

The *Key* to Happiness + *Three* (!)

By

Daniel Ruefman

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... I can't imagine this poem, as imaginative as it is, came from Daniel's imagination. I think it really happened. It is one of those rare instances where art imitates life, chock one up for mimesis. Ruefman, "performing poetic passages from Beowulf," "while lecturing on the oral tradition" (it is unrevealed whether he is reading or reciting), encounters a "haka." He is confronted by a collective incredulity, insisting it had to have been initially written, messaged or texted. I won't spoil it for you. All I can say is that if Fleas had a Most Quotable Line contest, "but in the iEra, / age of the receding hippocampus, / they have a right to be skeptical;" Don't miss it. On the other hand, if you're wearing too much face powder, you might not want to risk cracking a smile. (Spacing is poet's own.) HS*

The Key to Happiness

Mr. Rimpa once said that math was the key
to happiness; it was buried in his lesson
somewhere between Mr. Bubble Duck
and the functions of graphing calculators;

as I foiled my way through equations,
isolating each variable, I thought about life and
how it separated me from my prom date senior year,
how each month, friends fell away
like the petals of ancient potpourri,
and my adolescent truths were crushed
beneath the cleats I wore chasing impossible dreams,
running races that never mattered;

in that classroom, I realized that life was an equation;
it's balance; it's isolating goals from impediments,
identifying the right variables and functions
that allow us to solve for a happiness—
however improbable,
however elusive;

I think that's how we'll find it;
in our places on this plane, instances
where our life lines intersect;

had I understood the Rimpian-algebraic philosophies,
we might have recognized them before,
gotten to the next ones sooner, but the proof is there;
I'll work it out; to solve for happiness,
I'll just graph the meanings of our lives:

x is the meaning of mine
y is the meaning of yours.

Quarantine (Day Six)

By the sixth day,
blind slats become sundials,
directing a beam of light
across the floor to the bag by the door;
in an instant, the sun goes supernova,
its white blaze, burning his retinas;

when the spots clear,
the world of Tainter Street presents itself
faintly askew, as a new world order is revealed
by the COVID quarantine.

inside the black Honda Civic, husks
of shucked acorns and sunflower seeds
are piled in the rear window,
bitemarks freed foam from headrests
and seatbacks; on the ground between
doorstep and driveway, carcasses of canaries
are kabobbed by pine-needle pikes,
beneath the feeder, on top of which
a black squirrel stands sentry,
brandishing fistfuls of spruce quills;

the black-tail chitters, drawing red-tails
down from the trees, and Master Gray-Tail
rises from his hoard, huddling with his harem
in the driver's-side window;

the man peers at the flagstone path
between door and drive, gawping
at the fifty fanged, fluffy-tailed beasts
baring their buck teeth, flexing
and cracking their nimble knuckles;

next door, the man's neighbors
peer through their curtains, like a broke bloke
through the VIP veil of the strip club;
the neighbors watch him watching
Master Gray-Tail, to see if this is the day
he'll take back his yard; but beyond
there is COVID; now is not the time
for terror; so, he grips the bag
of seed by the door, bows to Master Gray-Tail,
and the black-tail moves, he fills the feeders
and yields the yard—for now—
to the court of the squirrel king,
wondering what will come,
when the madness ends, and whether the sun
will still burn like that for him
tomorrow.

Denying the Oral Tradition

While lecturing on the oral tradition,
after performing poetic passages
from *Beowulf*,
a challenge rises;

“But someone had to write it.”

A single voice turns haka,
when another student produces the text,
and gestures toward the alphabetic stains
set to the parchment, as if its very presence
in this room belies the lesson.

“They didn’t write it,” I say, “Not at first.”

Then I tell them of generations of scop
who tongued the tales, town-to-town,
preserving legend in a collective memory
that predated pen and paper.

“There’s no way anyone could remember it all,”

the class argues, but in the iEra,
age of the receding hippocampus,
they have a right to be skeptical;

outmoded is the memory of even my youth,
the ability to recall a girl’s phone number,
to dial it at will on a landline, without consulting
Alexa, Siri, or Google.

In my adolescent romances, I memorized
digits and carried those disembodied
parts of girls with me.

“I still do,” I tell them.

They aren’t buying it;
even as I stand here, reciting
my own teenage oratory,
they hear me.

They don’t believe a word.

Lost Teeth

I couldn't say which was my first;
that one I swallowed
in second grade or the one
my dad bent back and twisted,
wrenching the nerves
that stretched behind my eye,
only to drop it into the sawdust
piled on the cellar floor.
Maybe my first was the one that was lost
to the soccer pitch before its time,
causing its open socket to ooze
and me to tongue at its metallic taste for days.

Whichever it was,
I'm fairly certain that I was never paid
by that pixie, hoarder of human tailings.
In her world, she probably poses
as some sort of warrior chieftess,
cuspid's strung as a necklace,
the dust of ground up molars stored
in a satchel on her belt,
an ingredient in all fairy homeopathy.

I can't remember which was the first,
but I do know there are dollars due,
and one thing I learned from student loans
compounding interest never stops—
it's time for me to collect.

THE POET SPEAKS: *I prefer poetry with engaging imagery that balances complexity, brevity, and accessibility. Often, free verse narrative poetry is the form that is most compatible with my writing style and the poets who have had the greatest influence on me over the years would include Philip Levine, Bob Hicok, and Mary Oliver.*

Although I write in multiple genres, the thing that keeps me coming back to poetry is the form's therapeutic applications. Often, writing helps me to vent negative emotions, to process new experiences, and calm personal anxieties. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, I often felt isolated from my friends and family. To cope with this, I imagined what my friends were doing on any given day, and drafted a series of quarantine poems to help me feel more connected with them. In the poem "Quarantine (Day Six)" I imagined the sort of war my friend, A.G. Cochran, was likely waging with the squirrels in his yard. In an odd way, these poems helped me

to deal with the social isolation while injecting a bit of whimsy into mundane existence of our COVID lockdown.

AUTHOR BIO: Daniel Ruefman's poetry and prose has appeared widely in periodicals, including the Barely South Review, Burningword, FLARE: The Flagler Review, SLAB: Sound and Literary Arts Book, Red Earth Review, Rockvale Review, and Thin Air Magazine, among others. He is the author of four books, the most recent of which *What the Fuzz? Survival Stories of a Minor League Mascot* have been featured Wisconsin Public Radio and NPR podcasts. When not writing, he teaches the craft at the University of Wisconsin--Stout.