

*IM POE TENT*

"Hazy March sun, lazy and impotent,"

I wrote in a poem at 17.

I loved that word "impotent": I pronounced it

IM Poe Tent and felt sophisticated even

Knowing it. I had only the vaguest idea

of what it meant of course.

Thinking of Jake, probably, Hemingway's man in

*The Sun Also Rises,*

the wounded war hero hopelessly in love.

Wounded down there, somewhere, and Bret, the woman he loved,

And she loved him but not enough to keep her from other men.

But what could he do? Being wounded and all.

Down there.

I was a very sheltered boy. Twelve-year-olds today would  
be astonished at my ignorance. And how could I not be?

The only things I knew I read in books, and

*look up* masturbation in an old-time Dictionary.

Miss Bork, our senior English teacher, told us you can't define a word

with the same word. It's a rule.

Masturbation: the book entombed, the act of masturbating.

I would have brought it to Miss Bork herself, but knew it was all  
part of the secret.

At least my body did what male bodies did, though I was not to know

I wasn't alone in my condition

since Catholic boys didn't speak of stuff like that.

I asked a very gentle priest when 13 or so about

the odd distortions

and excretions my body was experiencing,

And he, a very gentle priest explained about  
the bodies and the unions and the plan, the divine one  
and my personal one in my distant,  
distant future, and  
I truly, truly,  
had no clue.

And do my parents undress when they do this? I finally asked  
for he had started with my parents though I hadn't thought to connect  
my parents with the strange things happening to me.  
Yes, he answered and I was shocked. How can they?  
I don't know, he answered, equally  
Appalled.

At 17 I had only necked, petted some. My education slowly moved.

The girls I dated were only slightly ahead of me.  
I laughed

the first time a girl  
put her tongue into my mouth.

French kissing she called it, and the couple in the front seat snickered  
at me.

At sixteen I dated Cheryl and at her door, one half block from my own,  
we'd  
often neck and gently feel each other's body.

One night I began slowly,  
very slowly, to slide open the pearl buttons on the back of her dress,

Guiding each pearl roundness through each  
narrow slit, blindly feeling my

Way. Each opening a permission to go on  
to the next. No sightless explorer

Ever thrilled at Braille's revelations  
more than my fingers in their exploration.

In Fellini's *Amarcord*, he has a young boy you feel must have been him,  
moving closer and closer to the town Beauty  
in the village's movie theatre. Nearer and nearer,  
seat by seat, he pushes towards his goal  
while she stares straight ahead. And when he is next to  
her, he puts his hand upon her thigh.

She turns to him, astonished. What are you doing? She asks, only then  
aware of him—and he slinks away, seat by seat.

Cheryl was shocked when she finally felt the breeze  
upon her bare back. Offended and hurt.

She looked at me with eyes that could have been

my gentle priest's. Don't you respect me?

What have I done to make you think I was that kind of girl?

Are you that kind of boy?

I *was* that kind of boy.

When we later dated in our twenties, in New York, 90 miles away from our small town,

I reminded Cheryl of that night and how abashed we all were at the mischief  
my fingers had wrought. What a prude I was, she said, but that's not so.

We were youthful and fully potent  
but so enclosed in our cloistered lives. My fingers

sliding down

Cheryl's back---didn't know but suspected

they were maneuvering the minefield of love much like

Jake drove his

ambulance through pitted Italian fields

though we were not wounded

down there. Not wounded yet, at least.

*Jersey Boy Out West*

The 14-year-old boy stares at the camera,  
standing by two horses: Pixie and Coco,  
the Oregon landscape behind him spread like a cowboy  
Painting of the West.

No Indians, though, except in his imagination.

He'd race across the plain and up a few hills

with Pixie. He'd get in trouble

when they saw her sweat. He'd be relegated to Coco, then,

the old mare for beginners,

and if she moved at all, she'd only trot

back to the barn.

He was a Jersey boy sent West for a year

to do something with him, since nothing was working back East.

He had galloped a bit too fast in Jersey with

no old mare holding

him back.

He seems calm in the photograph as if the

emptiness of the landscape had

absorbed all his adolescence angst. As if Coco's

phlegmatic stoicism

had transferred itself to him.

It hadn't.

I remember that boy. All photographs lie

a bit.

The truth is in his eyes which try

to please and hide.

