

small events



haibun by w. f. owen

small
events

w. f.
owen

small events

© 2007 w. f. owen

ISBN 978-1-893959-62-0

Red Moon Press

PO Box 2461

Winchester VA

22604-1661 USA

www.redmoonpress.com

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the author except in the case of brief quotations in reviews.



For Caroline, Kennedy and Corey
and my parents Billy Gene, Sallie Bell and Frenchie

Contents

- 9 small events
- 10 clicks
- 11 the taste of blood
- 12 frog
- 13 oatmeal
- 14 in and out of fog
- 16 a story about nothing
- 17 canoe
- 18 haircut
- 19 doodlebug
- 20 thunder and lightning
- 21 whisper
- 22 mumblety-peg
- 23 tower
- 24 waiting
- 25 blanket party
- 26 ring
- 27 napalm
- 28 stripped
- 29 stomp
- 30 womb
- 31 umbilical
- 32 adult condor no. 8
- 33 flying a kite
- 34 opening day
- 35 eat

- 36 flares
- 37 quake
- 38 clothesline
- 39 happy birthday
- 40 september rain
- 41 winter chill
- 42 frame
- 43 a perfect cut
- 44 blink
- 45 dog tags
- 46 haibun for jerry
- 48 veterans
- 49 don't talk
- 50 home
- 51 02-827
- 52 red trees
- 53 horizons
- 54 dead pixel
- 56 checking
- 57 indian summer
- 58 a better look
- 59 penny
- 60 father's day
- 61 his mark

- 63 publication credits
- 64 author's biography

small
events

small events

Memories of my fifty-nine years run together like photographs in a family album put together in haste, out of chronological order, too many shots of some events, too few of others. Pictures of the living and the dead, immortalized. Cherished photographs: my sons' hits in Little League; summers pulling catfish from the Colorado River; four years a Marine; twenty-four years a professor; ten years a SCUBA instructor in Hawaii. Small events have made me—such as having to retake high school biology. After I aced the course the second time, my teacher told me I should think about going to college. Thank you Mrs. Simmons (oh yeah, I'm sorry I called you "Simons" to irritate you all those times). Other images stick in my mind: the quiet school hallway the afternoon JFK was shot (my sixteenth birthday); puffs of smoke from the Texas Tower that hot August day (it was my friend Joe's idea to drive down to see the sniper). And last, moments of perfection: nailing a haiku; spearing a line drive; swishing a three-pointer; earning my expert badge at the rifle range.

boot camp album
counting the Marines
who died in Nam

*(Dedicated to Platoon 196, First Battalion, Marine Corps Recruit Depot,
San Diego, California, 16 June-11 August, 1967.)*

Sitting with A.C. in the predawn Texas autumn, his 1957 Ford running with the heater on. He has driven us to this wild pecan grove in the hill country to hunt squirrels. His only son is grown and in college. Like an uncle to me, I am familiar with his personal habits. My feet roll over empty beer cans on the floorboard. Puffing on filter-less Camels and slurping black coffee, he changes the country music station by punching the yellow-brown radio buttons above the ashtray. His teeth are that color, too. A wheezing attack interrupts a story about the life of squirrels intermingled with a Zen-like dissertation on the flavors of wild meat compared with domesticated animals. He likes to instruct me, even though I know most of his lessons. "Squirrels communicate by clicking sounds, so wiggle the bolt on your gun and that will draw them out." I nod, having used this technique my grandfather taught me. These critters move up and down trees like linemen climbing telephone poles.

With enough light to walk, we take our stations beside pecan trunks. We begin clicking our bolts and watching the treetops for any movement. Other than an occasional woodpecker, I only hear A.C.'s metallic messages and lots of coughing. After a couple of hours of this, he comes over to ask if I saw any squirrels. "No, only a rabbit." "Hunted out," he grunts.

afternoon shadows
with each click
the coffin lowers

the taste of blood

The last dog we had growing up, a boxer named Bullet, developed the habit of jumping up and laying his paws on the chest of anyone who approached. Licking and slobbering, he only wanted to play, but would knock over small children, so we were forced to take him to live in the rural town of my grandparents. There was plenty of open space. Rabbits and possums to hunt. When he needed to be chained, he had the shade of the plum trees. On our visits we would throw the green canning plums for him to chase. He liked to chase. He also went after the neighbor's chickens sometimes and killed a few. "Once they get the taste of blood, you might as well shoot 'em," the man explained.

And one day, that's just what he did.

first fist fight
the taste of blood
in my mouth

frog

The box in my tent contains all of my clothes and the mongrel dog who has adopted me this rainy season on Oahu. Every night, the dog greets me by wagging its entire body, whimpering, and croaking in anticipation of the scraps I bring: a bit of hamburger and the middle buns of the 99¢ Big Macs eaten after teaching SCUBA class. I named the dog Frog. We both are homeless, but have each other to look forward to.

