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Three Poems

by Paul Handley

Family Tradition

As a carnivore I am repelled by cannibalism
and self-mutilation, but I still attend
our biannual Marinsky reunion
held in Villa Park, Illinois, bordering Chicago,
in a park coned unevenly with trees
blocking the skyline of the city
and industrial complexes to the south.
Instead of like a dog cone
to prevent tonguing salve,
we like to tease cleft scabs.

Family tradition is telling horrific stories
of family history or wince inducing
periods of bad luck. Best of all is to
hook a new member, impaired by politeness,
with cousins chortling knowingly,
confirming the details. A coup is
embellishment that becomes embedded
in the retelling.

Traumatic events such as our pharmacist grandpa
poisoning his first two wives to death
when they became ill, because he didn't
want to take care of anyone.
His caretaker days were over
when the youngest turned eighteen.
Or grandma on the maternal side
burning down the house to commit suicide.
The madness here is implied.
Warning, embrace with caution.
Welcome to the family.

After a couple of beers
males eyed to see if drink wine coolers
for hint of weakness. Various levels
of the unsound. Ice in whiskey
(the short ones). Beer from a cup
instead of a can. The opposite
true for females. All related by
blood are strict adherents.
A couple of bohemian in-laws
dare to add cubes and defiantly stir
with a finger after four domestic canned beers.

No one must admit they have been drinking,
transgressions cannot be excused.
Decorum flaws cannot be indulged
by bloodstream. Another test.
As a proponent of stem cell research
I reject cloning and synthetic foods,
yet I comply within reason by the reunion rules
created by matriarchs and patriarchs
with a unique sense of their own cosmos,
in a closed off park in Villa Park, Illinois.

Closet Art

Tonight, I leaven the conversation
with white lies, since the gleam
of beauty is enhanced by flaw.
I lace in impure motives just as
gin is set off by vermouth.

Yes, I have to paint or watch
summer reruns to out-detect
myself.

Earth, water and chlorophyll have merged.
The concentrated form bruises on contact.
A spray is an open hand slap to the heart.
Looking god in the face is too much.
Filters and confessionals provide a screen.

Our summer home is an estate of
status. Far away from urban eyes,
that out here, seek only the astral bound.

Menthol is wrung from winter from
harvested leaves of mint and diluted to taste.
Gun injected chlorophyll into impulse bought gum.
Cigarettes are a sauna of flailing sprigs in the throat.
Pool filters provide a menthol soak
if the cabana boy skims off the muck.

Shock value is what one must do to
get showings. Walk-ins that fund
the real art, in the back for
private showings.

No need to add jelly to pears and lamb.
Elegant horse racing wear is up.
After dinner rooftop derby julep drinking,
while watching late rush hour of cabs and cars jockey.
Third floor Nona's white notes slide the loopy guide wire,
the way their puppet master who plays wind instruments
inlaid with a chlorophyll coating,
blows them like iridescent smoke rings.
Cool jazz complement is ideal.

Love Cliché

Rebekah believed in the *power of the healing heart*
Hearing her say this didn't crush his heart,
But a part crumbled to the floor.
Another time she actually said the words,
One following the other, "*mission statement*".

"*Never settle,*"
Patently ridiculous.
Everyone settles.
Should I not settle for my parents and get new ones?
Should I wait in a downpour for a cleaner taxi?
Should I quit school until I feel a universal oneness
precipitating a religious permutation
of all my classmates and teachers?

"*Time is the most precious thing to me,*"
Another of Rebekah's dividends.
If you never settle, how much time are you wasting?

"*Every day is special*".
She professed understanding and sweetness
-which she definitely was-
but also vindictive, callus and a formidable enemy.
When he was in the wrong,
she would bear down on him.

"*I want to be happy all the time.*"
After pondering, he said,
I think I would miss it, being sad,
if I was happy all the time.
She gave him a look.

"*Knowledge is power.*"
If you get an A on your physiognomy test,
I will make you lunch this Saturday.

It's a slippery slope
from pouring hot wax on nipples to removing a vital organ,
he thought as he tongued a cube
of cantaloupe in his left cheek.
Since he was slowly losing his mind
and didn't like being tugged
around by the short hairs of his crew cut,
he would occasionally lash out,
but quickly beg forgiveness.

"*Tough love,*"
she told him once.
After each incident she measured out
punishment with greater severity.

"*Time is the most precious thing to me.*"
Forgetting that she had mentioned it earlier

or trying to imprint the message through repetitiveness, Rebekah told him after an incident where he had strained to hurt her, "I do not want to be with someone who hurts me that way."

The cornerstone of a good relationship is being comfortably off balance.

Paul Handley spent a career as a student and a student of odd jobs. He has an MA, an MPA, and is ABD. He has driven a cab and sold meat door-to-door. He has poems included or forthcoming in a full length collection *5-Tool Poet* (Punkin House Press), on-line chapbook, *Life Is for Us to Keep* (Silkworms Ink), publications such as *Glass: A Journal of Poetry, Pemmican, and others*.

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