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Three Poems

by Lowell Jaeger

Change Finds My Hometown

Not that I mind them being here, that's not it.
Just wanna know why they drive better cars
than mine. Somebody give 'em them cars,
why don't they give me one? I worked hard

all my life and nobody give me shit.
Why these Chinese get all the favors?
Not Chinese, Dad, my sister says, they're
Hmong.
Mom chimes in from the kitchen: So much crime

we got now. Just read the papers. Can't
feel safe nowhere. Maybe these Hmong that
come
over here aren't so bad, but their kids are mean.
They got gangs beatin' up

on kids who been born here. I'm listening
from the easy chair, pretending to watch TV.
My first visit home in years and I can't
navigate my own living room. It's changed,

I say loud, can't deny it. What did you expect,
my sister says, the world is shifting and won't
stop.
She's right. She's up close with Hmong enrollees
in her classroom and their families after school.

She's big-hearted to a fault. Wants us all
to get along. It's Mom and Pop I can't figure;
they used to walk evenings up and down the
block
visiting neighbors till past dark. Now they're
locked

in their own home. It's hard, my sister says.
You bet it's hard, Mom says and bites her lip.
Yeah, Dad says with a sigh. It's never been
easy,
he says, never been easy for nobody.

Bull-Headed

Jerk 'em, Dad said, when a bullhead
tugged a bobber under and swam
for deeper bottoms farther from shore.

Look at 'em fight, Dad said,
as we heaved from muddy depths
a black fish thrashing thin air.

Had to admire the frenzy; fish
flip-flopping in the grass, Dad's
hopping hot-foot pursuit, till
he'd boot-stomped the fish stupid
long enough to rip the barb from its jaw.
Or the hook snapped in two like a brittle stick
in the fish's clamped steel-trap smirk.

Don't touch the bastard, Dad said.
We stood close, wincing when the bullhead's
quick spines cut Dad's thumb to bleed.
Had to admire the bastard's huff, gills
gasping in the catch-bucket, his pearl blue
light-blinded gaze staring back.

Admired him even worse, when Dad
nailed him to a chunk of two-by-six
—a twelve-penny spike through his brain—
and still he twitched and refused
to quit. Dad slit him, grabbed the hide
with a pliers and stripped it. Axed

the bull's head clean from the rest
of its connections. And still the gills
opened a little and closed. Opened
and closed. In a heap of entrails,
a heart the size of a wart, determined
it would not stopped beating.

Lenny

He'd knock and open before I answered
in the locker room where busboys, prep-cooks,
and high school dishwasher jocks hung
their street clothes and readied for another shift.
I'd be unbuttoning my bellbottoms
when he'd settle in for a smoke like clockwork
on the bench too nearby as I stripped,
just the two of us, and we'd pretend
a conversation to cover over things unsaid.

Would I give him a ride on my new bike?
Sure, I said, maybe someday. Did I want him
so I'd have weekends for sw
not enjoy being singled out. And I let him
drape an arm around my shoulders,
buddy-like, down the long basement corridor
to the stairs up into the respectable world

where a small town queer was unimaginable
amidst linen tablecloths, suits and ties,

and fine ladies in their finest frocks.
He was twice my age. He was alone
in his own secret life. I was only beginning
to understand compassion, how much we all
need
to be what we are and loved for it.
I'd be off to college that fall. Did I
have a girlfriend? I sure did. And would I

just give him a ride on my bike someday?
Sure, I said. Don't you remember I said I would?
And I'd roar off into the dark and leave him
standing there watching me go.

Lowell Jaeger is author of four collections of poems: *War On War* (Utah State University Press, 1988), *Hope Against Hope* (Utah State University Press 1990), *Suddenly Out of a Long Sleep* (Arctos Press, 2009), and *WE* (Main Street Rag Publishing, 2010). He is founding editor of Many Voices Press and recently edited *New Poets of the American West*, an anthology of poets from western states. He is a graduate of the Iowa Writers Workshop, winner of the Grolier Poetry Peace Prize and recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Montana Arts Council. Most recently, Lowell was awarded the Montana Governor's Humanities Award for his work in promoting civic discourse.

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