Wordsworth tells us that the child is father to the man,

And I am still that boy, wishing my future

Stretched out in natural piety.  
That boy's future is my past now---no murders and no  
high crimes, though  
    many misdemeanors.  
It's going to be all right, I'd like  
    to tell that boy, but I still don't know  
if that is so  
though hindsight is more than 20-20 now.  
Too soon to tell, Chou En Lai  
replied when asked if the French Revolution was  
    a success. Count no man happy  
until he's dead,  
and all the dread I read in that boy's face  
cannot fend off  
the fractured future that is coming on  
or amend  
    a sweet-remembered past  
that's gone.

*St. Francis and Joey*

St. Francis, he was told, by Sister Mary Caroline,  
his first grade teacher,  
threw all he owned away.  
He wanted to be poor.  
Free from all the material  
possessions a rich young man  
in 14<sup>th</sup> century Assisi might possess.

Joey wanted to be free, too.  
He was already, in South Jersey 1952 terms,  
poor, though nobody had told him that.  
But he knew he wasn't free,  
and he wanted to be.  
So he threw what he had away---  
his jacket, his first grade reader  
with its nice neat family of David and Anne  
and Pal,  
his shoes, too--- and ran sock-footed  
up and down the field at the edge of the  
new housing development, yelling,  
I'm poor, Lord, poor, meaning,  
he gathered later,  
I'm free, Lord, free.

But he wasn't, of course.  
He was just six.  
Nobody is free at six.  
At seven, the age of reason,  
the choice of hell looms, and six is spared that, at least,  
but six reads, and knows its limits.  
He had had to turn in his running already  
for the field abruptly stopped  
at two torn trees waiting for the bulldozers.

Joey wondered, as he paused, who would feed him?  
Who would help him find his jacket, for that matter,  
and his shoes, for though it was just October

and winter's edge more than a few fallen leaves away,  
his feet were cold, he noticed, suddenly,

and the night sky strange and menacing.

*Parking the Valiant*

We'd leave the 71 Valiant parked askance  
by the mail boxes,  
as if we had skidded in from route 15,  
maneuvering as far away as possible  
from the coal trucks,  
rumbling down the twisted road  
like bulls fresh from paddocks,  
looking for matadors.

We did this conscientiously  
though we would not have minded  
a squashed remnant and an insurance check which  
was the only possible money  
that car would ever generate.

Its slant 6 motor chugged like a fine mind  
in an octogenarian,  
but its body was rapidly going  
the way of all metal in Eastern Kentucky.  
We would spare it, though,  
the indignity of a creek burial.

We had no choice but to leave it  
by the side of the road,  
and stretch what we didn't then  
know were young muscles to climb our hill,  
a third of a mile up.  
We were the North side and Spring came later,  
ice patches caught in curves  
the sun never reached.

Sometimes we shifted child or groceries  
from one hip to another  
and contemplated the view across the river  
showing yellow and purple quilting,  
weeks before the merest bud bloomed on our mountainside.  
We'd grumble then about the unfairness of Spring  
and the caprice of sunlight,  
the treachery of ice,  
and the budget constraints that kept us too poor  
to consider four-wheeled possibilities,  
though ice and shade ambushed them, too,  
and we might pass one  
upended in a ditch,  
hood down, rear wheels up,  
doing penance for its hubris.

But really the slow walk gave us the details  
of what would have been  
a blur of last minute hurry,



for child and chore demands  
pressed the end of days into one big deadline.

No one hurried up that hill;  
we'd have to sit and rest a spell,  
and answer all the questions  
a child could come up with,  
or do our best.

And when Spring finally came,  
it came up close,  
a purple violet's tiny splendor  
we never would have spotted  
in our chugging aging Valiant.

### *Basement Apartments*

When Elizabeth,  
    Who had gone back to Colorado  
sent her friend to look him up  
    years later, it was a favor.  
See how Joe Anthony is doing, she asked,  
    And her friend, owing her some small return,  
did.

It's how things happen in the world.  
He doesn't think he would  
have dated Elisabeth if she  
    hadn't been living in the basement apartment.

They wouldn't have met in that casual way  
that allows intimacy to build without design,

in hallways

and neighbors' rooms, on front stoops

and corner delis.

Intimacy hadn't grown its roots deep enough

to last Elisabeth going away and the loss

Of casual touch. Coupled

In that small world

And lost without it.

Her friend became his friend,

And further on the mother

Of his children who owe their very lives, so

To speak, to their father's small range,

his dislike of change, his inclination

to date the girl

he met at his front door, or the girl she sent.

Of course, her friend could have bent the rules,

found another way to pay her favor.

Who knows what Joe Anthony

would have done then?