

3rd Place, Writing Division

Home Sweet Home by Tony Taylor

I was only gone a day but it was a long one. I drove south through Bellevue in the dark and reached the horse sale by first light. The desert gets hot early and by noon the Twin Falls Stock Yard was baking. Palls of dust shrouded the pens and alleyways and the heat shimmer in the sales ring parched any notion of impending relief. A subsequent horse-haul to Hagerman and a deadhead back to the Yards was the final cook-off. All I wanted in the waning afternoon was the hell of the Snake River Plain. I broke over Timmerman Hill in the early evening. Lookout Mountain glowed in the late angle of the sun and first shadow covered the valley floor. I felt a coolness that spoke of willows and water and the grace of Silver Creek rolling in deep shade. It was good to be back. I felt like I had been gone for years.

Between the blinking light and Hailey I received four waves from oncoming traffic and gave four waves-back to the anonymity of sun struck windshields. It was like a welcome back or how you been or see you later but from the blinking light at Timmerman to the Bridge that Billy built is an obligatory salutation for all denizens. What the hay, just friends being silly with friends and keeping the spirit alive.

First things first before I reach my house. Water the horse and shop for some dinner. Hazel is a retro-racehorse. One you buy by the pound. She never liked her race career much except for the early works when the angle of the rising sun turned the dust on the track to a gauzy curtain. It is not ironic that the name on her pedigree is Run In The Haze. That's all behind her. Now she has her public. She hangs out beneath a cottonwood at the edge of the pasture and watches the passing parade of runners, walkers and joggers that frequent Quigley Road all day. Her studied indifference is a foil, she's trolling for carrots or pats or some form of vocal adoration. She fits well into the Wood River Valley; not quite an outcast but different. It's a privilege to be her human.

I park in my regular spot at Atkinson's and grab the shopping cart closest to the door. It has a squeaky wheel and I go down the aisle like a one man band. I meet Marie Skahill next to the marmalade. She says her husband ("The Cob") just bid a big sheet rock job in Glassford Heights, Cali is going to graduate from High School next year and is working for the summer at the Toy Store. Ryan got a soccer scholarship for his last two years in college and that today was sure a hot one. I shake my head and tell her she should have been in Twin.

"Or Boise," she offers.

We both laugh.

"God forbid!"

Ev Phillips waves at both of us from the end of the aisle as she scoots by on a late

evening power shop.

“Don’t forget Dinner this Friday,” she says.

“No way!,” I reply.

Ev works and works and works and then goes home after work and works on gourmet dinners for her friends.

Steve Straiton is by the strawberries and we plan a fall hike in the desert. I see Ron Fudge in front of the yogurt and hear the exciting details about the nineteen pound steelhead he caught last week. I catch Stew Brown half way down the coffee aisle and ask for updates on Baldy. Our conversation soon degrades into an exchange of old ski patrol stories. It goes on for fifteen minutes. We plug traffic in the aisle and ignore the sour looks. We talk with our hands more than our mouth and laugh till our eyes squint with tears. After thirty-five minutes of shopping I leave the store with five pounds of carrots, a quart of two percent and a chicken pot pie. If it wasn’t for Atkinson’s I’d have no social life at all and if it wasn’t for Marie Callender I’d probably starve.

The dog and cat (Smiley and Doobie) meet me in the driveway and my neighbor Ray is setting his sprinkler.

“Where you been?” he asks.

“The far side of the universe,” I reply sarcastically.

“It gets you tired out there doesn’t it.”

I have to agree.

“Great to be back!” I say.

The livestock is milling and hungry so I go in the house and feed them. I come back out to start watering as Patterson Peak catches the last light of the day and glows amber and serene against the paling eastern sky. Up north the last rays play on Baldy. They light the top terminal of Lookout Express and it shines on the horizon like a new dime.

I pause to honor her. She is a Holy Cow and our justification to pursue our passions. She feeds and clothes us and nurtures our free spirit. She draws the Jet Set and the Soup Group and on her shoulders there are no distinctions between them. She is singular but never the same. We paint her and photograph her and send her image all over the world. She thrills us and hurts us and defines us in our little victories and broad folly. We are her children and travel to the four corners but return like salmon to sleep at her flank. Mountains are forever and she is the metaphor.

By the time I shower and finish dinner it’s eleven o’clock. The back yard is dark when I

turn off the water and roll the hose. The sky is splendid with stars and the only sound is the quaking of leaves in the Aspen trees. Small town stuff; no traffic sounds and no burden of light to drag down the exquisite blackness of space. It occurs to me that people from small towns speak in terms of the plural possessive: "We are so lucky," or "this or that is ours," or "this issue or that issue is up to us." I retire to the house and turn out the lights. For a few moments I resist the tempting waves of sleep. I remember when I was nine or ten and our family would return to our house from a ski trip or a movie or a ball game and my mother would go from room to room straightening things that didn't need it, smoothing the bed spreads, wiping down the gleaming porcelain sinks and repeating a mantra.

"Good to be home." she would say. "Good to be home." Again and again.

It annoyed me.

"Alright already! I get the message!," I would say to myself.

But I didn't, but I do now.