

The Place at Castle Hills

By

John L. Stanizzi

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH SCRETCH writes...Sometimes, now and again, it's good to read 'a piece of work' from a post-beatnik stuck in the sixties. At least Stanizzi predates that worthless, cant-coined phrase 'chill dude,' but what if he still uses it? I thought it just meant dandy or fancy man before Easy Rider (just under the wire opening in '69). He's a ramblin' guy (mixing Springsteen's Born to Run with Shakespeare's 'Macbeth') so let's get started. It's good stuff. . . . Here're some random, misfit lines to get the gist and fix your interest: "Lorna was a good fifteen years / older than our crew, / but no one, / not one person in the pack / gave a fuck." "Jack in the Freezer, / ...perfectly rolled joints. / Lorna's was a haze of newly grown hormones- / Sex. Drugs. Rock 'n Roll," "...murdered by a sniper in Quang Nam? [not Lorna]" "One night I got so cocked on screwdrivers / that I nearly killed myself puking / OJ and vodka" "I also recall Lorna / getting into bed with me" "...just fading / away from each other, / until the days and nights at Lorna's / were just a murky memory." "Mammoth Mart was a big, dumpy / department store up on Route Five [x 13 + 1 = 66]" "Here's some crazy shit. / A solid fifty years after Lorna's house,..." . . . JLS' 'mistaken identity' denouement is priceless...(Spacing is poet's own.)*

THE PLACE AT CASTLE HILLS

*Sprung from cages out on highway nine,
Chrome wheeled, fuel injected, and steppin' out over the line
Oh, Baby this town rips the bones from your back
It's a death trap, it's a suicide rap
We gotta get out while we're young
'Cause tramps like us, baby we were born to run
-Born to Run
-Bruce Springsteen*

Anthony hooked me up with Lorna
who lived with her mother
in a beat-up two-bedroom joint

in *The Place at Castle Hills*.

Lorna was a good fifteen years
older than our crew,
but no one,
not one person in the pack
gave a fuck.



Lorna's mother was
a wild-looking old thing
who looked like
she should have been gabbling
by the pricking of my thumbs,
something wicked this way comes,
as we all filed in and out
at all hours
as if Lorna's Ma's place was
a roach-infested 24/7 gin mill.



Remember Keith?
Good kid.
He always seemed
much older than the rest of us,
but that's because he insisted on
wearing suits all the time-
-definitely a cut above our tattered jeans.

Brain tumor got him
about ten years after the parties
Good kid.

After Keith was gone,

his brother Man just stayed Man,
but kind of lost it,
schlepping all over East Hartford
sometimes carrying a shopping bag,
sometimes just his gun,
and always by himself.



Lorna made sure the fridge was packed
top to bottom with beer,
Jack in the Freezer,
and a huge ashtray
filled with perfectly rolled joints.
Lorna's was a haze of newly grown hormones-
Sex. Drugs. Rock 'n Roll,
and that's a fact.

Through all the commotion
Lorna's mother sat crumpled
in a ratty recliner and watched TV
with the sound down,
gumming cold pizza
with her toothless mouth.



Remember Charlie getting drafted?
He left a big hole in Lorna's place-
murdered by a sniper in Quang Nam?
He wasn't even there a fucking month.
Guard duty on a beach at night,
and one bullet comes tearing
outta the jungle,
and catches him in the neck.

I've been raging inside for 50 years,
fantasizing about what I'd do
if I ever came face to face
with that little bitch
who was hiding in the jungle.

It took them three weeks
to get Charlie home?
Something about germs or bugs-
something like that.
Goddam torture waiting for him.

Finally, *finally* they got him to
Newkirk and Whitney Funeral Home
over on Burnside.
They sent him with his young partner,
dressed in Marine blues;
that kid never left the coffin,
standing at attention next to Charlie
for hours,
looking like a middle school kid
dressed as a soldier for Halloween.

I'll never forget how deep Charlie's casket was;
it was like three times as deep
as a regular casket,
and he was way down inside there,
the top sealed with glass.
Worst thing I ever saw.



Out front of the funeral home
there was a gang of us low-life punks
just bullshitting for a while,
didn't know shit about shit,

yapping through Marlboro smoke,
Camel smoke, Winston smoke-
Gary, Richie, Moosie, Wayne, David, Kevin, Jimmy, Dougie,
Billy, me,
and a bunch of other guys, too,
but I forget their names.

Jimmy Broadth was running his mouth like usual;
he says, "Let's get Charlie
a "get well" card,"
and starts laughing his ass off, dick wad.
But his sick fucking joke
was met with absolute silence.

I swear if I had the energy
I would have busted his face wide open.



Lorna always made sure
there were plenty of girls at the parties,
girls we didn't know, which was cool.
Lorna, man, she knew what was up.

