



Poetry in Motion

by Benjamin J. Stein

Saturday

It's bitterly cold here in Washington. But I have convinced old Maw and Paw to go for a walk with me down to the Sequoia Restaurant on the Potomac near Georgetown. The wind is sweeping along Virginia Avenue. My mother and father are holding each other's hands and peering forward as if they were looking at Mount Everest instead of Rock Creek Parkway. They're holding on to each other for dear life. As each gust of wind strikes my mother, she recites a new poem from her youth.

As a bird flew by in the cold, she said, "North wind doth blow, and we shall have snow, and what will poor Robin do then, Poor thing? He'll hide in a barn, To keep himself warm, And hide his head under his wing, Poor thing."

Then the wind blew again, ruffling her hair. She declaimed, "Shoot if you must this old gray head, but spare my country's flag, she said . . ."

"That's your favorite poem, Mom," I said. "I wonder why."

"Oh, the story of Barbara Fritchie is very touching," she answered. "I first learned it many years ago, and it still brings tears to my eyes."

"But I think that story is supposed to have been made up," I said.

"Even so," she said.

When we walked across a little bridge and into view of the river, we saw a small boat heading against the wind down the river.

"Sail on, sail on, O ship of state," my mother said.

There was a big frozen puddle nearby. "I wish I could get out my skates and go skating," she said. "We used to have such fun skating in Monticello. I can still skate," she said. "I'm sure of it."

The wind hit us again and my mother said, "Winken and Blinken and Nod, we three, sailed off in a wooden shoe . . ."

As we sat down at a lovely table at the Sequoia, my mother studied the menu and said, "Oh, what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive."

That's also one of her favorite poems. I think it's from Shakespeare, but it could be Maya Angelou.

I looked at her and my father as they studied their menus. Except for my mother occasionally yelling at me over trifles when I was a child—and what parent doesn't do that, as I have learned—they never did anyone any harm. They live like people in a shoe.

They read their books, listen to music, watch "Murder, She Wrote" and "Jeopardy," and attend lectures. What a country this would be if everyone harmed his neighbor as little as my parents do.

Sunday

Now it's even colder. I have taken John Meroney, a fine young writer, for a ride to Easton, Maryland. To get there, you drive over the Bay Bridge. I can vividly remember when there was no bridge and we took the ferry. There were terrible lines at the bridge for many years so they built a second span. In summer, it's still jammed.

Today, the dead of winter, it's deserted. There are big whitecaps on the bay far below us. On the road to Easton, there are lots of auto dealers and fast-food places. I recall that there used to be signs for hotels that said, "For Refined Colored Adults." In diners, there would be signs saying "White Trade Only." Maybe someone could make a movie about all of the progress in America in the postwar period. A story of a people who made the most amazing strides towards full equality at the starting gate ever made, while guarding the world against totalitarianism—and also inventing rock 'n' roll and the Corvette. Nahh, let's do one about what racist pigs we all are instead.

In the lobby of one of my favorite spots, the Tidewater Inn, it's quiet and peaceful. There's a roaring, crackling fire in the fireplace. The armchairs and couches look like they have looked forever—classy, with little flowers



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and doilies. John and I had shrimp bisque, then walked around Easton. It's really adorable: federal style restaurants, antique shops, a majestic brick county seat, large frame homes with porches, and old oaks. I have loved the eastern shore for about as long as I've been alive.

After our walk, I drove us towards St. Michaels and down a long country road to the landing for the Bellevue-Oxford ferry. There were a few sailboats tied up, with some pieces of rope with metal attached (halyards, I think, not lanyards) clinking against their masts. The moon was out in the afternoon sky. The water was glass. On the way back to Washington on west-bound Route 50, that daytime moon was exactly in front of me. Flocks of mallards and geese (at least I think that's what they were) flew across that same silver bright moon.

