nicollsroad

Fall 2016
Dedication

Myron C. Ledbetter

1923-2016

After a distinguished career as a botanical scientist, human rights advocate and patron of the arts Myron was one of the founders of the Round Table, now OLLI.
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Introduction

In the thirty years since OLLI began as the Round Table it has grown from about thirty individuals who formed discussion groups of ten or twelve people to our present membership of over one thousand who meet in classrooms and lecture halls both on and off campus. We dance, we sing, we study history and literature and some of us write. Our writing workshops are small and interactive where we all participate and help each other grow and improve our craft.

It is the goal of the editors of nicollsroad to present to the world the fruits of these labors. We hope that our members will enjoy and be inspired by these efforts.

This issue is dedicated to one of our founders, Myron Ledbetter, who passed away this spring.

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A Walk Home from the Beach

I walk down the pavement, hot from the beating sun. My feet burn and I raise them higher to escape the heat, cool the bottoms. I am at peace. My father walks beside me, tall and brown, calm and sure, tall to me. I am six. The hot world of August gives me a piece of summer when sunburn alternates with seawater to cool me. I feel my heart jump higher as my father raises me higher and higher above his head. I ride tall above the beach crowd, the breeze cool against my face. My ears are hot, ringing and burning because my father...my father. Peace floats with me on his shoulders. A more peace-filled moment I don’t recall, a higher moment I don’t recall. The moment is burned deep in me sitting tall on his shoulders above the hot pavement, my hair floating in the cool above his head. Cool feels new. The summer is one piece of ribbon. He stops for corn on the cob, hot from the vat, steaming, and raises it higher toward me, on his shoulders. Tall, I savor the hot kernels and let them burn continued
my mouth, watering before supper, burn
my upper palate in pleasure. My father’s cool
hands hold me tall
in a going-home-to-supper sail of peace
before my mother’s raised voice—higher
than any voice—can douse the hot

sun in me. The continuing burn
spreads like lava higher, cools
me with fingers of peace, keeps me tall.

Florence Mondry
Homeless

He sleeps inside the warmth and safety of a recessed doorway to the bread factory where the air smells rich with yeast and heat.

He sits on his blue plastic milk crate. A torn umbrella stands between his legs. His arms balance on its handle, forming a pillow.

The milk crate holds a pint of rum nestled in clothes tied with knotted remnants of cloth and twine. The umbrella, his cane by day, blocks the contents.

His head is shielded by the hood of his cerulean blue down jacket found in a trash bin on Prince Street.

He roams the four-block area each day. His head jerks, his arms flail, he shouts then laughs. At night he returns to the yeast and heat.

Carol Musac
Early Morning, Tucson Foothills

Shadows jag over rock and cactus playing tag with the rising sun, nature’s Rorschach asking me what these immense ink blots mean. This one’s the boogeyman scaring my daughter, that one’s a tarp smothering moist green fields of my youth, up on the crest a black stallion gallops away with loved ones’ years.

I focus my eyes on patches of light knowing they’re yoked to the shadows.

Lee Marc Stein
Cyber Shy

You won’t find me in Facebook
or in MySpace on the ’Net.
Dear Plaxo, Pulse and LinkedIn
my name you can forget.
It’s not that I’m asocial,
a loner or too wary,
But sharing all my secrets
with the world is kind of scary.
Once all your life is open
for inspection and review,
How can you ever show yourself
as someone fresh and new?
Your face, your age, your vitals
are followed by your history
Your likes, your hates, your dreams
devoid of any mystery.
This need to reach out blindly
now borders on obsession
Will we reveal our deepest thoughts,
our sins told in Confession?
And how are we to deal with
that sorrow in the end
When one of our new buddies
e-Johns us to de-friend?
So when it comes to baring all
consider me a quitter
Somethings in life are best unshared
Plus I’ve no time for Twitter.

Len Farano
from here to there

roots less watered
take shallow breaths

fade

find final solace
in the soil

nature will provide the tears

Sheila Eisinger
From Bad to Worse

The brass knuckles of torrential rain
slam my car and lightning rips the sky,
the road, a blackened sea swallowing the tires.
I clutch the steering wheel like someone
hanging from the ledge of a building,
plead with the angry sky
to show a little mercy.
Someone suicidal passes me and
sends a tsunami over the windshield,
leaving me behind, a prisoner
in the cell of my Toyota.

