

Run Softly to the End

by Thomas Albury

It was a brilliantly perfect morning. He had not seen a sky this blue since being partly snow blind at ten below zero. No pale-bright painted blue, but a blue so deep it increased the longer you looked, until it seemed that you could see beyond the stratosphere. The applesweet air glistened with birdsong. Today there would be no deaths, no emotional misfortunes, no angry words. Nothing that couldn't be put right with a resolute mind and an open heart. But oh, the heart. What a fecund field! A lotus of possibility, a bird in an open cage.

"Fly free of this mortal coil! Let my soul unburdenedeOuch!" he exclaimed as his foolish song and dance caused him to trip on the curb, "goddammit!" as he peeled his knee from the pavement. >brush brush< "I'm glad that I don't have to find a job today," he mumbled.

No, today will be immortalized.

Where do I stand? Slow Down, slowdown. Go back and be where you were then. You know what I mean. You will never get there if you aren't here. Look around. What do you see? A road. But it's not just the road, it is also the things on either side of it. Lanes of trees between houses and streets. Lamp posts, walls, walkways - so many things pulled from the depths of the earth, laid here before me upon its crust. I did not make these things. Someone else, many someones, thought up all of this. And then there is nature. Nature smells like coffee and biscuits - slow down, I am running again!

He had three cups of coffee, a napoleon bismarck and tiramisu.

I should find an angel. How about that one hovering about the art supply store yesterday, maybe it will be back? No, it must be in the moment. Just like this moment when I have \$34.00 left. I have things, I must have enough things for a while to get me by. How many years have I been buying things and keeping them, using them, putting them away. I need to know it's real. Not the angel, everything else. This coffee, my thoughts, the news, passing cars, beauty. Of course it is real - illusions are so much more complicated.

The sun slowly etched across the top of the window. He breathed the shop ambience deeply as the dust of humans, flour, and coffee beans drifted through the blinding rays. Everything turned yellow and smoky brown.

It looks like some of those sepia tones I printed; black plus a pantone color. Good job for a two color press. Straight down the Starwell gallery, fifteen steps; no landing like there was in Michigan. No conversations with the basement ghosts. Was it only in dreams? The further I went, the deeper the terror. What was I dreaming of talking to on the landing? It was a long conversation in the dark; behind me a blank wall, the full length mirror on the open door three steps up to

my left, on my right the side-door to the outside, in front of me the ghost and the dark stairwell. The landing was a no-man's or ghost's land - we had equal footing. What was said? Another milestone I can't remember. Could it have been an angel? No, it's easy to tell them apart. Angels smell like babies, ghosts smell like old people. No more thoughts left in here, he thought, and wandered back outside.

The Starwell gallery - a collection of mostly family paintings lining a narrow staircase. Fifteen steps down the wooden stairs, past a white buffalo hanging with a crescent moon in the middle of the sky - across from that a colorful feather in mid-fall. Past eerie landscapes, alien looking mushroom people in a diminishing line, a fiery windmill sun trying to burn its way into a halloweenish tree; for all its fury never dispelling the cool darkness. Further down the well dwelt the semiotic Triangle People, animals, fae, and the four directions. At the bottom stood the door painted with birch trees full of ancient Indian faces. On the backside of the door, covering the glass window, a cardboard sign shoutscrawled "You Cannott Exkape". Two feet beyond the door a tall metal ink cabinet almost blocked the way. Turning right, in the middle of a bedroom-size area sat the Hamada 600 CD offset press and a paper folder.

Cachundle Cachundle Cachundle the press would go, slap slap slap in soft harmony the transfer rollers would hit the distributors. Pshh pshh pshh the paper would fall and jog perfectly into a descending stack. Ink, Water, Paper, Plates. That's what printing is made of. Listen to the rhythm of the falling sheets, telling him exactly where he'd been for fifty years. Do everything exactly the same way every time and you will have more freedom for what you want to do; at least in theory. The less you have to think the more efficient you will be. It's a law of coffee and biscuit smelling Nature.

“You should go find your angel,” she would have flatlined, “it’s obviously what you want to do.”

“You obviously completely misunderstand what the angel is. It could be a baby like the one that was staring at me for ten minutes in the grocery line. It could be any kind-hearted person. It could be you. How could you be so offended by that if you don’t really know what it is?”