Tonight, Frog fails to greet me.

in the box
the dog licks
her stillborn pups

oatmeal

Papa is cooking oatmeal for supper. He stands over the old stove just as he had the last time I saw him four years ago when I left for the Marine Corps. Daily oatmeal with milk and black coffee. He doesn't seem to notice me, intent on stirring the bubbling paste in the dented pan. Taking the spoon, I stir for him. It resembles the glue I used in grade school, cooked well past done. The spoon stands up at attention by itself. I remember helping him mow lawns in the summers. Back then, he would say, "you won't have to eat all day after a bowl of this—it sticks to your ribs." I motion for him to sit at the table, then hand him the pan. He eats it right out of the pan. Less dishes to wash. Pouring the milk for him, he stares blankly at my face.

autumn deepens
he searches the pan
for my name

in and out of fog

I stride this January morning as much to stay warm as to emulate my heroes, Jim Bridger, Davy Crockett, Kit Carson and my grandfather. Pump pellet gun slung over my shoulder, a leftover biscuit wrapped in foil bulging my left pants pocket, a ball of cotton twine—in case I get a squirrel or rabbit—bunched in my right pocket. After an hour walk, I reach the outskirts of town, a pecan grove cut by a small creek. When I have been here before, I have seen families of squirrels among the bare limbs and clumps of mistletoe. Even so, they are hard to shoot, as they rotate around the trunks to hide. In his many stories, grandfather explained how to hunt game. “Click the bolt of your rifle or click your tongue,” he would say. “The squirrels will come around the trunk to see what’s makin’ the noise.” And, about hunting rabbits, “Make sure you lead ’em like shootin’ birds.” Walking slowly through the grove, clicking my way, looking for squirrels above and for rabbits among the tufts of winter rye. Feelings of anticipation and sadness. Sad that grandfather had only told me how to hunt; he never came with me. He wanted to, but as a young man he had pierced his right eye with a pocketknife while whittling. “My shootin’ eye,” he joked. And recently, his dementia has taken more from him.

Fog is lifting, birds are singing. This hunt seems over. Reaching for my biscuit, I look for a boulder to sit on. Across the creek, a large marsh rabbit lumbers up the trail. I raise my pellet gun, aim ahead of the rabbit and squeeze the trigger. To my amazement, the animal falls. I run across an oak trunk that spans the

creek, then up the embankment to stand over the twitching body. The pellet has entered one eye and protrudes the other.

I walk home, munching the cold biscuit, the rabbit hanging from my waist.

in and out of fog
driving him
to the home

a story about nothing

Here at the home do they know it's Christmas soon a
fruitcake underneath the artificial tree on a formica-
topped table pine-scented shiny white floors masking
the smell of age wafting through open doors I make my
way to papa at the end of the hall peering inside each
room this one with an attendant wearing a Santa hat
turning a groaning man mumbling about bed sores
another with a child's mobile swinging beside an IV
bag a last empty except for someone changing sheets
I wonder where the occupant went and papa doesn't
notice me I stay as long as I can.

winter chill
papa tells a story
about nothing

canoe

Threat of rain. I jog to get the mail. Pulling letters from the small rectangular mailbox. Here is a large manila envelope from my hometown in Texas. It is my share of the inheritance from the sale of my grandparents' rural home.

Memories of summers my cousins and I spent there. The add-on back bedroom, with the swamp cooler that added humidity to the already-sticky Texas nights, where papa and we grandsons slept. After dawn-to-dusk days helping him mow lawns, we played rock-paper-scissors to see who slept where. The loser got the old single bed so hollowed out we nicknamed it "the canoe." Secretly, I always tried to lose. I liked sleeping in that bed because it gave me a feeling of being held.

Drops hit the envelope. I lock the mailbox and walk home.

November rain
zipping my coat
all the way up

haircut

The scissors gouge and tear my cousin Leon's hair. Not a professional haircut, but he complained all summer about needing one until grandpa finally agreed to do it. We circle the chair, barely able to stifle our laughs. Cicadas are louder than ever. Leon just sits there taking his medicine, but with the look of a condemned prisoner. Haircut done, huge gaps in his hair, he quickly puts on a cap.

distant rumbles
the anvil shape
of a thunderhead

doodlebug

I squat hunched over at the entrance to my grandfather's run-down garage inspecting the cone of sand on the dirt floor between my feet, mindful of the red ants that also occupy the area. Ant lions—doodlebugs—have built these upside-down pyramids in hopes of capturing a meal. Like Huck Finn, grass stem between my teeth, daydreaming of rafting down the Colorado River as it winds through this railroad town a mile away.

No Jim to accompany my boyhood adventures which for a ten-year-old are limited to this acre of land and doing things, unspeakable to parents, like capturing honey bees in jelly jars with an inch or so of black oil at the bottom. I'd go up to the flowering mock orange blossoms, close the lid quickly around the pollen-drunk insects. They'd fall, wiggle a little, then sink. No raft either . . .