These weren't Friday night parties either,
or weekend parties; these gigs ran day and night
seven days a week.
A Tuesday would get just as crazy
as any Friday or Saturday,
maybe wilder.



One night I got so cocked on screwdrivers
that I nearly killed myself puking

OJ and vodka

behind the bushes in front of the apartment.

Lorna and a few guys carried me upstairs to Lorna's bed.

I vaguely remember purple silk sheets

and about six purple silk pillows.

I also recall Lorna

getting into bed with me

and very, very slowly taking off my clothes.

She stroked my face

and played with my hair,

and I just laid there,

the room spinning and wavering,

and taking in every bit

of Lorna's attention.

I woke up deep in the night,

or morning if that's what you want to call it.

It was three or four –

the house was quiet – just the noise of conversation

from downstairs.

I didn't see my clothes anywhere.

I called out, "Lorna, where the fuck's my clothes?"

She came up and spoke quietly.

"They're right over there on the chair, Johnnie.

Come on, let's get you dressed."



Some shit was totally unforgettable, man.

Remember Richie's silver '57 Chevy Bel Air?

Three-twos, Flowmaster dulies, and a reverb

that twanged every time we hit a bump.

You could hear Richie coming
five minutes before he got there.

The absolute best thing was
he didn't give a fuck who took his ride.
He was the only one of us with a car,
and what a car, man.

All you had to do was say
"Rich, imma take the car, yeah?"
And he'd smile his ass off
and toss you the keys.

That baby roared to a start,
and you'd slide the three-foot high
Hurst shifter into first gear,
turn on the reverb
and growl outta Castle Hills.

Oh, I almost forgot to tell you,
Richie was completely deaf,
couldn't hear a single thing.
I'd look him straight in the face,
point to my ears,
shrug my shoulders,
and Richie would mumble something
unintelligible, and move around
like he was rumping to the heaviest bass
you ever heard.

That's when I got it!
He didn't actually *hear* shit.
He felt it, man.

With two thumbs up
and a hug around his neck,

I'd look at him and mouth the words
so he could lip-read.
“Fuckin’ cool, man.”
That’s when he’d say something
that I *could* make out.
He’d laugh and be like, “YEAH!”



Man wasn’t right, not ever.
Real quiet, foul temper,
quick trigger, and strong as a muthafukka.
Everybody gave Man lots of room.

He got pinched one night
for bothering girls at North End Park,
asking if they wanted
to see his gun, and then pulling it out
regardless of what their answer was.

That got him a night in lock-down.



The night Lorna’s mother died
was a fucked-up mess.

She was stuffed in her big recliner,
as usual,
and here comes Markie.
He’s like, “Lorna’s ma, bro, Lorna’s ma!
She ain’t breathin’ right. For real.

Her breathing, man, it's all fucked up!"

Lorna hurried to her old lady,
checked her out
and yelled, "Somebody call an ambulance!!
Hurry up!!"

In a couple a minutes
the place was crawling with dudes in uniforms-
EMTs *and* cops.

I never found out who hid
the joint-ashtray
but when I looked at the table
it was gone.
Nice job.

The EMT dudes put her on a stretcher.
Lorna went with them in the ambulance.
We all hung back at Lorna's place.

I never saw the old lady again.

She didn't make it.



Course, we were all getting older,
there were real girlfriends,
(girls who never knew nothing about Lorna's),
there were jobs, cats getting drafted,
moving out of town, just fading
away from each other,
until the days and nights at Lorna's
were just a murky memory.

I think Lorna moved out of town
not long after party-time died down.
I'm not positive, but I think so.



The only dude I really stuck with
after the crazy times at Lorna's
was Anthony.
Eventually he joined the Navy
hoping that would keep him outta Nam.
He was right. It did.

I still have all the letters
he wrote me from the ship.
Fuckin' Anthony, Professional Horn-Dog.

Every letter I got
talked exclusively about shore leave
and all *the leg* he was getting.
Crack me up.
...the leg...

Ant, you crazy man. Certifiable.

When he got out of the Navy
he worked at Mammoth Mart
where his mother worked.

Mammoth Mart was a big, dumpy
department store up on Route Five.
Everybody worked there at some point
during their teens.

Eventually Anthony and I kinda split up,
moved to different towns.

I heard through the grapevine
that he got married,
had a kid,
a boy.

I also heard – and this is totally fucked –
that he got
pancreatic cancer,
killed him in five months.

I missed the wake, the funeral,
the whole deal.
I Found out too late.

I don't know where you're at, Ant,
but if you can,
let me know how *the leg* is.

Love you, man.



Here's some crazy shit.
A solid fifty years after Lorna's house,
everybody separated, went their own way,
or worse.

I was married and we moved
way out to Coventry,
twenty miles or so from Lorna's old joint.

There's a small grocery store out there
called Highland Park Market.
Everybody in town goes there.