I remember I was eating lunch at a diner in Easton in 1962 on the day I heard that Marilyn Monroe had died. John F. Kennedy was president then. Richard Nixon and Dwight Eisenhower and Harry Truman were all still alive. I was seventeen. I drove a 1962 red Chevrolet Impala I had convinced my parents to buy. I thought that life would be eternally perfect if I ever just had one beautiful girl who would love me.

Wednesday

I'm shopping for clothes at the local Polo shop on Rodeo Drive. I'm getting so fat that I can hardly wear anything. It comes from a combination of too much food and too little exercise. I guess it always comes from that. I just have no discipline when it comes to food.

At the counter where I'm paying for my trousers, I'm standing next to J.D. Souther, a great songwriter and singer who had a role in *My Girl 2*, just as I did. As I waited for my receipt, I talked to him, and then nodded at Jon Lovitz, with whom I played in a small scene in *North*.

"Did I tell you what I gave Henley for Christmas?" Souther asked me.

"No, what?"

"A T-shirt for PETA: People for Eating Tasty Animals. Get it?"

That night, as I shopped for groceries at the Trancas Market, I bumped my

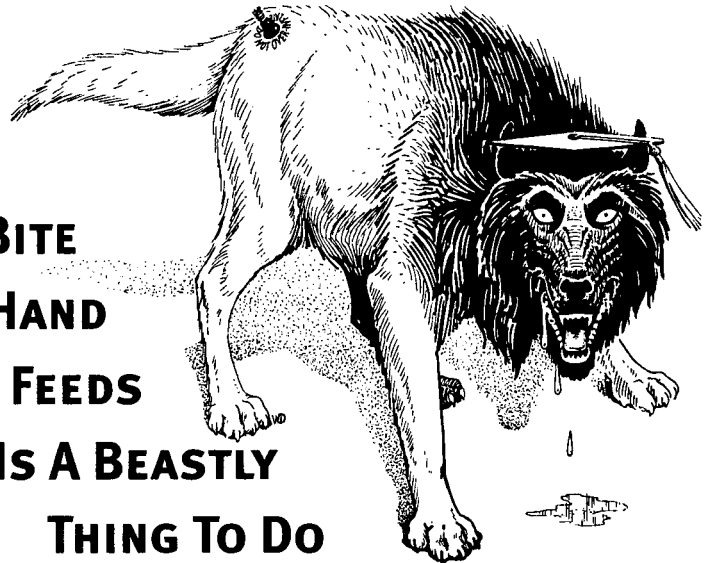
shopping cart into Emilio Estevez. We talked for a while and then a group of teenage girls came after us for autographs. They wanted his about a million times more than they wanted mine, but they were polite enough to mention me in their requests. I was grateful. The Sheen brothers, Emilio and Charlie, are about the nicest guys in Hollywood. And great actors. Heh-heh, just us actors, signing autographs, heh-heh. *How long can this go on?* How long? Not long.

Saturday

I'm back in D.C., visiting Maw and Paw. I miss Washington, D.C. when I'm in Los Angeles. L.A. is arid, crazed, a marketplace of bargainners and shriekers in the wilderness. It's the place where people come when they're crazed and think that becoming a star will make them well. I know too many desperate people in L.A. It's starting to get me down.

To me, Washington is solid. My life

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THOMAS AQUINAS COLLEGE

there has nothing, and I mean *nothing*, to do with Bill Clinton. The people I know there—Wlady, Aram Bakshian, Ron Burr, Chris Caldwell, Estelle, my parents—they're the kind of people I want my son to pattern his life after.

There are trees in Washington. You can walk down a street and find shade under a tree. In L.A., you walk in dazzling, smoggy sunlight by rockers in skintight black denim who smell of sweat and old cigarettes. A big difference.

When I was a child, I could just roll out of my back door and into a huge park to play. I want Tommy to be able to do the same. So, in a fit of craziness, I am looking over the rainbow at houses in McLean, Virginia, a leafy suburb of Washington. My plans for buying a farm in Virginia have come to naught for a variety of reasons, but I might still be able to get a house in a leafy suburb.