The tickle of an ant crawling up my leg snaps me back.

distant thunder
dropping an ant
to the doodlebug

thunder and lightning

Hiding with friends, a homemade bow and quiver with one arrow strapped on my back, I see dad streaking down the street away from momma's house. I'm sure he's mad, but I'd rather play with my buddies than stay with him. It's his weekend for custody. He does his best—gives me money, buys me things and brings my brothers and me unusual gifts. One Easter he gave us brightly-colored chicks. They grew up of course and we had to take them to our grandparents' house in the country. I liked visiting them to see how much of their color was left. Another time he gave us two colored bunnies. Other than one being blue and the other pink, they were exactly alike. So, we named them Thunder and Lightning. We kept them in the garage until one died and the other escaped.

distant thunder
movement through tall grass
in the vacant lot

whisper

Smells have the ability to bring up memories, like when I used to step outside my Texas home in the autumn. The scent recalled a time I was stationed in southern California. But sounds, too, can conjure memories as the phone call did this morning from a friend who had a stroke. His damaged voice reminded me of events in high school involving a star football player named Jeff. He was over six feet tall and about 230 pounds, but agile. He played practical jokes on everyone. Once in gym class, Jeff and Larry (the other football star) got into a play fight in the locker room. It started with Jeff popping Larry with a wet towel. They snapped each other's naked butts until it escalated into a real fight. Larry glanced a blow off Jeff's chin causing him to slip on the wet floor. As he landed, there was a stunned look on his face. Other than football games, it was the only time I saw him serious. That same year, Jeff and I were in the same art class. One day the teacher left the room. Jeff went around putting paint on everyone's canvas and flicking paint on our clothes. Paint got on my new shirt.

Just after graduation, I was waiting to go into the Marine Corps. One day I received a call about a hunting incident between Jeff and his older brother. Jeff had been joking around with a shotgun, thinking it was unloaded, and accidentally shot his brother Steve in the head. Steve recovered, but he always talked in a whisper after that.

the dryer's hum
my favorite shirt
in the rag pile

mumblety-peg

The pocketknife lands in the black Texas mud just beyond his foot. In this game called split, we take turns throwing a knife outside our friend's position. He stretches a leg out to the knife, pulls it from the ground and takes his throw. The first person to fall while stretching loses. This Yankee kid named Ed stretches out, loses his balance then falls, to the hoots and howls of my buddies. Keeping with tradition, I wipe my blade clean on his clothes. Ed is from New York and talks funny—he calls our knife game “mumblety-peg”—but he has a nice Case pocketknife and turns out to be our high school's best football player. After a while, we get used to his northern accent.

September sky
hearing that a friend
was in the first tower

tower

August 1, 1966. It is a typical humid day in Austin until the phone call from Joe, my high school buddy. He says he'll pick me up in a few minutes. There is someone shooting from the Texas Tower. He pulls up and I jump into his '56 Chevy. Burning rubber, we speed off the three miles to the "drag," the main strip bordering the University of Texas campus. A Texas Ranger stops us at a roadblock. We park and run closer. People are hugging buildings and peeking around corners. A plain-clothes officer has a rifle perched on an open car door peering through the scope. Following his line of sight up to the Tower, occasional clouds of gun smoke drift across the building, partially obscuring the huge clock and floating into the pale blue sky. A puff... then the crack of a firearm discharging. It was like watching a gunfight on TV, surreal yet somehow familiar.

passing clouds
echoes of gunfire
from the grassy knoll

waiting

1967. I'm 19 and don't want to be drafted. As a loyal American though, I go to enlist in the Navy or Marine Corps. The Navy has excellent schools, but there is a long list to get in. The Marines, well, will make a man of me or, as my brother says, "get your head screwed on straight." My high test scores guarantee a Marine aviation school, so I end up delaying four months after all. In the time before boot camp, I help my grandfather on the chicken ranch he runs.

clearing skies
the chickens play
before they are cut

blanket party

Muffled sounds of fists striking body parts through the blanket in the pitch black of our platoon's Quonset hut. The shit bird deserves it. Good Marine? Not yet. He can't keep up on marches, can't do push-ups, sit-ups or even clean his rifle right. No one talks about his blanket party—nobody needs to.

field day inspection
bouncing a quarter
off his blanket

Walking guard duty around a Quonset hut of ammunition on the Marine Corps Air Station, Oahu, my high school ring tapping the barrel of a loaded M-14 rifle. Possible racial and anti-war riots threaten the base. Tropical stars trigger memories. The major in boot camp warned me that this ring would snag and pull my finger off when jumping from a helicopter in Nam. Instead of going to West Pac, I got stuck driving a "six-by" truck in California until boredom spurred a transfer request, which could have led to the Tet Offensive, not here to paradise. First week on the Rock, the sunburn from bodysurfing, tasting poi (the glue-like brown paste made from taro), hearing stories on the base from Marines, and on liberty in Waikiki from soldiers and sailors on R & R, about rumors of Russian tanks crossing the DMZ, moments of unspeakable terror beside hours of boredom. Alcohol-induced loose tongues, like the kid in the bar so juiced he removed the prosthetic mask covering what was left of his face from falling on a grenade. He stuck the plastic façade on someone's arm and watched him flick it off like some dead alien in a sci-fi film. A faint steel guitar playing Hawaiian music wafts through swaying palms just ahead of the approaching change of guard. "Halt, who goes there?"

About a year later, while SCUBA diving off the base near an old firing range, I lose my senior ring.

combing
the military beach
a crab with one claw

napalm

Returning after years away, I walk onto the Oahu beach. This sheltered cove is where the memorable love scene in “From Here to Eternity” was filmed. I had taken hundreds of SCUBA students across this sand where famous actors had wallowed. On dives with my buddies, we spread speared fish here. They flapped over and over on the sand until they seemed breaded for frying. Now even those times seem distant as I kneel near the surf where remnants of waves wet my trousers. This is the first time I had worn long pants here. Removing my shirt, I tie it around my throat like a neckerchief. The spray from the Blowhole a few yards away wraps everything in salt mist. I crack a smile and murmur “I love the smell of salt in the morning.” The Colonel in “Apocalypse Now” surely must have felt the same. A moment sealed in time by the smell of napalm incinerating all that it touched in gelatinous globs. Like me in my fully wet pant legs, an emblazoned memory.

