

Yesterday's Oars

I used to love the soothing, slippery feeling
of reaching into a sink of warm, soapy water
and searching for the next plate
beneath the bubble cloud.

I'd carefully pinch the rim and slide its face
halfway through the surface
and swirl the sponge around its front and back
before passing it under the faucet's stream
and standing it next to its sisters
stacked in the drying rack.

Then, in the name of efficiency,
we bought a dishwasher,
and I was liberated
from this age-old chore
that connected me
to my youth, my parents and those before.

A fire no longer burns deep into the night,
and none of us can remember a tune
or tell a many-chaptered story
to bring the dark alive.

We've been set free and adrift
in an electronic ocean without yesterday's oars
and only the vaguest notion
of how to read the stars.

Martin at the Keyboard

*Martin Lesch - Journey Through Jazz
The Jazz Corner, Hilton Head SC*

His smile shows slowly.

When first seated he doesn't grin.
His fingers skip lightly, searching
as if slipping a key into the front door
like a husband slips his hand
past the popcorn, along his wife's wrist,
and into her palm when the previews finish
and the feature starts to fill the screen.

Then there's just the slightest pause
when he looks up at what must be
his most familiar view,
the trio on guitar, bass and drums,
and without a word of introduction,
with no welcome or preview,
he begins something slow and comfortable,
a kind of syncopated warm-up
with key chords dropped in place
like a castle's foundation upon which
he begins to build walls, open windows,
then invites his crew to stop by
to take turns describing what they see.

He's like a Las Vegas magician wooing the audience
away from their lobster and into the mystery,
hooking their eyes and ears on a bit of flipped silk
that transforms into a passel of trampling buffalo
then back into an innocent caress.

And that's the moment his jaw first relaxes,
the edges of his mouth begin to rise,
and his growing grin unveils an impish delight
that says, "Got-cha! Didn't I?"

Perfect

“How are we today?
And what will we have?”

The pronouns challenge us,
but we strive for politeness,
smile and ask for water.

“Purr – fect.”

Not exactly! More like a cross
between somewhat clean,
not too loud, and inexpensive.

If we had really sought perfection
we would have dressed up
and reserved a window table
overlooking the harbor
with an ironed white table cloth,
Czechoslovakian crystal,
and an enticing selection of French wine.

When the water arrives
in mostly clean glasses,
she orders a salad, dressing on the side,
and I choose the Spaghetti Bolognese.

We’re told both are “Perfect.”
But when the meal arrives,
the salad is already dressed.

Sometime later, we’re asked,
“Did we leave any room for dessert?”

We look at each other,
know there’s always room,
but decide to leave it empty.

Sunday Cruising in Coastal Georgia

The bright morning light and smooth asphalt of US-17
invite your eye to roam the broad fields,
and up driveways to rust-streaked mobile homes

where two nails hold a railing to the front door
and damp jeans and long-sleeved tops sway on a line
across the shaded opening between two trees.

The highway extends in long stretches of straight
and is siesta-empty with only a few sleepy curves
between rare stoplights like distant cousins who never meet.

Then, toward the far end of a straightaway,
you can see the sun reflecting off a cluster
of parked fenders and windshields,

and you have plenty of time during the long approach
to picture the sales manager's smile and meaty handshake,
the frayed, auto parts calendar behind his chair,

the Styrofoam cup next to a sports page
and a pile of mismatched papers
stacked on the corner of his Army-green, Formica desk.

And you can imagine his shoulders' sway and unhurried voice,
that feels like a breeze caressing the marsh grass
in the damp stillness of a three-T-shirt day,

while he walks you from lightly to roughly driven,
kicking tires, opening doors, fingering electronics,
and asking which ones you'd like to test.

But when you finally arrive, you don't find
an office trailer or a string of red & white pennants,
but a low square of painted-white cinderblock

ready to defy any hurricane's howl.
And in front there's a gold-on-black sign
with another dice-throw's combination

of “New,” “Apostolic,” “First,” “Second,” “Calvary” or “Ebenezer”
that shows you’ve arrived at another warehouse of faith.
Instead of a desk, there’s an ivory pulpit, piano and tiny choir.

The walls are cemented with Amens and Alleluias.
The cars brought believers in clean clothes and shined shoes,
and everyone will leave with a brimming supply of scripture
and a fresh tune-up.

Leavening

Will she take it on faith –
my fistful of pennies, dimes and nickels?

“Believe it or not,” I say,
“it’s two dollars.
I counted it this morning.”

She looks me in the eye
and pushes her finger
around the mound of metal
cupped in her hand.

The line stretches out the door,
patient patrons
bundled against the cold,
waiting to order bagels,
fresh bread to break for breakfast.

“He looks honest,”
a baritone voice chimes down the counter.

I turn and see a smile –
the funeral director who cremated my father
and offered solace to our atheist clan.
It’ll all be taken care of.
You don’t have to worry about a thing.

“Fine,” she says,
and, without counting,
sorts the change into her coin slots.

I walk out into the cold morning –
no choir, no liturgy,
no steeple, no dome,
but in the final steps
of my Sunday pilgrimage.

My hands warmed by the bagels’ heat.
My spirit lifted by her trust.