She would stare straight ahead and turn up just the corners of her mouth. “I’m not offended, you can say anything you want. I know what it is, I just feel excluded.” (His stomach would drop into the void. He would wait and hope for redemption.) “Is that how you feel about your life, just tedium, day after day, year after year?” (He would draw a few breaths to center, to not jump into defensiveness.) “You always have a choice,” she would impart.

“I know that, I choose every day.”

“Uh huh.”

This is what they mean when they say that love hurts. The burning cold, the freezing burn of dispassionate anger. The longing wrought from holding something beyond your own reach. The urge to merge or break asunder changing color with each breath. To face the consummate fear of honesty, or artificially melt into forgetfulness. The knowledge that no matter what, you will end up either in love or oblivion. It would be an easy choice were it not for pride, weakness, and the yoke of autonomy.

But if we are really talking about love, it makes all this blather. The power of it cannot be easily diverted, let alone harnessed or forced. It will stand on its own. As John quoted God - “Love is all..” and we are left to either surrender or despair. The blather is all about the filter. From our perspective it filters both ways, but in reality it’s just a dimmer switch. Too much love coming in or going out can blow a gasket if we can’t embrace it with openness and honesty; so with anything from a shy grin to complete emotional sabotage, we tamp it down to a level we can handle.

“Uh huh,” he mumbled to himself.

I always, we always have a choice. It all boils down to preferences and choices. It all comes out in the wash. But what happens when choices merge? Rolling together, folding over each other, parting and returning like waves on the beach. It gets complicated if you try to figure it out - better to ride the waves even if they tumble you sometimes. “Follow your heart” they say. That’s like closing your eyes to try to see the inside of your head.

“Hey you, watch out!”

He opened his eyes to see one of those lamp posts careening in front of him.

“Oh, sorry! I mean, thank you!” as he skidded to a stop. “Didn’t see that coming - you must be an angel.”

“Right, aren’t we all?”

“I can think of a few who wouldn’t qualify.”

That guy in Council Bluffs who gave me a ride from Porky’s. Had all that religious stuff hanging in his car, the next day came right into where I was bussing tables at the village pancake place with his safari hat on and wanted me to go with him to look for gold in Mexico right when Jimmy had written a song about it. After work I went with him to his mother’s house where he had a shack full of memorabilia from his world travels. Swords, masks, all that kind of stuff. He picked up a copy of “Diary of a Yogi” and began to read to me about the part where a yogi’s hands bled just like Jesus. He got very agitated and it took a while to calm him down, but we eventually went and picked up a motorbike he intended to sell. He dropped it in the back, and with the trunk lid banging around drove a while longer until he announced that he was going to stop at a bar in this tiny town somewhere in western Iowa. I said okay, so he stopped, went into the bar, and I walked down the road. Just another choice.

Leaning casually on the lamp post that nearly ambushed him, he focused his eyes thoughtfully on the man before him. *Who is this? Just another guy, washed up here by the dry waves of time’s sands. Someone to say hello to, run from, or ignore? Someone who saved me from banging my head, so at least be polite to. Non-aggressive, unpretentious, casual, not too sloppy or stupid.* “Yeah, well thank you there for saving my head, I can’t seem to walk and shut my eyes at the same time.”

“It can be done, but I hear it takes a lot of practice. Is this a skill you’re trying to master?”

“No, just wandering in the wrong direction.”

“How do you know?”

“That’s just it, I don’t.”

The midspring earlynoon sun was climbing steadily, its warmth flowing down like soft pillows. Cars slid half-noisily by, their windows firing hypnotic laser sun flashes as they went. On, on, off, on, off,-. . . .-. .-. .-

I couldn’t walk by her without touching her. We were becoming one of this, one at that. Comfort and pleasure wafted like incense through the house. Desire ripened into the unnameable. Poems flowed through her eyes and fell at her feet. If only I had a better imagination, I

could almost describe the visions, the feelings; the vulnerability. Seeing the gypsydance moonlightlove power shooting from her wrists like flower showers as the universe spun around her made fireworks look like plastic souvenirs.

“Are you lost?” interrupted the stranger.

“No, no, I’ve never been lost. I found my way here, didn’t I? But who are you?”

“Well, my name is Fred. Are you sure you are okay?” he asked, moving a little closer.

