

Mantra n.o.t Tantra

By Edward Zahniser

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... EZ is a real caution, "even when / as a teenager I could corrupt / most any idea during that richly / liminal time" He is as refreshing as a Lime Rickey at an old fashion soda fountain. Read 'Mantra not Tantra,' "her loose blouse / sort of fell forward, to reveal / not a bra but her breasts" There's gold in them there hills "themselves" ...*

Mantra not Tantra

"Put that in your hope chest,"
my parents used to say when
something special happened
material or even experiential
or sometimes just the odd idea.
This stuck with me even when
as a teenager I could corrupt
most any idea during that richly
liminal time as body and mind
began to differentiate in ways
conscious of themselves even
if sometimes I was a bit slow
to catch onto myself, as when I
fell for Lora down the block,

one year younger than I, but
both in the same Zodiac month.
As I have recorded elsewhere,
this happened at her back steps
on which she sat as I stood to
face her when her loose blouse
sort of fell forward, to reveal
not a bra but her breasts—I
almost added “themselves”—
with my first impulse not lust,
not, e.g., tantra but a mantra:
“Put that in your hope chest.”

— Ed Zahniser

THE POET SPEAKS: *My “Mantra not Tantra” poem irrupted from my remembering the “put that in your hope chest” mantra my parents often prescribed for their four kids. This was memorably secular, given they were both children of evangelical Christian ministers in the Free Methodist Church — and the “Free” don’t mean liberal! In fact, my father’s father and all four uncles were Free Methodist ministers. One would serve as Bishop of the Free Methodist Church. The brothers are now memorialized in a Free Methodist museum chapel. My parents met when one of their fathers was invited to preach at the other’s home church.*

I, the youngest child, was raised in the Presbyterian Church because the church was within walking distance (during World War II gasoline was rationed), and it had a choir—which Free Methodists still deemed sinful then. My mother was a trained singer in need of some respite from four children. I was the fourth child in my parent’s planned family of three kids.

My above outburst of religious memory reminded me that, as a high school student, what “hope” I had in whatever “chest” was not so much salvific as corporeal, embodied. Think: female breasts. Hence the poem’s near addition of the word “themselves.” The tantra (literally “woven together”) comes from Hindu and Buddhist meditative practices of sexual union. (Hence the

Mantra not Tantra!) In Sanskrit, mantra is a form of psychoactive speech — repetitive sacred words, sounds, or phrases chanted in meditation.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Ed Zahniser was a founding member of Some Of Us Press in Washington, DC in the 1970s. His seven books and seven chapbooks of poetry, co-edited anthologies, and exhibit catalogs of two gallery shows of poetry as works on walls were recently accessioned by the University at Buffalo Special Collection of 20th- and 21st-Century Poetry in English. He is the poet laureate of Shepherdstown, WV. Ed retired as senior writer and editor of the Publications Group of the National Park Service in 2013.