I drove around the split levels and the colonials and the ranchers, and then I thought—hmmm. This area is very familiar. Very. Twenty-one years ago, I went to a party here with my old girlfriend Pat. The party was given by my erstwhile boss, David Gergen. Hmmm. I wondered where his house was . . . and then, wham. There it was in front of me. Big as life. And there in front of it was Ann, Dave's lovely wife. Unloading groceries.

I called out to her and walked over. She was effusively friendly and invited me in to see Dave. He came up from the basement in an L.L. Bean outfit. We had a nice talk about his kids, my son, my acting, his teaching at Duke. He looked just the same. We talked about how much college cost. We talked about commercials in relation to how much college cost. Dave was very interested in how many commercials I did per year. "Enough," I told him, although frankly, it's never enough.

Dave first came to see me when I became a White House speechwriter. He asked me if I wanted a couch in my office. Yes, I said, I did. Did I want to be able to go to the White House Mess? Yes, I did. Then he made fun of me for wanting those things and said I was much too junior to have them.

After that, he was quite nice to me, though. He was a Democrat, but he tried to do a good job anyway. He did not like it when the oil companies made big profits. I remember that. I also remember some very funny jokes he made that can't be repeated here. But they were really funny.

Tuesday

I'm back in L.A., at a studio called Screen Music. It's in the San Fernando Valley. This studio is famous for its work on cartoons. Today, we're doing a cartoon called "The Mask." I played a psychiatrist in the movie, and now I'm playing the self-same character in the cartoon. This is very fun work. I get to scream and yell



and be a crazy L.A. person. If I could be a regular on a cartoon, I would be a happy guy.

But as I drove home and listened to the O.J. Simpson trial on the radio, I thought of something very basic: this is not a happy city any longer. When I first moved here in 1976, people of every age were laughing and scratching and having a blast. Now, people are not smiling. The city has been flattened by a variety of plagues:

(1) The homeless, who are everywhere and make us all feel terrible and guilty and frightened at the same time.

(2) Crime, although that's a national phenomenon. The criminals are attacking

and the cops are getting humiliated by politicians, and no one's really supporting them as they fight for us, but we know we're defenseless against the criminals, and it makes us feel terrible.

(3) The real estate crash and endless, nonstop, grinding recession that has just walloped the tar out of this city. Hundreds of thousands of engineers losing their jobs. The average house losing a fourth of its value—that wipes out many families.

(4) The earthquake, which scared people to death, as blasé as we may act about it.

(5) The riots, in which thousands went crazy and looted and burned and killed—and got away with it, which makes the rest of us feel like very vulnerable chumps.

(6) And now, the Simpson case. Everyone knows he did it. His blood was at the crime scene, for Pete's sake. He had been threatening to kill her and beating her up for years. But everyone also knows he is going to get away with it.

Now, here is a truth. When people are confronted with a painful, unpleasant, hypocritical life situation, at first they become angry. Then they become desperate. Then they become depressed and sullen. That's where we are now in L.A.—and everywhere else in America, as far I can tell.

This is a quest for Newt. Give us back hope. It's a funny thing, but you can almost calibrate the exact day that the music died. The day Reagan left. He wasn't perfect, God knows, but he made us feel that it was morning in America. There were plenty of problems, but we would get to them. Now we're in this big morass—ahh, the hell with it. Time to go back home and watch Tommy go from level to level on his horrible video games, whispering "Cool" every few seconds.

Wednesday

Today I'm paying bills. They're scary. Not just because I can barely afford to pay them. No, because I feel as if I am about to be snowed under a vast wave of fraud and incompetence that's going to deprive me of oxygen.

Item: My cellular phone bill has charges for someone who cloned my number and went off to Las Vegas and made over a thousand dollars worth of calls to Somalia. Two months ago the cell phone company promised to take these charges off. They still haven't done it.

Item: On my MasterCard there are charges for some defective camera equipment I returned to The Good Guys before Christmas. I still don't have the credits.

