

JAMES VAN OORT

BIKES

Blue and white,
“The Lion,” it was called,
a colorful cartoon Leo
stickered onto the frame of
my brother’s first bike—
training wheels barely bolted to
the frame. And Shaun,
the dark-hued, dark-haired boy
that was my brother with
the devil in his eyes,
a baby-tooth smile glowing from
his happy face.

And my bike, a black and yellow thing
with an annoying squeak at a particular
notch in each full turn of the rear wheel.

Shaun and I both young lions, we thought—
kittens, really, thinking we had full manes,
the tough guys we thought we were.

We sped around the block,
pedaling faster in the early evening light,
a late afternoon breeze
nothing like the wind we made
speeding on, roaring on—
our lion selves, and Shaun’s Lion bike,
hellions of the sidewalks around that block.

At some unknown point,
the training wheels on the Lion
spinning themselves right off the bike,
and Shaun was riding—
really riding, big boy riding.
He was riding...

It’s 22, maybe 23 years later.
Time gets away.
The first motorcycle I owned,
sold to a good buddy who,
scared of being a real biker,
put it away in a garage to rust.

Shaun comes up with
a Grand for the title,
blows off the dust
from that ’82 Virago 750.
My first bike,
now his first bike.

In a concrete parking lot
I show him the clutch, the gear pedal—
down one for first gear, up one for second,
neutral halfway between first and second.
Give it a bit of gas,
ease up on the clutch, easy on the throttle
too.
The rest will come natural if you got it,
Brother.
You’re riding, Brother.
You’re riding.
Really riding. Big boy riding.

He is riding,
that dark-hued, dark-eyed boy
that is my brother with
the devil in his eyes;
we’re riding around the block,
both of us young boys—
he and I both young lions,
kittens really, thinking we have full manes,
the tough guys we think we are.

I can’t wait to spin around the block
with him
again.

ON TRAGICALLY LOSING THE ANSWER TO AN AGE-OLD QUESTION
—inspired by a brief in *The Daily Republic* slugged
“*Missing Chicken Found Across Street*”

That’s just fine, but why—
why *didn’t* they ask that timeless question?

It’s too late now.
Come to find out, there was a man across the street
peculiar as a “the-end-is-near” prophet
blathering about discount chicken prices.
He preached that Jesus was bringing picnic things
and that *this* chicken was actually worth an entire \$18.
We’re getting into illegal chicken trafficking here,
or something—
involuntary chicken labor,
solicitation of “employees” from “chicken ranches,”
or something like, by God, chicken slavery!
In any case, the man was mad.

The crazy-man-prophet guy
took the chicken as a hostage.
Police were summoned.
Hotel managers from across the street
came running, their tear-streaked cheeks
red with fear and sadness—as it turns out,
the chicken was of the hotel.

Police battened down the crime scene after
batting down the crazy-man-prophet guy.
A crowd gathered. A protest began.
An ambulance was called in to aid the chicken;
a second ambulance brought in to tend to
the under-arrest-crazy-man-prophet guy.
Police used tear gas and rubber bullets on protesters,
who refused to disperse by crossing any streets.
Eventually, National Guard troops were called in;
FEMA brought some grisly mobile homes and
stale chicken salad sandwiches
(feds always doing things in poor taste)
but Walmart did more to help people recover.
After a month or so, things quieted down.
The chicken wound up in in-patient care
for post-traumatic stress disorder.
Crazy-man-prophet guy got a life sentence—
the jury wouldn’t go for the death penalty.

There are so many unanswered questions.
What about that poor chicken
“belonging” to the hotel?
Was the chicken a partner in the hotel,
perhaps an owner,
a welcome patron—
maybe even a visiting executive
from some far-off farm enterprise
looking for legal loopholes,
wishing for a county that would allow
massive factories for the laying of eggs
or the production of some
chicken-fried Soylent Green?

And why did the chicken cross the street?

As I said, it’s too late now.
Released from treatment, pumped up on
hormones and therapeutic drugs, the chicken
entered an Ultimate Cockfighting Tournament,
was killed accidentally in the ring. Investigation is pending.

But now, we’ll *never* know why.

KYRIE ELEISON: DAYDREAM

(part two from the liturgical collection “Requiem”)

—for Beverly Flynn

*“I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord:
he that believeth in me, though he were dead,
yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me
shall never die.”*

John 3:16

I daydreamed in a chapel
where a body
smooth and still
rested in a casket of pearl, cedar, silk;
she was lovely through her life,
her slaughter, her slumber,
and there was no pang of infinity
on her lovely face.