Tim stuck his hands in his pockets and slid his back up the post. “Yeah, sure Fred,” he said. “You just made me think about how people put up walls between each other. Just the way you hold your hand, _ or / shows if someone should come or go.” His hand trembled a little from too much coffee and sugar as he demonstrated. After an awkward pause in which they both decided not to shake hands, he continued. “Oh, I’m Tim.”

“I feel like an experiment!” laughed Fred as he stepped up and down on the curb, scuffing his shoes carelessly as he looked curiously at his own hands. “I’ve never been accused of making anyone think before. What kind of walls are you talking about?” *This is very odd, but I just have to know what the heck he’s getting at*, he thought.

“I don’t know if I would really call it walls, or direction of motion. You know, towards or away. Attraction or repulsion, like waves on the beach. I think we experience something very similar to the waves when we meet other people. We may be initially repulsed, for example, by a bum on the street until we realize she has a pretty face. Well, then everything changes, doesn’t it? All of a sudden she just needs a little help. The waves start washing over the shore.”

“I see. You’re just talking about whether or not you want to engage with someone based on their looks.”

“Not quite that simple. I’m talking about everyone you meet. Family, teachers, friends, everyone. At any given moment you are either moving toward or away from them.”

“Doesn’t it ever just sit still? I’ve been married twenty-three years. Going by your theory, we should either be on different planets, or all smashed together!”

“No, no, no. For one thing, it can be very subtle, and even moving in different directions on different layers. Haven’t you ever seen the clouds doing that?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I’ve seen that. So are you talking about people, clouds, or waves?” Fred chided.

Tim didn’t have time for bullshit.

“Do you want to find out or not?”

Okay, maybe this is a little crazy. I think I'll ignore that one, thought Fred.

"I'm trying to show how you can learn things sometimes by just looking at the world around you," Tim explained. "They call it observation - it's a basic scientific technique. You can learn patterns, connections, similarities, parallels between the most diverse things. Try it sometime. While you're at it, try thinking without words; and while you're at it - consider this: is everything in your dreams of your own making, and is the landscape of your waking life any of your own, or are you just swimming in it?"

"You sound like you could use a beer."

"A little early, isn't it?"

"So we'll have a hamburger with it."

Their shadows crossed as they walked along. Fred remained curious and sceptical. Tim scratched his head absentmindedly.

"You would think that having been the patriarch in a family of five adults and running your own little business in the basement would free you up for more creative endeavors."

"Uhuh."

"Well, it does and it doesn't. I move too slowly to get much done anyway, but everyday life can be very distracting. Have you ever wondered how some people do things as well as they do? 'Practice, practice, practice!' How did Rembrandt do it? He must have used all three sides of his brain. I think most great artists were probably either assholes or recluses."

Fred almost laughed. They had animatedly covered a few blocks and the noonspring sun had him feeling expanded and airy. He tried piecing together Tim's apparent ramblings, looking for some of the patterns, connections, etc., trying to find a common thread. Ideas seemed to be flitting by like swallows over a river. "How about this place?" he asked.

"McDirty's? Oh, why not."

They had wandered a ways north on Main street and found themselves in the less pleasant part of town. Being set in a fishing village turned tourist trap, it was hard to tell if McDirty's just turned out the way it was, or if it was a poor attempt at irony. Its original life was a steak house with a western false front facade. The facade remained, but now had a big four-leaf clover painted on it with "McDirty's Pub" arching over the top of it. Depending on the time of year, it was either a local hang-out or a good place for a tourist to get mugged. After walking through the Kelly green door you would pass a wall of turned wood spindles (probably taken from old headboards), which guided you to a large bench filled with half-burnt loaves of bread; appar-

ently meant to be decorative, but suspiciously available for anyone brave enough to indulge themselves. The next thing you would notice in the dimly lit room is that all of the tablecloths were newspapers. The tables, chairs, and place settings were a hodgepodge of classic Salvation Army wares. The walls and ceiling were covered with a combination of nautical and Irish paraphernalia. Old fishing nets hung from above, littered with seashells, driftwood, and the usual flotsam and jetsam. A narrow shelf followed the perimeter of the room just above head high with an N scale train set constantly chugging clockwise along. The locomotive had “Michael Collins Express” emblazoned on the side facing the room, with a rustic Brigid’s Cross sticking out of the smokestack. A couple of the cars were carefully painted to look like Murphy’s Irish Stout tankards, and a few hoppers were loaded with random items, from stale french fries to toy soldiers. The remaining boxcars were painted with various Irish quotes, logos, and graffiti. The caboose had something on the rear most polite people chose not to notice. Old Mac was behind the bar, as always. “Greetings citizens” he boomed, “have a shit anywhere!”