I read in the newspaper that the U.S. military has decided to stop making napalm.

high-water mark
the Portuguese man-of-war
shrinks into itself

stripped

One of the screws holding the nameplate on the plaque my fiancée made for me is stripped. Over and over she says she wants to replace it, but I tell her that's what makes the gift perfect. At the end of the summer, she has to leave Hawaii for the mainland to resume college, while I finish my fourth year in the Marine Corps. Distance in geography and education levels cause our eventual breakup, but through letters we keep up with each other's lives: my marriage, new house and jobs; her college degrees and fight against breast cancer.

At work I receive a letter from her younger brother saying the mastectomy and chemotherapy have not been enough to win her battle.

early spring
before she can tie it
the balloon escapes

stomp

As a university undergraduate, I had a summer internship at the Juvenile Detention Home in Honolulu. On the first day, I see there is an element of danger. A caseworker has a swollen cheek and black eye from yesterday's escape attempt. My immediate supervisor, Pete, gives me two bits of advice: Don't turn your back and keep smiling. I watch him and he does just that. This man in his fifties has a permanent smile. Not a happy-face-sticker smile, but a genuine glad-to-be-alive one. The entire staff has this smile and one odd behavior: In conversations, each uses the "foot stomp," a slap of the foot nearest to you. Stomp, laugh. Pete introduces me to the superintendent. This small, articulate man has the loudest foot stomp of all. After three months, I file in my notes the hypothesis: Volume of foot stomp increases with status.

end of summer
on the storeroom floor
flattened cockroaches

We drop as if by parachutes below the mirror-smooth surface of Shark's Cove on Oahu's north shore for a rare pleasure dive away from SCUBA students. Our bubbles the only obstructions in crystal blue water, like a snow globe turned over gently just once. We move among schools of small fish, which part and reassemble around clouds of exhalations much as birds fly around kites. Through lava tubes with ceiling exits that mark our trek with tiny streams of air, we meander toward caves that go back under the one road, which encircles this most remote end of the island. A seduction of darkness beyond our hand-held lights sucks us inside the cave with each gentle wave swell, like the sweetness of Matsumoto's shave ice just up the street above our heads. Between breaths my mouth waters thinking of our after-dive treat. The slush of paste, cane syrup and vanilla ice cream gives way to the silt in the cave now so stirred that I must hold the depth gauge against my facemask with the flashlight directed obliquely. Fifteen feet of lava above us. And yet, no sign of the exit. We wait. An incredible impulse to shoot upward to life so close . . .

We breathe shallowly, resting on the bottom like two nurse sharks inhaling through gills. Occasionally, as the murk clears, we shine lights onto our own faces, calming each other . . . Now, faint blue, the jagged rock opening. We move through, out and up . . . reborn.

Fifteen years later, wearing a mask, knowing it could have ended that day.

first breath
after the caesarean
my son's birth

umbilical

The mobile twists slowly above my son's crib, catching moonlight slicing through the Venetian blinds. I have no reason to worry but come in to check on him, to hear him breathe, to cover him. His twitching eyelids . . . what could he be dreaming?

full moon
his umbilical
falls out

adult condor no. 8

Matriarch of a captive breeding program yielding 250 chicks was shot and killed by a poacher in the grassy foothills of southern California.

clear skies
watching the salmon spawn
with my adopted son

flying a kite

First, they put a strip across the road to count traffic. Then, they put up a stop sign. Now, they have erected a signal light. They call us a city. My friend calls it progress. He shows me how to find our location on his global positioning satellite system. I listen politely, but don't get it.

in the parking lot
flying a kite
with my son

opening day

Little League starts early with the decoration of a parent's truck in the team's colors. Being March and barely 8:00 a.m., sweatshirts cover the uniforms. But, we have our true big-league caps! Next, a raucous parade with parents and onlookers lining suburban streets in lawn chairs, then back to the field for ceremonies. As a coach this year, I sit with the players in right field for the introduction of league officers and a few ceremonial pitches—again, in the dirt low and away. Parents surround the field and fill the bleachers.

We stand for the Pledge: I trust in God. I love my country and will respect its laws. I will play fair and strive to win. But win or lose, I will always do my best.

opening day
in separate bleachers
the boy's parents

eat

Rushing around town doing errands nibbling on an increasingly-stale bagel remembering a story in the paper this morning about a mid-thirties woman who was an Olympic-class runner and was killed by a mountain lion while running on a northern California foothills trail life's fragility but the mountain lion had to eat not a matter of taste like humans take me for example I had not eaten certain foods especially Brussels sprouts until 1967 when I entered the Marine Corps if you took food on your metal tray you ate it or else and only then did I understand why my dad never ate beans because during the depression they had beans every day and that is why he ate so much beef a big man and could inhale steaks over an inch thick yet he did not die from a heart attack like his brother who at forty was felled by a massive coronary on the golf course now that man could put away the sausage which in Texas is called hot guts or my stepfather who was Cajun ate anything that wouldn't eat him first you know how they are food didn't kill him either.

