the army and bake a raspberry tart. Everything's fruit fillin', tons of fruit fillin's—apple, peach, blackberry, blueberry, boysenberry, this berry and that berry—or it's flavored with fruit like lemon meringue or banana cream. I'd open a one gallon can of cherry fillin', let's say, dump out the fruit in a mixing tub just in time to puke in the can. One time what I put in the can ended up in the pastry.

That's when I started stuffing cotton soaked in whiskey up my nose. You have no idea how much cotton a body can get in his nose."

Bobby yawned, stretched and got up from the couch. "Let me show you what I come up with." Edward followed him into the next room.

There was more coming over the squawk box. "...static... [female voice] There's none of that three-eighths coupling in the warehouse...static...[male voice] We can't do nothin' about this drip until we get the three-eghths ...static...[female voice] I'll give Bill Connors a heads up in the main office and see what he can do...static..."

"So that's when I come up with the squawk box. It's like pukin' in the privy. There's nothin' like havin' your face down a two-seater to get your mind off what's ailin' you. When the whiskey is burning up the lining of your mucous membranes, the fruit smell ain't a problem no more neither."

Edward was willing to tentatively accede to the credibility of Bobby's thesis because he was feeling better himself. The squawk box had gotten his mind off Bobby Stobbs and this stupid interview, which would give him a whole lot of trouble trying to write up for tomorrow's paper.

"...static...[male voice] We're gonna need a backhoe over here ASAP. We run into somethin' that won't budge for nothin'...static... [female voice] I'll check the site over on Wilson...maybe we can lowboy something to you this afternoon...static..."

Bobby picked up a squawk box from the wobbly table under the window. “See, this one is our most popular model, the Utility Call 150. It’s like an iPod inside and a squawk box outside. This here button changes the band. The 150’s got over four hours of recordings of cabbies, city utility workers, university maintenance crews, airport ground transportation, police bomb squads, SWAT teams, and such. You can hang it in your pick-up, take it to the beach, play it at work when you got a deadline.”

Edward thought that Bobby might be on to something. The squawk box was like the world thinking out loud, a record of how things got done, progress in the making. For once, Edward felt connected to something bigger, more important than he was. And besides, Bobby was right; who could think while listening to this stuff?

“We can’t make ‘em fast enough,” Bobby said. “Got all kinds of back orders.” Bobby nodded in the direction of his pressboard desk which was littered with papers.

“...static... [agitated male voice] We just busted into a hornets’ nest. I been stung at least twice and my buddy here’s got it worse. I think he might be allergic or something cuz he’s swelled up like a toad...static...[female voice] I got medics on the way...static...[same male voice] I never seen nothin’ like it, I mean they was mad as hornets...static...”

Edward knew he had something important to do, but he just couldn’t remember what it was.

Reflecting Autumn

by Mary Moses



Thoughts of a Lost Highway

by Glen Hayman

Why did I not go with you? Jason and Jason, you who embody the Beat Revolution, you who really were “on the road.” Why could I not follow your lead? Mike who was lost in the works of Heller and Vonnegut, you should have embraced your true fathers, Tennyson and Byron. You were “Mad, bad, and dangerous to know,” but you stood there thinking that you were Stephen and I was your Bloom. I stood there laughing and snickering the way that Eliot or Joyce must have, knowing that in my soul I understood them. They were my brothers in those long nights of lonely friendship. They asked the questions that I longed to know and stated the truth that really existed like dear Alfred, “I do not believe the sirens sing for me also.” I have long lost the power of my youth, the adventure of my childhood. The Quest has gone too long and I can no longer reach the Grail; I am now impure, tainted by the power of reality and its evil stink. I no longer walk with Kings, but once did. I was the black prince that Richard so feared. Now I am a sick and broken man who calls on dead poets like some used to call on spirits. I ask them with the Ouija of my mind, but the answers come back nonsense; I have not faith enough anymore to fool around. I longed to see the beauty of this creation, but like Milton in the end I have just gone blind. Oh Jason, Oh Jason, why hast thou spirit forsaken me? Why can I now not know long embrace, the knowledge of enlightenment

that we once knew, when Melville let us in that one time and we could embrace the whole simply as The Mystery and we were happy with it. I was happy with it. Mike, how could we cry over things like the hopelessness of Catch-22, and now you are in that role, driving a tank, in a war that in your soul I know you loathe? But reality makes a mockery of us all, and history will judge us as a quote: "They were of Great Sound and Great Fury but ultimately they signified nothing." Travel on my brothers; I am lost and I fear never to return.

Trapped in White

by Gabrielle Le Jeune



Gesture in Watercolor and Graphite

by Ted Cooke



Girl on a Swing

by Ryan Barrett



Agora Art & Photography Award

Each year the recipient of this award receives publication in the Agora and a cash prize of twenty-five dollars. This year's award was given to Ryan Barrett for his photograph "Girl on a Swing." This award represents the top submission as judged by the editorial staff and is based on creativity and originality.

Holy Angels Remembered

(for Annika)

by Fr. John Oetgen, O.S.B.

Circled with collar
Destined toward compassion
I once walked with you
Among the lame and halt,
And halted.
Frightened, really,
At the grotesque smiles
And hungry arms
Appealing for affection.

Official-like I stood
Enunciating
Blessings memorized:
Ancient, sanctified,
(I hoped)
And meaningful.

But you stooped.
You grasped within your arms
A most unlovely thing
And from a face distorted

Blossomed smiles (distorted)
That spoke love
In language totally unknown
Yet totally informative.

Hands no one ever thought
Could reach toward anything
Successfully
Caught tossed balls
To win your praise.
And trophied thus
They clapped themselves together
Endlessly.

And at your feet
In love
Those chosen ones of God fell down.
(The weak things of the world...)

Our time was up.
We had to leave them
For the hours
Of determined rest.

Still love lingered
In your eyes
Along the river-side
Where boats indifferently passed
And college boys
In studied stance
Of perfect form
Served us beer.

Staff

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Special thanks to Donella Haywood-Vignolini.

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"Birthplace of Democracy, the Agora dozes at
the foot of the Acropolis. Athenians
thronged here to discuss, harangue, litigate,
and philosophize."

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