Fred chose a table by the window, brushing off the chair as inconspicuously as possible before seating himself. From the shadows came a young woman.

“I’m Renee, what would you like to drink?”

Her old world beauty and new world don’tmesswithmeness spun Fred’s head for a few moments while he tried to gather his thoughts and speech into the same bucket that wouldn’t pour out as stupid or crass.

“I’ll have a lager,” was all he could come up with.

Stupid, he said to himself. *I should have said “Stout.” But then I would have been tempted to add something clever to that. Better leave well enough alone.*

“Me too,” said Tim.

“M’kay, specials are on the board,” she declared as she dropped menus on the table and walked back to the shadows.

Fred shook his head to clear his eyes enough to see the menu. Tim recognized his discomfiture, but decided it was best to ignore it.

“Fried haggis? What is that?” Fred muttered.

“Sheep’s pluck, if you were in Scotland. I don’t know how they make it in Ireland or the States. Why don’t you get it and find out?” he teased.

“Pluck?”

“Stuff they pluck out of a sheep, I guess. Unfortunately you won’t get any sheep lung

here, it's not allowed in the states.”

Renee returned with two tall glasses.

“I think I'll have a hamburger,” said Fred.

Tim ordered the same, no fries. They sat in silence a while, looking interested in the surroundings. A slight breeze from the window stirred the corners of the newspapers which were skillfully weighed down by the condiments and place settings. A few other customers were scattered around the tables and the bar.

“Married twenty three years! How old does that make you?”

“Too old to be staring at waitresses?” Fred mused.

Tim looked into his beer and smiled.

“The heart wants what it wants.”

“I'm not going to ask her out, I just admire beautiful things - no harm done.”

“Of course not, except for the objectification part.”

“Check.”

“And, mate.” said Renee as she plopped down a couple pieces of dead cow. She gave Fred the waitress smile and said “Will there be anything else?”

“No thank you, ma'am.”

Tim was greatly amused. *Good food, good entertainment, what more could you want? Home - home and immortality, that's what.*

“So, Tim...”

Ah, here it comes, thought Tim. The pause before the question storm. “Are you married, are you retired, what did you do, what do you do, any hobbies, how many kids?” etc.

“I think I sort of get it about the walls. The walls, the waves, whatever. It's like we are all in a big swimming pool, right?”

Tim raised his eyebrows and nodded politely. Fred continued.

“It takes effort to get closer or further from someone, doesn't it? More effort, I think, to get closer...” Fred's imagination began to churn. Tim chewed and watched the train go round.

“It's like an ocean of energy, all around. But doesn't it apply to everything, not just people?”

“It's not what I was thinking, but I suppose so,” replied Tim.

“You know, everything in nature - the whole universe for that matter. Ebb and flow, back and forth, yin-yang, on-off; or, or, ones and zeroes! Dark matter and light; all powered by a simple feeling.”

Renee came back, clicking her pen and tapping her pad.

“You guys want another beer, or are you ready for your check?”

“Well, my friend here just discovered the secret of the universe, so I think that calls for another.” said Tim.

“Hey Mac,” Renee called out, “we’ve got a couple of Moonbats here!”

Mac turned around and scribbled something onto a chalkboard behind the bar. “Okay, they can have one more,” he said.

Tim excused himself to go to the head. He hadn’t had a coupleabeers in a long time. A headfull of ideas were sloshing around his brain, and the floor felt like foam rubber. He thought of a picture he had in mind of someone reading the Celestine Prophecy. *A guy sitting on a plane, reading the book, looking up every once in a while and gazing around at the other passengers; looking to see if anyone else had that same look on their face of wanting to connect - waiting for something special to happen.* For some reason he always thought that was very funny, especially because he thought it could quite likely happen. In a truly synchronistic world it surely would. Looking around the rest room he couldn’t help but notice how tidy it seemed. *Old Mac must be a closet neatnik. I’ll bet he flosses four times a day.* He placed both hands on the shiny sink and leaned into the mirror. *Not too bad for an old dubber.* Running his hand through his barely thinning hair - *It always feels so weird to look at my own face, like I’m trying to pin down who this is. Wonder what Fred would think about that?* He took a piece of toilet tissue and used it to flush the latrine and close the lid. Then he grabbed a paper towel, using it to pump some soap into his hands and turn on the water. Placing the towel carefully on the sink, he lathered and rinsed. After using the same towel to shut the water off and draw off a couple of more towels he dried his hands, unlocked the door and tossed the towels in the can. Heading back to the table he took the opportunity to check out some of the other patrons. No-one he recognized, *not like the old days. Still, people are just people.* There were the customary singles at the bar, sitting one or two seats apart. *Close enough to talk if they want to, but not feeling like they have to.* At the end an attractive couple occupied their private sphere. One table waggled with a group of elderly folk, unabashedly making known their political leanings. Another was circled by a younger crowd, unusually quiet. *Almost apprehensive.*