summer morning
the cat brings in
feet and feathers

flares

I step inside after checking for ripe tomatoes in the garden the heat of California's summer sun radiating from my pink shoulders another stage three rotating blackout spins down the ceiling fan above the article I was reading that warns of increasing solar flare activity . . . Supercharged magnetic particles spew from erupting sunspots at 1,200 miles per second lighting aurora borealis for Midwesterners disrupting a high-frequency radio transmitter . . . Fanning my face with this page I rise to lay out the spotted tomatoes some with fissures oozing warm pink juice and seeds on the cool white tile counter . . . The ceiling fan spins, the VCR flashes 12:00.

power outage
a paper airplane
floats to the floor

quake

1906, I am burning. Children running, crying, pushed together like cordwood around Lotta's Fountain. The smoke of cook stoves dots the middle of my streets. Shouts everywhere: "Meet at the Fountain! The St. Francis is still up!" People waiting, huddled and overdressed. Stay away from my buildings! The liquefied ground eats some, but others are shedding bricks, like a snake sloughing skin in the old country. The snake lives! Time after time, I witness reunions at the Fountain—that man carrying his Chinese mother, her feet bound and dangling across his arms. She drives him like a car.

2006, I will guide you out of me. Turn left, go up and down the steep hill of Gough Street searching for the Bay Bridge. Snap out of your daydream, the light is green, the tires burn rubber, the car stares briefly straight up into the marine layer, then down with a thud. Yes, that sign says SBC Park. Remember Candlestick Park? The Battle of the Bay, the Bay Series and Loma Prieta.

Yes, I was shaken then too. They called it a Quake. Compared to the Great Earthquake, it was a mere shiver. The snake lives!

aftershock
the picture on the wall
straightens

clothesline

In the backyard strung like half-cooked spaghetti between rusted poles I return semi stiff and bleached white holding and being held the connective tissue of families and neighbors born from the despair of rolling blackouts baking in longer days casting broken shadows on a wilted lawn like Mercator lines on an antique globe artificially carving the land—joining it—these towels are my flags of white and stripes faded and new raised and pinned by early light to a reveille of sparrows lowered at dusk by mourning doves I am a throwback to decades before homeowner associations archaic like five-cent Coke in hourglass bottles ten-cent movies with all-day suckers real buttered popcorn and giant dill pickles a time when newspapers were only black and white.

summer wind
a dragonfly grips
the clothespin

happy birthday

November 22, 1963. From overhead, the crack of the PA system announcing “the President is dead.” He was forty-six. In the long hallway of our high school, there is an eerie creak of lockers opening and closing, like little coffins. On the way home, I kick a can ahead of me. A little boy’s game I decide, kicking it into the gutter. Sixteen. I am sixteen today. Arriving home, I see that Momma has made my favorite cake: banana nut with butter cream icing. The candles are on it already, but everyone is huddled around the TV.

in black and white
Marilyn Monroe sings
happy birthday

september rain

Every semester students in my Interpersonal Communication class bring personal objects to share. A college-level “show and tell.” I start by sharing a Kennedy half-dollar. My birthday is November 22, 1947. I carry the coin as a reminder of that tragic day in 1963. Students bring family heirlooms, photos, trinkets from trips, guitars and sports objects.

September 12, 2001, the day after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Although school was canceled yesterday, classes are held today. In my class, a man shares a mask from Mardi Gras; another shows his cross-country shoes; a woman explains the symbolism of her kickboxing shorts. One student brings a box filled with the ashes of her twenty-year-old cat. Someone asks how he can keep his own cat from wandering off and getting lost. “Put butter on its paws,” she says. The cat will find its way home by following the scented paw prints. We laugh together.

September rain
in the rubble
a new shoe

winter chill

A rock from the gravel road squirts from the truck ahead like a tiddlywink into the windshield creating a hole which quickly spider-webs across. Later, in the unheated shop waiting for my windshield to be replaced, the current program on TV is interrupted.

winter chill
the twisted cloud
left by Challenger

frame

Columbia the only cloud in the sky

This Zapruder film called life jerks its celluloid past the light provided by God in a continuous loop hanging on frames of imploded buildings, shiny black walls growing out of the ground, powered-up rockets' red glare to the tune of Jimi Hendrix on a farmland stage . . . I have seen this movie before . . . but God, the merciful God of your choice, has included subliminal clips between the ugliness, concession breaks of soft blue skies and flowers and children's smiles and homemade ice cream on a hot day and hope . . .

winter stars we walk into the theatre for a double feature

a perfect cut

Over the weekend a faculty colleague of mine died suddenly of what they called a “massive heart attack.” We were not especially close, but had talked often about such mutual interests as computers and television shows. A Film Studies Professor, he invited me to one of his night classes several years ago. He had brought in one of the writers of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* with rough cuts of a yet-to-be-seen episode. After class, he explained to me at length how to make the episode perfect through better fades, lighting and more effective storyboarding. “Like building a house,” he always said.

blue sky
the carpenter makes
a perfect cut

blink

Bill tells the story of his stroke on Super Bowl Sunday. A baseball player, golfer and high school honor student—much of that taken away as he sat in a recliner during halftime. He is a new advisee of mine at the College. Six years, and only a sophomore. He takes one course at a time. One day at a time, he laughs. Dark glasses. A white cane. He finds the buildings on campus by the colors and shapes of air conditioning units on top. Recently, they repainted our building a different color, throwing off his internal map. He found his way by the different scents of flowers and shrubs bordering the sidewalks. “You turn left at the roses, then right at the mock orange. It's easy.”

