

2018 Annual Contest Winners: Portrait Category

First Place

Assumpsit

By Donna Kelly

My friend is buried in Nebraska,
but I have not been to the grave.

It is the same prairie, same needlegrass,
same seamless sheet of colorless sky,
I suppose, as that boundless pavement
framing my breaths,
my walks, my worries.

A sister-state of continuity,
supreme flatness, an eternal stretch,
the feel of steady flight,
when you see
all is unremarkable
and unobstructed in the distance –
a sense that is unmatched by placement on any mountain,
or vision of any distracting, too-colorful thing.

A week before I traded the Fox River Valley
for the slow dance of the Big Sioux,
I learned that he was ill:
“gravely so”, a colleague informed me *via* text.

I called to check on the professor the next day,
and we arranged to meet in the county seat,
in a restaurant with dim lighting, but good food,
across from the farmers’ courthouse in the Illinois town,

and it was not a dying man who came to meet me -
but a spirit,
so light,
that his words sojourned carefree
as if troubles were river water,
greeting any boulder by dashing to its sides,
or skimming across its flattened top,
like champagne,
a celebration:
all of wit,
triumphing,
all of life,
delighting.

He was full of mirth and memories,
as though he had returned to the classroom,
pacing over the "Hairy Hand" case,
unjust enrichment, assumpsit.
Sidestepping the cancer,
he spoke of his students from my graduating class
of more than two decades ago.

He pulled up an alumni list on his cellphone,
and he read each name,
wanting to know where each was working;
but he knew, better than I,
which one was a partner downtown,
which one was in D.C.,
which one was a felony court judge,

and it seemed as if he was comforted
by the thought of them in a courtroom,
or in a boardroom, or in a classroom:
in knowing that the law had held them close,
as though he were sitting on a sofa in his bungalow,
with a cup of coffee, a gray cat,
a cough, a smile,
book upon book,
surrounded by these students,
surrounded by this family.

Drawn by the sweetness of his disposition,
and our knowledge of his aloneness,
we rang his doorbell at the close
of the first semester of our 1-L lives.
We had survived torts and contracts
and the Clarence Thomas senate confirmation hearings.

The bars had closed in the college town,
the fields were covered with snow,
and when he opened his door,
he was greeted by off-key,
raucous, Christmas carols,
sung by red-nosed revelers.

This post-midnight awakening
was met only with bemusement,
and an invitation inside,
out of concern,
I suppose,
that our year would not
end well if a neighbor complained.

Though it seems like only a handful of years have passed,
he was younger then,

than I am presently -
and that is the pace at which a trial lawyer's life moves,
is not heeded by foundations,
and objections,
and summations;
traverses like the argument of the water against the rocky falls;
confronts,
combats,
and convinces people
to succumb,
to believe;
deals with lives that have been eroded,
but cannot make any of them whole.

My friend is buried in Nebraska,
but I have not been to the grave,

though it is only about a three-hour drive,
and I think about how when I told him that I was moving to Sioux Falls,
his face was like a beam of light
in that sepulchral bistro,
and he said,
"That's not too far from Omaha."

And I had forgotten,
until he said that then,
that he had gone to Creighton.
And I did not know,
when he said that then,
that he would be buried six weeks later
in a field in Nebraska.

"It's not for everyone,"
is its new state slogan,
but I imagine there is a beauty there
that draws people in with its
ubiquitous, cornfield-framed certainty,
its understated simplicity,
its miles of antiquity,
just as I have been enchanted
by its neighbor.

He was remarkable
in his humility,
and he returned to a place
where the shoulders of wildflowers are muted:
shades of stonewashed blue,
cigarette white, and washed-out purple:
a fitting place for him to be at rest,
among other veterans in
the national cemetery,

although his service was a silent part of him.

My friend is buried in Nebraska,
but I don't need to visit his grave.

He has undertaken.
He has a lease with the pale purple cornflower,
an implied warranty with the musk thistle,
a memorandum of understanding with the globemallow.

He will remain beneath the common sky:
the infinity that trespasses
like an off-key version of Silent Night across the prairie,
across state lines.
The distance has demurred,
to the stretch of my lone arms across bluestem grass.
There is a quartering wind,
relentless:
We are all kites
that hover,
then settle,
here.