Item: I hired a man to come to oil my furnace and replace the filters. He came over and told me, in his best Syrian-accented English, that I needed a new furnace and would surely die from carbon-monoxide poisoning if I didn't get one. Every single time I have ever had furnace work done, I have been warned that I would surely be asphyxiated if I didn't cough up a few thousand for a new furnace. "Get out," I told him. "Get out or I'm calling the police."

Item: A man came to fix my garage door and make it child-proof. He left my immaculate garage a stone mess, overcharged me fifty bucks, and forgot to install the light for my garage. Then he called to tell me I had to pay right away.

"Tommy, my boy," I said as I paid my bills and glanced at the ocean (he was off from school doing his video game duties), "in this world, you have to fight against the thieves and the crooks every day. You can't ever rest. Can't ever relax. You have to be eternally vigilant."

"Cool," he said.

Thursday

Class at glorious Pepperdine. This semester I'm teaching Corporate Finance law. It's a lot like securities regulation. What I basically teach the kids is that promoters and managers try to raise money from investors and then not have any responsibility towards them. This is the fundamental problem with investing. You never know if the guys you place the money with are going to use it for you or for them: or whether they'll use it wisely. Then the managers want to be insulated from any legal recourse by the investors. With stockholder money, the managers pay savvy, cagey lawyers to build a wall

between management and investors. It's not pretty. It's not what Adam Smith envisioned.

Today, as I walked to class, I stopped to make a call to my pal O., who lives in a faraway city. "How can you stand to watch the trial any longer?" she asked. "I see O.J.'s lawyers and I think 'satanic dissemblers.' How can they get up in the morning knowing that they are defending the man who killed his children's mother and a totally innocent stranger?"

"Good question," I said.

"The real question is about the moral upbringing of people who can do that," O. said. "And why we even permit it."

"I agree."

"I especially hate Johnnie Cochran," O. said. "He swaggers around the courtroom like a prancing ballerina, and you can just tell he's a bully and a thug when he's not on camera."

"Money," I said.

"And people say that this is a God-fearing country. The only God that Johnnie Cochran knows is the buck."

O. had said a mouthful. In the land where only money counts, all other values will be trivial. Only winning the big dollar will count.

"This is not a nation of laws," the great jurisprudential scholar, Karl Llewellyn, wrote in a 1931 article in the *Harvard Law Review*. "It is a nation of laws through men."

Saturday

Tommy and I are up in Idaho. To be specific, we're out on Schweitzer Mountain ski resort. It's snowing. As the snowboarders say, "It's pukiing."

Tommy has gone off with a friend to ski Musical Chairs and the Quad, beginning and intermediate runs. I am taking yet another lesson in cross-country. My instructress today is Denise. The beautiful Jackie, the solid Extreme Craig, kindly Josh and Tim, have all bid me good luck in the ski shop. Now I'm out on a trail, and I am falling down constantly. I'm not falling down just because I'm clumsy, although I am. I'm falling down because I am going down a trail and I am gliding along. The only way I can figure out to stop is to fall down. Denise is a great teacher, but she's not really strong enough to lift me up. So I flounder on the



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trail like an overturned beetle, and eventually have to take off my skis to stand up.

"You're doing great," Denise keeps saying. "Yoga teaches us that it's only fear that keeps us from going forward. The body is ready."

"Yeah, but that fear is what's kept me alive all these years," I answered. "Fear has its uses."

Anyway, I staggered around for two hours, got very tired, then put away my skis and went into the lodge for a cheeseburger. Now, there's a sport I like.

After a nap, I took Tommy and his friend to a movie, and then Peter Feierabend and I went to see *Quiz Show* at the local art film house—which only shows movies once a week. What a bad joke of a movie. We never learn why the bad guy, Charles Van Doren, was bad, or whether we're supposed to hate him or love him. But we are supposed to believe his father is a good guy because he makes fun of Ike and laughs at the idea that Ike might be dead. We are never sure why a major character, Herb Stempel, acts like he does. Is he a fool? A psycho? A victim?