“What the hell is a Moonbat?” asked Tim as he scudded in his chair.

“No idea,” said Fred.

Mac was coming over to them carrying their beers with hands that looked like they were

made for hauling rope as big around as the mugs he was fetching. Showing a slight limp from years of bearing heavy loads, he seemed more suited for standing still than walking. “Here ya go lads - think you can handle these without getting too rowdy?”

“Tell you what” said Tim, “explain to us what a Moonbat is, and I’ll promise not to trash the joint.”

Mac pulled up a chair and sat down with a gravelly sigh. “I’m sorry for that,” he said. “Renee has trouble staying interested.” He looked around to make sure she wasn’t listening, his husky whisper of a voice was difficult to muffle. “I’d hate to lose her, so I thought up this little game we play. We categorize people.”

Fred looked concerned. “Haven’t we gotten past that in this day and age? I think we should try to see how much we are alike, rather than find ways to separate ourselves even more.”

Mac laid one of his big hands on Fred’s shoulder. *Geeze*, Fred thought, *he could squeeze me like a tomato!*

“I don’t think it’s like that,” Mac replied. “It don’t have so much to do with color and sex an’ stuff as it does with how they act. We think up stupid names, like “Mumbahs”. Like them old people over there. Mumbahs if I ever sawr any.”

Fred’s disapproval outweighed his fear of a crushed shoulder. “That’s age discrimination. What do you do - spit in their salad?”

“Got nauthin’ to do with how old they are. Just listen to them.” He leaned forward, and to Fred’s relief, set both elbows on the table. “They talk loud on purpose, like they’re building a wall or somethin’. What do you think would happen if we started doing the same thing with an opposite opinion? They’d prob’ly storm out without paying. Another typical Mumber trick.”

This was right up Tim’s alley. “What about that other table?” he asked. “Those kids over there?” He tried to imagine what sort of names Mac might have for them. *Probably just Nerds or Goths I’ll bet.*

Mac brushed the slick black bangs off his right eye and checked out the large round table like he was picking food from a deli bar. “Hahd t’ say. I think I see a few different ones there, but they ain’t givin’ me much t’ go on.” The table in question was being slowly vacated as the young adults paired and trioed off. “But you want to know about Moonbats, right? The best way I can think to say it is ‘old hippies’. Maybe Renee can help with that.” It was getting close to the lull-time at the restaurant between lunch and dinner, and most of the remaining patrons had their checks in hand. “Hey deah, I think you done enough to keep the dishwasher busy awhile.

Com'on ovah and straighten these guys out.”

Renee drifted over, sat with her hands folded in her lap and looked around like she was waiting for someone to deal the cards. “What is it?” she asked.

“Why did ya call these guys Moonbats?”

A brief smirk was replaced by the waitress smile. “They said they found the secret of the universe. Doesn’t that qualify?”

“Yeahp, yeahp,” Mac inhaled. “I’d say it does.” He turned to Fred. “Which one?”

“The one where everything is on or off, and...”

“No, which universe?” Mac interrupted.

“This one.”

“Oh. I think a different one would be more innerestin’.” He winked at Renee. “So what else you got?”

“Don’t be winkin’ at me, asshole. Isn’t that enough.?”

Tim had been squirming for something to share. “I saw a new color today,” he offered. “A new color - as if the secondary colors were primary and there was an extra one, like a bull’s-eye in the color wheel.”

“Sorry, that doesn’t make any sense,” said Renee. “There is only one color spectrum we can see, and it goes ‘round just like that train; in a never-ending circle.”

“That’s right!” Tim agreed. “But I didn’t see it with my eyes, exactly. It was more like a feeling, or a waking dream. Think of the chart from home economics class.”