I saw Bill only a few more times. We chatted about the new plants on campus.

humid stillness
in the bush
the frog's blink

dog tags

A friend tells me that his brother's dog tags were among hundreds found on a recent trip to Vietnam by two Florida businessmen. His brother was listed MIA after his helicopter was shot down during the 1968 Tet Offensive. Stamped into the metal tags are his name, serial number and blood type. The businessmen bought over 600 of the tags in the back alley shops of Ho Chi Minh City. Some cost just a few pennies.

his brother's dog tags
found after thirty years
washing off foreign soil

haibun for jerry

I sit next to him at my first haiku meeting. He reminds me of my late grandfather in appearance and manner: whistling dentures, thinning hair, quick to laugh. We have had many adventures since.

One time, I drive us to a San Francisco Giants game. On the drive, we talk about his cancer climb up Mount Fuji, recite favorite haiku, curse like old soldiers and compare medical conditions.

prostate exam
the doctor and I
trade jabs

Arriving in The City hours before the game, we go to a small Asian café across from Willie Mays' statue. Sitting with him as he sips coffee and eats a pastry, sharing stories of his bartending days when he knew The Yankee Clipper and many 49ers players. Listening, feeling surreal, as if sitting with Hemingway in Sloppy Joe's bar hearing an oral history of war dispatches, African safaris and bullfights. I recall some of the books he has given me: a Hemingway biography (complete with five Bosc pear stickers plastered inside the front cover) and Nick Virgilio's *Selected Haiku* with the *Mass of Resurrection* typed on crisp, yellowed paper tucked inside (I begged not to accept such a memento, but he insisted) . . .

A ship's deep horn in the distance . . . baseball fans with multicolored hair drift by the window . . . a thread of Iron Butterfly's "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" wafts through the open door . . . a customer orders a latté

with a growl like Chewbacca's in the Star Wars bar scene . . . game time nears.

The game is eventful. Barry Bonds hits a home run. We lose a smuggled can of root beer to a Pac Bell Park attendant. I narrowly miss a foul ball trying to reach around my haiku friend. We are like two old fishermen not caring if we catch anything.

Heading home, he is quiet, reading some of my haibun. We fill each other with laughter and stories of people no longer with us. I drop him off at his house and feel I soon will be losing something of myself.

names of the dead
comparing wars
and soldiers lost

veterans

Walking around campus between classes in the early autumn mist. Two important dates are near: the Marine Corps' birthday and Veterans Day. Memories of my service . . . In 1968, I take a commercial plane to my next duty station. At DFW airport, I run to catch a connecting flight. A man in a blue business suit carries my green seabag over his shoulder all the way to the gate. "We're proud of you son," he says. After reaching my destination, I retrieve my bag and walk to a bus. A protester yells "Murderer!" Then, he spits on me.

autumn morning
two veterans
shoulder their brooms

don't talk

Momma enjoys warm milk to help her sleep between breathing treatments for Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease. Every four hours one of us breaks ampoules of drugs to help inflate her paper-thin lungs. On good days, one ampoule is enough. As the next treatment approaches, she talks in short sentences, whispering, wheezing. I tell her, "Don't talk Momma, save your breath."

Stretched out on the hospital bed in my old bedroom, oxygen tubes up her nose, remote controls for the bed and intercom entangling her, she is bound like a prisoner. We play crazy eights, hearts and poker, or just watch TV. I bring her Scratchers and lottery tickets. Using my lucky half-dollar, she scratched a \$50 winner the other day. Even though she can see outside, she asks me what the weather is like. I walk to the window and describe the plum trees with hard green fruit and the yellow jacket nest that hangs just under the eave. Thunderheads are forming. I start to pull down the window, but she stops me. "I like to feel the breeze," she whispers. We hold hands while watching her favorite soap opera.

holding my breath
I break
the second ampoule

home

After being on sabbatical leave for spring and summer, I renew my teaching-day ritual of a brisk morning walk around campus. Many familiar signs of early fall. Green-brown leaves send final nourishment to trees. Squirrels collect food with greater urgency. They trap the squirrels yearly to vaccinate for rabies. Passing one who begs a meal from a woman living out of a shopping cart, I wonder if the furry creature will ever get wise to the traps. There are more transients this semester. Placards line the path advertising fraternities and sororities. Reaching the Quad, I am struck by the number of chickens. They have proliferated to all corners of campus. The story is that floods all through northern California in the late 1990s displaced many animals, including a rooster and hen onto these grounds. According to an article in the student newspaper, a biological sciences professor adopted them. Entering our building, I see a brood of nine chicks and a homeless man I haven't seen before.

morning chill
a man bathes
in the restroom sink

02-827

A Native American man has been frozen for six months in the county morgue. He remains unidentified even though his fingerprints and dental records were circulated across the United States and Canada. Dead of exposure on a midtown street, wearing only a T-shirt and a Mickey Mouse watch, he will be buried this week as number 02-827.

cemetery
momma's headstone
not yet engraved

red trees

Her first hospital visit for cancer tests. A colleague and I visit. She is not a haiku poet, or a poet of any kind for that matter, but I bring her a copy of Jack Kerouac's *Book of Haikus* because there are some dog haiku in his *Beat Generation Haikus*. She is such a dog person and I'm sure she misses both pets. One often wears a plastic cone surrounding its head, to keep from biting herself. I read her a few of Kerouac's poems:

Red trees—
the dog tears at
an old itch.