Plus there's a hilarious basic premise: that Richard Goodwin, the lifelong tool of the Kennedys, the most corrupt political family of the century, is a credible hero, a man of innately high moral principles. It's sort of an in-joke movie for liberals that on closer inspection falls to pieces. The biggest cracks come when one considers the condescending attitude the movie takes towards prime-time TV. As if the Hollywood that makes movies is somehow better, more moral, able to point the finger at the Hollywood that makes game shows. What a laugh—Hollywood pretending to be better than Hollywood.

Tommy and his friend finished their movie before ours. At nine at night, they strolled over to our theater, the Panida, and came in and found us and sat down with us. No need for armed guards, no scary street people. It's a small town and kids can walk around safely. That's beautiful.

Then Tommy and I went to dinner at Connie's, a local spot. Snow was falling in a mad rush outside. Blizzard conditions. Still, when Tommy and I walked back four blocks and then across a bridge to our hotel, we were in paradise. Just the

snow, the streetlights, the white haze, a few cars and their lights, and Tommy and his Dad. Walking in a winter wonderland. "Daddy," he says, "stand still so I can bean you with my snow ball." *I love him.*

Monday

We are at the Spokane airport. I have had to make a command decision to cut my trip short. My mother is in the hospital in Washington, D.C. She has coronary ischemia. She's in good spirits, says my father, but still it's scary. By a wild coincidence, Alex's father, the war hero Col. Denman, has bad pneumonia in Arkansas. He might have to go into the hospital soon, too. So I am on my way back to deposit Tommy with Alex and then turn right around to see Mom in the hospital.

As I ordered lunch at the Spokane Airport Cafe, a middle-aged woman in a



waitress's uniform came up to me. "The other girls say you're a TV star in Hollywood. Is that true?" she asked cheerily.

"Not a star," I said. "A lowly character actor. That's all."

"In Hollywood?"

"Yes, in Hollywood."

"Well," she said, "in that case, do you know that woman with the big nose who has such a great voice? Barbara something?"

"Do you mean Barbra Streisand?" I asked.

"That one," the woman said. "With the big nose. But she has a great voice."

At that, Tommy got up from his chair, grabbed my nose, and began to sing with glee, "Big nose, big nose, Daddy's got a great big nose. Big nose, big nose, so does Mommy."

"Stop it," I said. "Be quiet, you manic."

"I will if you buy me a snowboard."

The Alaska Air flight back was fine. They've made up for their misconduct of last September by giving Tommy and me this trip for free. Now I like them again.

When I got home, I called my father. "You can't imagine how miserable my life would be without Mom," he said. "I just can't even think about it. I wouldn't really have a life without her."

Wednesday

My mother looks so frail and little in her bed at George Washington University Hospital. Is this the woman who used to frighten me to death? Surely not. This is a sweet, little woman with a smile that aims to please. How can time have gone by so fast? The arc of life is long, but it gets traveled very, very fast. This towering figure is now just another patient in a vast hospital filled with older patients. Well, that's who she is to the hospital. She's still Mom to me, and seeing her this weak is making me crazy.

The doctors let her out, and we took her home in a very, very carefully driven taxi. Then she got into bed and slept. I sat with my father and made nervous chatter. By late in the evening, she called out to us. "Yoo-hoo," she said. She wanted some cranberry juice. I brought her a glass.

"Where's Pop?" she asked.

"He's at the Safeway buying groceries," I said.

"I love him so much," she said. "He takes such good care of me. I don't know what I would do without him."

I was crying so I had to leave the room for a moment. When I came back to take away her glass, she said, with an intent smile, "One if by land and two if by sea, and I on the opposite shore shall be, ready to ride and spread the alarm to every Middlesex hamlet and farm." Then she smiled a girlish, alert grin, and picked up the *Wall Street Journal*. □



Pilgrim's Progress

by Aram Bakshian, Jr.

