



JACK DAVIES

THESE STORIES

My friend Michael is always bugging me for something I've written. He runs a newspaper so he's partly trolling for material. I tell him *some things* have to get done but writing isn't one of them. He thinks it's just excuses but he lives alone. He talks about war and aging the way women talk about childbirth and dieting. Sometimes he prints my poems in his paper and he always spells my name wrong.

My mom was a grade school reading teacher with five kids. She was poor when I was in grade school because my dad ran off. We qualified for free lunch but my mom never made me take it. They gave you a red ticket instead of green. Ladies in the school kitchen used to give her leftover food to take home to us. She never told me that. My best friend's grandmother worked in the kitchen. That's how I found out. I didn't want to eat the food but I did. I never told my mom I knew where it came from. She had it hard enough.

My high school English teacher got upset with me once for reading a Harlequin Romance behind my English book. She met me at the classroom door the next day with a book of poems and said if you're going to do that in my class you'd better at least read something good. She was a lesbian who rode a motorcycle and the first woman I ever met who insisted on Ms. Instead of Miss. The book was inscribed "to patsy love joey" I liked it so much I never gave it back. Don't write "angry" she would say. Tell the story of the anger. But do it quickly. And use examples. And few words as possible. And short words are better than long ones. But don't be afraid of a long one if it's what you really need. Sometimes she spit when she talked. Economy of language she used to say.

I really hated college but stuck it out anyway. Shakespeare was mandatory but you had to choose, comedies or tragedies. You couldn't take both. The first day of required *Philosophical Ethics*, the professor asked why we were in college in the first place. One guy said to get an education and the teacher snorted. He asked how many of us would leave right now if we were guaranteed a good paying job that wouldn't kill us or anyone else. I was the only one who raised my hand.

I'm reading a book about Raymond Carver. He was a writer, then a drunk for ten years. Then he dried out and really wrote the hell out of things. Just when it was getting good he dropped dead at fifty of lung cancer. He smoked NOW cigarettes right till the end. He knew he was going to die but he wasn't even bitter. He wrote this one poem early on about his kid's dog getting run over and how he was almost glad because he really wrote a good poem about it. His last poems were mostly just saying thanks. I've always had a soft spot for drunks with stories. Reminds me of my dad.

A German woman who lives down the street from me once told me I looked like a movie star. I wanted to ask which one but was afraid. She's a retired language teacher and has a really old yellow dog she walks past my house a few times a day. She talks to the dog in German and he seems to like it. I've never been inside her house but she has these curtains with big orange and brown circles all over them and her sweet pea patch out front blooms all the way into October.

You know, my friend Michael doesn't write poetry which is probably the reason we're still friends. I usually don't like dreamers at all and liberals are the worst. Way too many big words. Republicans, Catholics, old men who were farmers or soldiers, they'd make good poets if they knew just what to do. Oh yeah, and alcoholics. They're the best.

WHAT WE ARE LEFT WITH

~for Paul, Fenton, Grandpa & Grandma P, & especially Viki

There's a man who comes into the tavern
shaggy hair and sideburns
the same striped shirt everyday.
Forget manners, trivia, front page news.
In love, he doesn't realize the bartender gets paid
to smile.

Outside, high on a wire above the river
a pessimistic crow sits every day at four o'clock.
He watches the cook, waitress and dishwasher
chain smoking wearing the same old white shirts
just like always.

Downtown, a lawyer logs fifteen hour days swigging
tumblers of whiskey, complaining how political
the world is becoming as he tries to keep politicians
out of jail. His secretary sits playing solitaire promiscuously
handing out privileged information.

Further up the hill, an old lady no one ever forgets
sits alone in a room of her choosing with a calendar.
It is a scorecard marking points of who comes to pay attention.
Nothing's really wrong here and she's had all the ring, teacups,
silvery teaspoons she ever wanted. Just spoiled, she
never learned to eat alone.

The town continues to spin which is fine.
It wants new houses to be built where the plywood mill used to be.
The cruise ships coming into port add more scenery for the lawyer, the secretary
and the old lady than they take away.
Everything is the same for the man and the bartender at the tavern.
Even his striped shirt and her thin smile though the crow notices the dishwasher and
the cook
wear nice, familiar second hand coats to smoke
because it's getting colder outside.

It's out in the country where you notice most
what we are left with. Not in the rural routes that now have names or
corn and pancake feeds becoming tourist attractions. That's actually a bit
romantic, not at all hard to live with.
No. It is most noticeable in standing next to the old men on the bridge above
Big Creek. It is in watching the salmon jumping upstream above the churning waters.
It is noticing those collecting in the deeper, stiller waters along the edges to rest.
It is that we aren't left with any words to tell them
so we talk about fishing.

FRIENDS AT THE RIVER'S EDGE

For Paul Jackson, Columbia River Bar Pilot
who died at age 57 on October 19, 2003

I used to have a neighbor, a young woman,
whose husband was in the Coast Guard
until he got cancer and passed away
one summer in his own bed.

She said it was hard to believe he was gone
since he was gone so often.
At first, to face the mornings, she told herself
he was just out to sea and would
be home soon.
Then it became a habit she couldn't break.
She moved because she couldn't look at the river
for the rest of the days
and I never knew what became of her.

I think of her sometimes when I am on the riverwalk
watching your men pilot your ships
walking where your boots touched until that one day
when you crossed your last bar.

That poor young wife.
How sad to have to give up the lovely habit of
scanning the horizon, waiting
for a man to return from his voyage.

As friends we are unconcerned with curfews, ticking clocks
or promises made with altars between.
We pour out a pint
choose a topic in your honor.
Scrabble tiles laid out
dogs warming our feet
we are waiting for you to come home from the sea.

Debby Barendse Reed is a lifelong resident of the Oregon north coast.
She is a teacher, poet, waitress and mother. Poems from her book
'Brownsmead Stories' appeared in the Marpril 2004 issue of the NCTE.