Walking with the dog on the road
—a crooked leaf.

We joke a little that Kerouac, like us, liked to drink. I promise to take her out for a pale ale or wine when she gets out. The nurse comes in to draw blood.

Red trees—
I hand her the book
dog-eared

horizons

In the bed she will die in, my good friend's body
contorted, limbs limp and intertwined, cheeks sunken
as if puckering like we did when sharing a brew, me
vowing to plant my own vines, crush my own grapes,
make my own wine, we laughed thinking of the purple
feet I'd have, but not caring. I hold her hand this last
time, gently because she bruises easily, the color of
wine.

winter sky
the contrail stretches
horizon to horizon

dead pixel

Empty, I read the e-mail my dad has sent to the family list. We had talked by phone on his birthday a few days before, so the news is not a total shock. Reading in the dark, the light from the laptop burns the message into me:

I went to Seton Hospital as an outpatient on Wednesday, September 29, 2004. Had 4 biopsies taken from the right upper lobe of the right lung. The mass in the lung was about the size of a lime and located beginning in the pleural (lung sack) and into the right lung. Thursday, September 30, my family physician called and confirmed that it was diagnosed as a malignant cancer. Forgot to ask the type of cancer and will call tomorrow. My family physician is also compiling a list of oncologists and surgeons. He will contact them and I will meet with several of them to determine who would be best and what treatments they would use. That's where I am now and will let you know more when I find out. Please keep me in your prayers.

Love, Dad

family photo
in the background
bare trees

He tells me on the phone he wants them to just cut it out. "I am not going to lose my hair and be sick to my

stomach from chemo.” I try to comfort him best I can, saying a colleague friend of mine has gone through several chemo cycles and now is getting her hair back. “Let’s just hear what the doctors say.” Then, the next day, another e-mail:

my primary doc., has made app. with two doc. for next week, one cancer doc. and one cancer surgeon mon. the 4th and wed. the 10th. will let you know something when I do. by the way, my doc. said the cancer is adeno carcinoma of the lung. i ask him if it was fast moving. he said not being a cancer doc. but with the knowledge he has, if i did nothing i would have from one to two years. with treatment, up to five years. sounds good. on with the doc. next week. will let you know. love, dad.

I was thinking of getting a haircut this week, but think I’ll wait.

moonless night
on the computer screen
a dead pixel

checking

Returning from my son's Little League game, I check the answering machine:

"Son, this is Dad. Got some bad news today with the new CT and PET scans and my cancer is spreading. I'm probably gonna try some alternative direction, maybe Mexico—a new treatment for lymphoma cancer that looks promising and/or MD Anderson. If I don't find something to check it, to check this cancer soon . . . well I may only have three months to live. A kind of brutal way to put it but life's a life and I thought you might as well know. Anyway, we love you, give Caroline and the kids a hug . . ."

I listen to it twice to be sure, then just stare out the window.

checking . . .
the dove has returned
to her nest

indian summer

Down the hallway I trail my father playing out the oxygen tubing like fishing line giving a tiring fish just enough monofilament to stay hooked yet not jerking a loose connection he reaches the bed lowering slowly held steady by my other hand he was too tired to stretch out on the living room couch also he wants time to spend with me while I'm here just the weekend back here in the bedroom away from visitors I help him pay his bills he always pays his bills on time but not too soon he always said he didn't want creditors to get their money before they deserved it I guess that's where I got that from only five bills these will be the last bills he will ever get we joke that "Bill" is our name too I write them out on his checks then he manages to still a shaky hand to scrawl a reasonable signature maybe the last he signs that too as I put away the fold-up TV tray and card-table chair he whispers "stay a while with me son I'm scared" and I ask afraid of what and he says he fears when the time comes he will panic that is understandable I think everyone thinks of how they will go but I know him and assure him he will be a brave Texan at the end I see he has fallen asleep still holding my hand.

He didn't panic.

Indian summer
a spent salmon
washes ashore

a better look

The clock chimes 8:00 A.M. The sound replaces what would have been his morning breathing treatment of albuterol. Instead, his widow and I are off to visit his grave the day after the funeral. It has been an odd few days for Texas in July—more rain than clearing. It feels cool as the rain hits you but the resulting humidity seizes you by the throat making it hard to breathe.