“You took home ec?”

“No, I took shop like a good boy; but my sister did, and I stopped in a couple of times. I’ll never forget that cool chart. I would just sit and stare at it, imagining all kinds of things. It started with yellow, just a happy, happy color - like daffodils. Then it was red - it could be happy, but it’s more like lust, fire, blood, or sports cars. In-between was orange - coloring pumpkins with crayons on halloween or thanksgiving. Homey and satisfying. Then it went to blue - sky, ocean, sad, infinite. In-between was royal purple. The richest of all. Finally, between blue and yellow there was green - earth itself. The re-assurance that all will be well and new again. The primaries might be building blocks, but the secondary ones and all the in-between ones are what really color our emotions. So when I looked up at the sky this morning it was incredibly blue. I couldn’t stop looking. After a while the blue became, not darker, but deeper. So deep it almost appeared black - but bright, not dim. I kept looking until it seemed like a pair of hands opened

up and gave me this feeling. A royal thanksgiving earth-dream came out and colored my sky, inwards and outwards.”

Mac wasn't impressed. “Quite a speech old man, but I don't buy it. Just sounds crazy to me.”

“And a guy with Italian heritage running an Irish pub with a choo choo train in it isn't crazy at all,” Renee said, looking Mac straight in the eye. “Face it, we all have the crazy gene. We've got all of these emotions cataloged in the pit of our stomachs and sometimes they get out, like little worms.” She interlocked her fingers and wriggled them to make her point. “Did you ever get into an argument and really listen to what you were saying? Where does that crap come from? No-one is born sane; we don't even know what that is.”

“Vulcans!” said Fred, “They had it completely under control.”

“My point, exactly. They all had it too - but they just learned how to dominate it. And not always successfully, if I remember correctly. People blame it on the rest of the world, or their childhood, or brain chemistry, anything else they can think of, but I think it's all just in there waiting to get out. If you're honest, you have to admit that you deal with it every day. I'm sad, I'm afraid, nervous, touchy as hell, lonely, sick of people and I don't have much hope. Does this make me crazy? It tries to. But I'm also a lot of other things. I'm full of wonder, I literally believe in love, I think people are divine beings, and I have plenty of hope. A lot of contradictions there, but I think that's all a part of being human.” She got up to cash out a customer.

“Wait a minute,” said Fred. “Italian?”

“Ask him.” she tossed a hand toward Mac as she walked away.

“Michael Cambio. Pleased t'meecha. All my grandparents were from 'old country', but mom and dad were born here. I'm not sure how Mike got turned ta Mac, but Dirty's was my wife's idea. She din't like the tablecloths, or the train.”

“Or you,” added Renee from across the room.

Outside of McDirty's the east wind was cooling off the day. It had a way, late on a spring afternoon, of coming off the ocean and taking a brisk walk down Main street. Strings of clouds were chasing the sun on its way down, weaving thicker gray braids behind them. A cool mist was waiting for Fred and Tim as they wound up their visit. Stepping out onto the sidewalk, Tim zipped up his thin jacket, tugged at his collar, and prepared for the upwind trek. Fred followed close behind.

Everything seems so far away, thought Tim. The euphoria of food and drink was turning into a dull queasiness. A low humming from the diesel engines of the bus and ferry terminal drifted across the street, and the foghorn was beginning its diffused song. The flags and banners of the shops slapped at his face, so he dropped his head and measured his steps according to the dividers on the sidewalk. Fred picked up his pace to walk in tandem, their elbows bumping together as they buried their hands in their pockets, squinting into the mist that grew thicker with every gust of wind. Emptiness peeked out of every doorway, offering no shelter from the wind or Tim's imaginings. *I took a ferry to Wisconsin once, the S.S. Badger. Lew and Gail drove me up from L.P. while I sat in the back drinking wine and trying hard to be Kerouac. I had a large dufflebag - half books, half whatever; I was going to see Clyde for a while and then go back up to Lupton where I would stay in the trailer alone until I got my music ready. The four hour ferry ride arrived in the dark. The water was behind me, wire fences and distant lights in front. It was the loneliest I ever felt.* His fingers twiddled the twelve dollars and change remaining in his pocket. Clouds overspread most of the sky and the mist became a soft rain. They had walked the half mile or so past the ends and beginnings of the one-way streets, the restaurants, art galleries, and gift shops, to the big intersection where "downstreet" officially ended. Ahead, the storefronts turned into homes and woods; going right sent you past the auto dealers and box stores - to Portland, Boston, all the way to Key West where his father was born, well over a century ago. *So far away...Hey dad...*

"Hey dad."