Returning from a casino
where the god of gamblers
held my head under
a river of lousy luck, I am
drowning in dangerous waters,
praying for a change in the weather.

Dottie Giuffre
Late Night

There is something about lying on the couch after midnight, a late show host inviting you to chat up someone famous, leftovers even better served with a side of Casablanca, wrinkled napkins catching crumbs, wiping tears. There is something about being with a new day as it fills the dark with the promise of tomorrow and wrapped in the reassuring arms of a well-worn robe, socks cling to the sofa like shapeless sighs, the worries of yesterday fast asleep with the next-door neighbors.

Dottie Giuffre
Thank Me for Flying

Some fly the friendly skies
tipsy on Scotch, others discreetly sedated
and there are those who take comfort
in a stewardess donning a life vest,
the oxygen mask that drops
like a dead body
from the overhead compartment,
the news that their seat
is a flotation device
which will drift in frigid water
until a hungry shark finds them
bobbing like canapés.

But I catapult past clouds
with eyes shut tight,
a death grip on my armrest,
appalled by the velvet voice
of the captain who announces
we are “cruising” at 35,000 feet.
Hurtling through space, I do not want
to watch a movie, chat up my seatmate,
or hear Sinatra sing “Come Fly With Me”.
I ignore offerings of pretzels and trail mix
and pass on the invitation to gaze out the window
at a gaping Grand Canyon.
I am not thirsty and have no interest
in a beverage cart that
shimmies like a stripper with every
dip and roll of “temporary turbulence”.

I want to plead with the pilot
to let me off at the next corner
at one of those nice motels

Dottie Giuffre
The Compassion of Lions

_They do not kill children except when very hungry._

— The Bestiary

Leo the Wonderful is living in golden wallpaper.
is multiplied by himself many times, there’s plenty
of Leo to go around, an armory of whiskers,
icons of magisterial mane, affable power.
It’s not all treasure island for Leo.
When the children choir in gleeful pity
_Poor lion. Poor lion._
_Thorn in his paw. Thorn in his paw._
_Poor lion,_ he bows to the truth
_no one is free from the ropes_
_and rags of time. In the evenings_

after the clock has been reset
so that he too is transported
into the evil world of witches
who eat little children and more
grim tales, he’ll fall asleep
into one glutted nightmare
for another fiction to feed on.
Winter might as well be roaring,
recycling the age when lions sucked
on ice, whiffed the bark of trees.

Leo can get upset. Beside himself,
two or three selves pad closely behind,
limping from the golden wallpaper,
the utopian residence where he is victim
of blind adulation, He pauses, sniffing
the scented blankets of children tossing
like oceans in their own bleak dreams.
He knows well their smashing cries
to make the darkness go away.
And of course it always does.
The sun rises. The curtains are drawn.
Everything is as it was.

Dan Daly
Birds at Sea

They came out of a calm sky
blown out to sea
by a wind long passed.
First little dots then
furiously churning wings
informed by instinct or experience
that a ship is solid in a liquid world.
They were dressed in land feathers
not oily ones that would let them
float serenely on the surface.
Some made it
some fell short
and were lost in the waves.
Some stood on deck
swelling and shrinking
for breath until their hearts
burst from the effort.
The survivors
losing caution to exhaustion
opened themselves to our mercy.
We fed them morsels
let them walk over our feet
until land showed on the horizon
and they became wild again.

Bob Stone
The Full-Service Doctor

by

Gayle Bellafiore

My yearly physical invariably stresses me out. I know that this should not be the case, but now that I’ve turned sixty-five, I feel the clock ticking in my head, almost like my heartbeat which is slowing down. Who now has cancer, who now has heart disease has become the normal focus of my conversations. Every day I receive another phone call prefaced by did you hear, a coded warning that I am soon to learn some terrible news about this or that close friend. It is a sad state of affairs, something I swore I would never fall prey to, just like old age. This shapes my frame of mind with each subsequent visit to the GP. It doesn’t matter that last year all my numbers were right: cholesterol, blood-pressure, sugar, PSA. Anything my doctor told me to do, I did. Watch what I eat, drink, and think, are what it boils down to. Still, I’ve grown tired of hearing the lectures about the correlation between stress and illness. I don’t want to know that my telomeres have shrunk abnormally since last year. Outside of a frontal lobotomy, I’m not sure what I am supposed to do to change who I am: a highly anxious, over analytical, easily prone to fits of anger, sonofabitch. Blame my parents; don’t blame me. There is no form of Zen meditation, deep breathing, hot or cold yoga—tantric, hatha, Ashtanga, or Bikram—that can turn back the clock.