One day I'm walking out

carrying a few bags
when my knees buckled.

I'm headed out,
and who's headed in?
Yeah, you guessed it – Lorna.

Fifty years, man. *fifty*,
but we recognized each other immediately.

I think I may have said, “Lorna?!”
though I can't be sure.
I was too rattled.
I must have had some kinda
look on my face.

With signs of dread and sadness in her face,
Lorna had read me.
She looked me square in the eyes
and she said,
“Anthony??”



THE POET SPEAKS: *In response to your questions...ahhhh, the inspiration for my poems. Well, generally I'd say everything I write is born of the absolute truth, not a wisp of fiction in any of my work, poetry or non-fiction. In fact, I'm just finishing up a memoir called Bless Me, Father, For I Have Sinned. The book chronicles my seven tumultuous years at an ultra strict, ultra sick Catholic School in East Hartford, Connecticut. The place was called St. Mary's, and I spent grades 1 through 7 in there. Harrowing, man. Anyway, my inspiration comes right out of my life. For example, the poems I submitted to you...spot on true. Lorna remains a mystery to me. Anthony introduced us, and for the next...unmmm...well, it's hard to remember how long...for the next "period of time" (that'll have to do) I was part of that rat-pack who lived at Lorna's. Booze, beer, dope, girls from outta town, which made them extra-exciting. Came and went as we pleased. Seventeen, eighteen years old and well beyond the control of our parents. It was all practice for the kind of men we would become. My old man called us "alley cats." Ha! He should talk. So yeah. Lorna's story. I sat on that one for while. It couldn't make up its mind whether it wanted to be a poem or a story, so I kind of made it both. Wild fucking abandon. Absolute freedom. The Viet Nam war swirling all around us in the air, picking us off one by one. As far as specific influences, I'd have to begin with W.S. Merwin and James Tate. Kim Addonizio and Sharon Olds. Bukowski and Hunter Thompson, Ilya Kaminsky. Man, there's too many. Let me edit a*

little. My strongest influence is whoever I'm reading and liking at a given time. That's never changed in my whole writing life, which began when I was about nine years old. Yeah, young. And I had the wherewithal to keep every single thing I ever wrote. Over the years, I typed everything up and had it all perfect bound. My whole life's up on that shelf. Thousands and thousands of poems arranged date and decade. So, I'll finish by saying poetry gave me a life, an identity, a purpose, and it saved my life lots of times. The "saving of my life" part is absolutely true, but I'll spare you the stories. I've already gone on long enough. I am deeply grateful to you for giving my work a shot and for supporting me. Totally appreciated, man. Big up! -Johnnie Stanizzi

AUTHOR BIO: John L. Stanizzi is author of the collections *Ecstasy Among Ghosts*, *Sleepwalking*, *Dance Against the Wal*, *After the Bell*, *Hallelujah Time!*, *High Tide – Ebb Tide*, *Four Bits*, *Chants*, *Sundowning*, *POND*, and *The Tree That Lights The Way Home*.

John's work has been widely published including the journals *Prairie Schooner*, *The Cortland Review*, *American Life in Poetry*, *Praxis*, *Rust & Moth*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *The Laurel Review*, *The Caribbean Writer*, *Blue Mountain Review*, *Tar River*, *Poetlore*, *Rattle*, *Hawk & Handsaw*, *Plainsongs*, *Patterson Literary Review*, *Potato Soup Journal*, and many others.

His work has been translated into Italian and appears widely in Italy, including in *El Ghibli*, *The Journal of Italian Translations Bonafini*, *Poetarium*, and others. His translator is the Italian poet, Angela D' Ambra.

His nonfiction has been published in *Literature and Belief*, *Stone Coast Review*, *Ovunque Siamo*, *Adelaide*, *Scarlet Leaf*, *Evening Street*, *Praxis*, *Potato Soup Journal*, *The Red Lemon*, *after the pause*, and others. *Potato Soup Journal* named his story *Pants* “**The Best of 2020**” and it appeared in their anthology celebrating these works.

John is the Flash Fiction Editor of *Abstract Magazine TV*, and he has read at venues all over New England, including the Mystic Arts Café, the Sunken Garden Poetry Festival, Hartford Stage, and many others.

For many years, John coordinated the Fresh Voices Poetry Competition for Young Poets at Hill-Stead Museum, Farmington, Connecticut. He was also a “teaching artist” for the national poetry recitation contest, Poetry Out Loud; he spent a decade with Poetry Out Loud.

A former Wesleyan University Etherington Scholar, and New England Poet of the Year (1998), John has just been awarded an Artist Fellowship in Creative Non-Fiction – 2021 - from the Connecticut Office of the Arts and Culture for work on his new memoir.

He teaches literature at Manchester Community College in Manchester, Connecticut, and lives with his wife, Carol, in Coventry, CT. <https://www.johnlstanizzi.com>