Second Place

“Teno’s Tacos”

By Katy Beem

Teno made tacos.
Home-hewn flour tortilla
cradling spiced burger
festooned with shredded cheese
orange confetti flung triumphantly on a parade of teeming meat crumbles.

Frozen on a Styrofoam bed and sealed in Saran,
Teno’s Tacos enticed from the buzzing meat cooler in Farmer’s Market Grocery
on the corner where the gravel met Dakota Avenue.

Exotic amidst the chops and sausage,
delicately cratered half-moon tortillas beamed bright
in a pale-pink swath of organ meats and stew bones.

Mom small talks with the amiable, blood-stained butcher
I read the hand-written label: *Authentic and handmade in Teno’s own kitchen.*

Who is Teno and why does he make tacos?

Secretly, I wonder if Teno is my father,
not living unknown in Los Angeles, but present and enterprising,
the builder of a split level taqueria beneath a sanctuary of Dutch Elms just over on Kansas
Street.

I long to search him out, sit at the work-cluttered table in his steamy kitchen,
watch his large brown hands swiftly shape dough into balls
flattened between soft, clapping palms lined with cornmeal.

His mother sits at the table beside me, chopping her millionth onion,
Monitors Teno’s progress on the recipe
she brought from Aguas Calientes
Basta chile, hijo! No tan picante!
Abuelita smiles at me, puts her hand over mine,
returns to her onion.
Teno, belly to the stovetop,
thick, dark hair haloing his high forehead,
rolls his Emerald Spanish eyes, sniffs his aquiline nose,
a domesticated Ricardo Montalban.
Winks at me as he pinches more ancho into the pot
Si, mama.

Mom has finished up with the butcher, calls for me to pick out some cereal.
What about these?
Casting her eyes into the cooler, she sighs, shakes her head
Too spicy, too expensive.

Third Place

Taking Lunch to the Field, (Circa 1964)

By S.D. Bassett

I remember taking lunch to the field
on hot summer afternoons
with my Mother.
Baloney sandwiches,
or cold roast.
Large slices of fresh cake.
Coffee in a quart jar.
I always watched her pour the coffee,
because she always told me to stay away.
I know how to do that now;
pour hot coffee into a glass jar.
First you heat a jar with hot tap water,
then place a long metal utensil in the jar,
and slowly pour coffee on the utensil
until the jar is almost full.
Then you cap it.
Mayonnaise jars can leak or burst.
Canning jars are best.
Keep it upright,
wrapped in a thick towel.
We'd get in the car,
a big white one with trunk fins.
The best was taking the "gully road"
where I'd say "go fast"
through a dip that was gigantic;
anticipating a stomach lurch
that always came.
I remember oat and wheat and swathing.
The smell of late summer,
cut grain, hot coffee,
and hot, red-faced, sweaty men.
Dust lodged in skin creases,
their white t-shirts grey.
I had my own sandwich, cake,
and jelly jar of water, or Kool-aide.
Dad let me dip in his coffee,
our combined butter oiling the dark top.
I wanted to run across the golden cut fields.
Pretend I was on a fine horse
galloping across an endless expanse of prairie
for absolutely no reason.
(Needing reasons would come later.)
Running was not allowed.
I would be reminded of this.
For all its golden enticement,

grain stubble is hard and sharp,
a lesson my ankles frequently learned.
I'd watch the men eat instead.
Big sloshes of coffee.
Big bites of cake;
making even date cake look good.
Then the food would be gone,
coffee drunk, jar recapped.
We'd drive back through the gully
in our white-finned car.
The stomach lurch less impressive.
Arriving home, Mother entered the house,
returning to her endless list
of farmwife work.
And as the hot,
waning, summer days
poured into my life,
I'd straddle my latest stick horse named Maisy,
gallop down the dirt driveway
that was actually a golden expanse
of endless prairie.
I'd ride for absolutely no reason.
Riding until I was red-faced, hot, and sweaty.
Dust filling my skin creases and on my clothes.
Riding until I was tired and out of breath.
Riding until my childhood was gone.