Yet when I met with Dr. Schneider last Friday morning, I wasn’t prepared for his concerns regarding my abnormal sinus rhythm. “My breathing is just fine, Doctor. I use a nasal spray. I irrigate every day with a porcelain neti pot blessed by Maharishi Basmati. I never use the same tissue even after one sneeze.”

“Mr. Klinski, I’m talking about your heart, not your nose.”

“My heart has a sinus condition?”

“You’re not listening, Zero Klinski.”

“I eat heart healthy meals. I’ve been on the Mediterranean diet, the Paleolithic diet, the Atkins diet. I eat Dr. Oz super foods. My whole life is low salt, low fat and low impact. What more do I have to do?”
“Sometimes it’s just a matter of genetics.”

“Genetics. Why couldn’t you tell me about these things ahead of time so that I wouldn’t have wasted years of my precious life eating acai berries, sprouts, buckwheat and sunflower seeds? Do you know what it’s like to eat like a downy woodpecker? Every day I bang my head against a tree looking for edible insects and worms.” I could see that he didn’t know whether to believe me or not.

“You’re getting older, Mr. Klinski. The body breaks down.”

“Don’t tell that to Nina. She spends six hours a day at the gym doing ironman exercises. Do you know what it’s like living with a woman who rolls an SUV tire around the gym and swings kettle bells every morning as part of her warm up?”

“Your wife is aging whether she wants to admit it or not.”

“My grandfather smoked cigars and drank vodka ‘til the day he died at ninety-five. He never exercised a day in his life. He ate pierogies and kielbasa, and golonka ‘til they were coming out of his ass. But I can’t have one buttered bulka or a slice of makowiec. Instead, I have to be married to Nina who measures my caloric intake regularly and checks my urine for excess acidity. I’ve had to eat lettuce with olive oil and apple cider vinegar to balance my chi. I drink green tea, never coffee, and apple juice, never wine, because it makes me colicky.”

“Now, Mr. Klinski, be happy that you’ve made it this far without any serious illness.”

Although Dr. Schneider had given me the name and number of a fine cardiologist, I decided to secretly research online all the cardiologists in my area, reading carefully all the patient recommendations, researching the number of malpractice suits filed against each doctor, and assessing each doctor’s medical training and years of practice. No matter how hard I looked, there was always something that deterred me from making a clear
choice. The ease of scheduling, the length of the office wait-time, the listening and communication skills of the doctor all weighed on my mind. I pondered and then malingered. If only I had told Nina. She would have made up my mind for me.

One afternoon, I noticed in the local *Pennysaver* an ad for Dr. Assmus, a *full-service* cardiologist. *Cradle to Grave Care.* How unusual. I called immediately to make an appointment and discovered that fortune had smiled on me. He had a cancellation for the very next day.

The office was well-appointed, but not in the way that you would expect with hanging plants, soothing music and comedic movies airing to soothe the arrhythmic heart. Instead, there was freshly brewed *Duncan Donuts* coffee. There was Danish, and muffins and munchkins. I had never seen a doctor’s office run out of a Duncan Donuts concession before.

All of his patients seemed remarkably happy and relaxed. There was none of that *Sturm und Drang* that characterized my every visit to the doctor with people weeping in the corners of the room as they waited their turn for the executioner.

“Zero Klinski.”

When I was called into the examining room, his nurse, Alice, took my blood pressure and then had me take off my shirt for my EKG. “Zero is such an unusual name,” she said as she pressed the cold pads to my chest and legs.

“Yes. My real name is Zibigniew after my uncle Zygfryd. My father always wanted a son, but when my mother had me he called me Zero instead and waited for my brother to be born.”