But I daydreamed as I saw her—
all my focus shifted to
the lily colored candles in the corner,
to a solitary flame on a single wick;
my stare diminished to the center of the fire,
the heart of the flame,
the essence of perpetual light.

All sounds in the chapel diminished,
the faintest din receding into
quiet corners I didn't know;
a sound of rippling water,
hushed and gentle,
grew quietly to a murmuring music,
an indiscernible lullabying whisper—
I heard in that quiet plainsong
not one but a host of voices,
and their quiet was marvelous and deep.

The sound and sight
assembled together in my questing,
and I saw the slightest swirl,
a microcosmic vortex of spirits
welling up from the beginning,
rising to the end in a heavenly helix—
the chorus of quiet voices
offering supernatural song to the sound I heard.
I knew,
seeing the wondrous spiral of light,
hearing the voluptuous chant of serenity,
that there was such an idea as mercy.

The vision swelled,
the song crystallized—
the swirling light a vapor of souls,
the plentiful chant a plea for mercy.

My vision cleared;
I saw the flame again,
the wick, the candle,
the lovely body in its final bed.

The stillness rushed in;
my ears heard mourning,
a hush of solemn voices,
the clatter of a sleeping funeral chapel.

She was beautiful,
her pearl earrings, diamond necklace,
flowing nightgown of silken moonlight
effervescing the life she lived.

“Mercy,” I whispered,
thinking on my daydream,
on the living,
on the dead.

They would, someday,
lie together—the living and the dead—
until all of death was dead
and all of life was living.

I remembered my daydream
as I left the chapel—
“Mercy, mercy. Mercy,”
the words circling me—
still, I see that vision with waking eyes,
hear that blessed song above living voices,
and I know that there is such a thing
as mercy,
even for all the days of my life
until, and after,
I am gone.

TOUGH
—for Gary

Thick and woody fingers
knobbed at the knuckles
betray the true heart of the man—
and seeing how they twist an obtuse way or
quiver very slightly;
you can see
the pain he's in.

He keeps on working though,
keeping on,
never complains.

He doesn't dress like the farmer he was—
doesn't cuss like it either;
he walks like it, works like it,
moves in the hard-work-break-your-back steady plowing
that makes one think of a work horse pulling a stuck implement.
Now he stocks shelves, moves dry goods around,
makes less money to feed people from a grocery store
instead of his own farm.
You can almost see
the white needles of pain
throbbing in his hands.

Arthritis.
Hearing aids.
Little sleep.
Occasionally an aching heart.

Sometimes that was the same on the farm.
Restlessness.
Tiredness.
Weariness.
Occasionally an aching heart.

Sometimes that was the same in Vietnam,
where he ran through toxic napalm fumes
and clouds of Agent Orange
to fix missiles and gather ordnance on helicopters
that needed arming or had gone down.
Pals falling around him,
rat-a-tats like hail on a hard tin bucket
blasting his ears apart,
elephant grass slicing at his farm-boy arms,
Victor Charlie peppering bullets toward him,
aiming to blitz his guts out before he could do his job.

He went running though,
running on,
never giving in.
He probably doesn't need the job—
the sleepless pounding of cans of beans onto a shelf,
hands aching insufferably,
knees ground down by concrete floors,
eyes suffocating under sleepless lights.
He could go without the pain of nights,
the going home in the morning to struggle more,
the long walks he sometimes takes to clear his head
of whatever memories and demons that haunt
so hard-working a man.

His boy knows war now,
his wife knows pain as he does,
his grandchildren know something of cows and land.
His neighbors know he's a good man,
his friends knew he used to be worse than he is now.
His coworkers see that he's Godly.
He reminds his boss of Jesus.

He just keeps on going,
tough,
keeps on working.

A SIMPLE OBSERVATION

As he sat drinking warm whisky,
smoke of the bar whorled and whipped
with music from the jukebox,
dancing lewdly.
The smoke and the music became one,
its narcotic serenade lending
emotional counterpane to
the melting ice in his glass.

“I’m so lonesome I could cry,”
the melody licking at his ear.

“If God wants to knock me down a peg,
I say knock me down,” he says,
ignoring the prophecy of Hank Williams
stirring in the smoky air.

A woman across the bar
licks lipstick lips,
sucks an olive out of her beer glass—
she eyes him with unreadable eyes.

“Stupid guy—”
she thinks.
“A peg,
to God,
may be to us
a skyscraper.”