At the gravesite, we rearrange the flowers and talk about my dad's life. She tries to visualize how the plot will look with the tree two grandkids will plant in the easement just behind the headstone. It probably will be an oak for longevity. Fruit-bearing trees are not allowed. It's too bad. He liked pecan trees and that would have been nice for him to look up at. He had picked pecan wood for his casket. And, I'm sure he'd get a kick out of the thump of pecans on his chest.

first day in the grave
I move his picture
for a better look

penny

Walking into the coffee shop for another day of writing. Two people glance down at a penny without picking it up. I bend over to retrieve the dull copper disk. Paying for my latté, I get one of those state quarters in change and quickly see it is one needed for our collection: a 1999 Virginia. But pennies have lost their allure, their shine... Memories of summer months lugging rolls of pennies in a shoebox to shopping centers for exchange. Finding a shady spot, I'd open roll after roll. Sometimes there'd be an Indian-head or a steel penny of the World War II years or even a 1909 or 1910, the kind with wheat stems on the tail side. An occasional Canadian penny, too. It was the thrill of reliving history. Imagine, who has touched this smooth brown cent? Had it been around the world? From the discoloration, this one may have been buried, then found and lost again. A 1958 on it. I was eleven then. About the time I started collecting coins. Maybe it was used to determine who goes first: "call it, heads or tails." Perhaps it once was in someone's collection. Recently there was a story that they will no longer produce pennies. Something good will be lost.

hot afternoon
tossing my lucky penny
in dad's grave

father's day

I drive my stepfather's old pickup on this Texas farm-to-market road to show him a new fishing spot just below a dam. Between his Cajun stories of eating alligator gars, squirrels and turtles, he laughs as I struggle to hold the truck on the road. Knee-slapping laughs. This truck has no power steering, a mind of its own. It's the road that makes it so hard to drive. Counties don't get much money for repaving. They patch these converted wagon trails. It's a quilt of odd-shaped tar globules. Sticky black humps with tire prints, embedded Lone Star beer caps and toads flattened like Frisbees.

At the steep bank of the slough that carries dam runoff, we catch fish with almost every cast. Some are gars—I talk him out of keeping those—but many are gaspers, a carp-like, thick-bodied suckerfish. They gasp. All are keepers over 10 pounds. They hook themselves. The only test is the strength of the monofilament line. Several fish snap our lines.

I didn't know then that this was his last Father's Day, his last fishing trip and our last laughter together. But, at 70, he caught his largest fish ever—a 30 pounder—that day.

distant thunder
the fish's tail
slaps his arm

his mark

My friend and haiku mentor Jerry says on the phone that he feels he's about to "crash and burn." That's the way he hopes to go. All I can do is sigh and silently agree with him. Make your mark, don't linger.

a trace of dust
on the window screen
autumn butterfly

(For Jerry Kilbride)

publication credits

Some of these pieces have appeared previously in

journals

Frogpond XXV:1—"opening day"; XXV:2—"canoe",
"september rain"; XXVI:1—"stomp", "blink";
XXVI:2—"adult condor no. 8", "frame"; XXVII:1—
"flying a kite"; XXVII:3—"the taste of blood", "a
perfect cut"; XXVIII:3—"umbilical"; XXIX:1—"his
mark"; XXIX:3—"blanket party", "oatmeal"
Mariposa 8—"womb"
Modern Haiku 32:3—"father's day"; 33:1—"haibun for jerry";
33:2—"dogtags"; 35:2—"waiting"; 35:3—"mumblety-peg";
36:1—"stripped"; 37:2—"penny"

books

blink: haiku and other forms (Central Valley Haiku Club,
2002)—"blink"
contemporary haibun 5 (Red Moon Press, 2004)—"frog" (as
"the box"), "in and out of fog", "veterans"
contemporary haibun 6 (Red Moon Press, 2005)—"the taste
of blood", "don't talk", "02-827"
One Hundred Gourds (Two Autumns Press, 2003)—"small
events"
*Pegging the Wind: The Red Moon Anthology of English-
Language Haiku 2002* (Red Moon Press, 2003)—
"september rain"
summer dreams: American Haibun & Haiga Volume 3 (Red
Moon Press, 2002)—"ring", "flares", "blink"
Tangled in Dreams: Linked Haibun (Leaning Bamboo Press,
2006)—"umbilical", "don't talk", "dead pixel", "check-
ing", "a better look"

online

contemporary haibun online 1—"clothesline"
Simply Haiku 4:2—"quake"

w.f. owen



was born and raised in Austin, Texas. He currently resides in Antelope, California and is a Professor of Communication Studies at California State University, Sacramento. His teaching interests include

interpersonal communication and creative expression in personal development. He was educated at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, specializing in speech and English education and, in 1982, received a PhD in Speech Communication from the University of Washington in Seattle. Bill has published haiku, senryu and haibun in such journals as *Frogpond*, *Modern Haiku*, *Acorn* and *Contemporary Haibun*. He won the Harold Henderson Haiku Contest in 2004 and the Gerald Brady Senryu Contest in 2002 and 2003. In 2001, he appeared as a featured poet in *A New Resonance 2: Emerging Voices in English-Language Haiku* and has appeared in the *Red Moon Anthology of English Language Haiku* each of the last five years. He was a featured reader at the 2003 Haiku Poets of Northern California's Two Autumns Reading and edited the Two Autumns chapbook, *If I Met Bashô*, in 2005. As President of the Central Valley Haiku Club, he co-edited the club's chapbooks: *blink, feel of the handrail* and *Tangled in Dreams*. His book, *haiku notebook*, was published by Lulu.com in 2007. Currently he is Haibun Editor for the online journal *Simply Haiku*.

ISBN 978-1-893959-62-0

Poetry/Literature \$12