It's eleven in the evening, and outside the front entrance of Washington's Mayflower Hotel, on Connecticut Avenue, a gaggle of cabbies—Pakistani, Iranian, Ethiopian—is conversing in Pidgin English. Around the corner on DeSales Street, by the side entrance, there's a line of hookers waiting for out-of-town suckers. But the real action is inside at the hotel's Town and Country Bar, where what looks like a gold-braided, white-jacketed officer of the old Royal Cambodian General Staff is levitating a fifty-dollar bill in mid-air before an audience of amazed customers.

No, it isn't one of the late General Lon Nol's aides-de-camp doing parlor tricks with the last of his CIA largesse. It is, however, a Cambodian and, besides levitating greenbacks, he can also do an astonishing variety of card tricks and other feats of legerdemain, including making the bras of female volunteers transmigrate from their owners to the bar with no visible human assistance and no disturbance of outer garments—an art most of us attempted in our high school years but never mastered.

The master perpetrator is Sambon "Sam" Lek, the Mayflower's head bartender. Sam's potable and prestidigitational ministrations, his superb service and elfin sense of humor, have been delighting old friends and new visitors to this Washington landmark for nearly twenty years. Sam's second-in-command is a fellow Cambodian, Sitha, a bright, bespectacled little man who lost most of his upper-class family to Pol Pot's butchers during the Khmer Rouge terror. Sam and Sitha are supported by an amiable, efficient crew of Asian, Ethiopian, and Latin

American waiters and waitresses, emigrants all, and many of them originally Cold War refugees. Call me biased, but I find them to be generally more pleasant, well-informed, and patriotic than many of their American-born patrons.

The Mayflower itself goes back far longer than Sam. Although my late father could remember when the site was still occupied by an old, walled Catholic convent—nuns once trod where the hookers now hover—the Mayflower has been around since 1925 and has remained one of the capital's most prestigious hostelries, thanks in part to several massive but tastefully-executed renovations and a constant flow of celebrity guests and events.

The Town and Country is a place



where network correspondents (ABC News is just around the corner) and print reporters (Washington bureaus of the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Reader's Digest* are all a short walk away, as are the evil towers of the *Washington Post* headquarters) mingle with well-heeled tourists, bar regulars and visiting statesmen, financiers and politicians. During the course of one evening at the massive walnut bar a few months ago, I bumped

into the current chairman of the Republican National Committee, a former U.S. Trade Representative from the Reagan years, and half of America's major league team owners, the latter celebrating their successful repulse of Bill Clinton's clammy but ineffectual mediating embrace earlier that day.

At the Town and Country, anyone—a cabinet member, a half-forgotten bimbo from an old congressional scandal, a well-known novelist, a crazed professor of English literature, and, on at least one occasion, a retired bank robber who had also (only in Washington!) once served as a Capitol Hill policeman—may walk in at any time. Sometimes one's conversational role is defensive, sometimes offensive. I have led the rhetorical charge against living and dead characters as different as Herman Melville, that whale-sized literary poseur, and Bill Clinton, another blubbery bore. I have defended figures as varied as George Eliot and Dan Quayle; they share a certain wobbly, prepubescent asexuality, although Ms. E. had a distinctly better way with words.

But what I've enjoyed most over time at the Town and Country is the puncturing of balloons. There's never a shortage of gasbags at the Mayflower, so one never leaves feeling thwarted. By midnight, you've usually shot your quota of game. And just when you grow weary, Sam will levitate another fifty, liberate another bra, or extract a large red rubber ball from a petite blonde's ear and proceed to work a series of minor miracles with a deck of cards.

"America," he observes between tricks, "is a wonderful country." Amid the soft murmurs and muted laughter, the plash and tinkle of ice cubes, the report of a champagne cork sounds in the background like the signal gun of a secure and happy garrison. Sam, God bless him, is right. □

Aram Bakshian, Jr., editor-in-chief of American Speaker, writes regularly on politics, history and the arts.