The sun passed into the thin spot just between the horizon and clouds, sending crimson streaks across the sky and turning the raindrops into fleeting promises of color. *There it is again!*

"Hey dad - out for another lonely poet walk?"

He turned to smile at his daughter. "Indeed!" The rain fell, the sun set. "How about you, found any poems today?"

"No, I drove. Would you like a ride home?" She wasn't in the mood for a long conversation in the cold rain.

“Of course, thanks for coming. I have a friend I would like to bring along for dinner, is that alright?” He nodded to Fred. Sandra looked at Fred and also nodded. Fred shrugged his shoulders and they followed her to the car.

A short ride took them over the hill just outside of town that overlooked the Great Meadow. The view at the top afforded one last glimpse of light in the distance, and in the shadows lay the meadow brook. Crossing over the bridge, the peepers were in full force - singing in happy waves from thousands of tiny bodies. Tim cracked a window to let the song in as they wound up the hill on the other side and curved to the right to ride along the ridge. Many a journey from afar had ended along that quarter mile of road, the tired passengers remembering the best part of the trip is getting home. So it seemed again for Tim as his own song from long ago began to play in his mind.

*In the north of New England about a mile from the coast
On a hill overlooking a meadow
There's a home that's so grand, I don't mind to boast,
There's no other place I would rather go.
'Tho the roof's a bit sagging and the shingles aren't straight
And the dogs can't be held by the ragged old gate;
I'd wander the earth, and a lifetime I'd wait
For the fortune to call it my own.*

As he crossed the threshold it seemed like it had been a lifetime, but familiarity soon vanquished any strangeness. Hugs for Tim and Fred were abundant as they were immersed in the amber lights of home.

“Thank you for finding him, uncle Fred,” whispered Rose. “You’re just in time for supper. Go have a seat with Erik, and we’ll be ready in a few.”

Fred perked up - he enjoyed his long talks with Erik about the politics of the day, and he had much to share. “You should have heard those numbers carrying on...”

“Numbers?” asked Erik. And so the long discourse began.

Tim looked around at the home that had been transported from an old church camp slated for demolition. It had probably been the boy’s dorm, judging by the rough carvings on some of the woodwork. Sandra had added her own special touch as a child when she X marked some of

the door jambs to aid in finding treasure. *Where is the treasure?*

She was there.

“Where have you been all day?” said Stormy as she walked over to chastise him.

She is Here! “Just hanging out with Fred for a while.”

“I know, but what were you doing?” She asked, placing her hands on his forearms and looking him softly in the eye. All the streams of his consciousness coalesced into one river of emotion.

She Is! “Missing you,” he answered.

“Oh right, I’ll buy that one,” Stormy said sarcastically. “How are you feeling?” Her look of concern assuaged any sense of delinquency.

“Good, good. Just a little off-center today” he admitted, “kind of tired, I guess.”

She took him by the arm and led him to the back of the house. “Come and rest awhile, let the kids take care of dinner.” She brought him into the bedroom. “Sit down, let’s try a meditation.” He gladly complied, acquainted with her sense of knowing exactly what to do. “Close your eyes, and take a deep breath.” He immediately felt better. She skillfully guided him through the first six chakras, her voice encompassing his awareness. “Now the seventh chakra, your third eye. Tell me what you see.”

“Just dots and patterns, phosphenes.” he said.

“Don’t think about that, just relax and wait; it will come to you.”

He waited. The patterns formed into an eye, beginning with a dot, dead center. *Still just dots and swirls, but yes, an eye.* “I see an eye.”

“Look through it.”

The eye began drifting slowly back and forth. It opened wider, revealing the full circle of the iris. He concentrated on seeing through the pupil. “Am I looking from the inside, or the outside?”

“Does it matter?”

“I guess not.”

“Just be quiet and watch. You will see your higher self.” She waited, giving him time to adjust. “Do you see it?”

“Maybe.”

“Yes, you do. Keep breathing, slow and deep. What does it tell you?”

Tim opened his eyes and took Stormy by the hand.

“That I’m just happy to be here, now.”