“So many Zs,” she said.

I was shocked when she lit up a cigarette. “Doesn’t smoking violate New York State health codes?” I said, as I brushed away the smoke.

“Everyone here is in recovery,” she explained. “And we’ve been given a special waiver by the state. But if it bothers you, I’ll put it out.”
“Recovery?”

“I’m on the wagon.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“No, it’s fine. Since I began working here with Dr. Assmus, I’ve learned not to worry about a thing.”

When I met Dr. Assmus, I was surprised to see that he was a bit overweight. He didn’t have that athletic build that I had come to expect from the doctors that Nina always selected for me. “What brings you to Full-Service Heart and Aftercare,” he asked.

I showed him my recent EKG which he then compared to my current one, pointing out what a normal sinus rhythm looked like and how mine skipped and pranced as if it were not quite sure of where it was going. “We could take the defibrillator and shock it back into place, if you want,” he said.

“You mean with the paddles?” I said, my voice trembling.

“It’s nothing. I do it all the time, sometimes to myself. Some of my patients come here just for the experience so they’ll be prepared when the big one happens.”

“Is that safe?”

“If you’ve ever been tasered, this is far easier. For some it creates an out of body experience. If there’s a God waiting for you, you’ll know it in under twenty seconds.”

I was baffled. “Isn’t there some kind of medication that I can take instead?”

“Anything you want, Mr. Klinski. That’s why this is a full-service facility.”

Dr. Assmus had me lie back on the examining table. Rather than probe and poke, and then listen to my heart with his stethoscope, he took out a tape measure to measure me from head to toe. “Wouldn’t it have been easier to use the scale and the height rod, Doctor?”
“With a coffin we don’t need the same leg room.”

“Coffin? Is that some kind of medical term?”

He stepped back and smiled. “I thought you came here for The Cradle to Grave service?”

“Your ad said that you were a cardiologist, not a mortician.”

“A full-service cardiologist.”

“I’m confused.”

“My father was a mortician. He trained all of us from an early age. But rather than immediately follow in his footsteps, I decided to go to medical school. I certainly had experience with the human body. Then when I was in my thirties, and just out of medical school, I put my father’s training aside and focused on serving my patients.”

“That makes sense.”

“But I was also driven to serve my appetite for things: fast cars, a stately beach house in the Hamptons, a statuesque beautiful wife.”

“Who can blame you? You gave up the best years of your life to become a doctor.”

“But then something happened. I was stuck in traffic on the LIE for seven hours. There had been a terrible car crash that led to a chain reaction. At the time, I didn’t know that. I was trapped miles away from the scene. But with no place to go, and nothing to do but sit and wait, I started to feel my life slipping away. I began crying out to heaven, crying, tearing at my hair. And I literally was having a nervous breakdown, but didn’t realize it at the time.”

“I hate the LIE. I hate cars if you want to know.”

“But for me, it was the best thing that could have happened. I became like Buddha under the Bodhi Tree. I became enlightened. There was no Eight-fold path, or Four Noble truths. I realized that there was one path. And that path is the path of sensual pleasures.”
“Isn’t that the opposite of Buddhism?”

“Precisely. That day, I realized that life was here for me to enjoy. If I wanted to drink, I should drink. If I wanted to eat, I should eat. If I wanted to enjoy women, I should enjoy women. Instantly, my fear of death vanished. It meant nothing to me. I became a free man.”

“Haven’t you heard about the marshmallow test, Doctor? Neuroimaging proves the benefits of refraining from immediate gratification. My wife Nina quotes that study to me every night in bed.”

“Bupkis…Asceticism, diets, exercises programs only feed your ego. They fill you with pride and force you to stand in front of the mirror. But the mirror never lies, does it Mr. Klinski. No matter how many pounds you’ve lost, how much plastic surgery you’ve had, and how many Botox treatments you’ve endured, you always want more.”

“So what are you saying?”

“Let go, Mr. Klinski.”

“How does measuring me for my coffin help?”

“Get death out of the way. Take death for a test drive right now.”

“A test drive?”

“Sleep in your coffin overnight and when you wake up in the morning, you’ll know everything that you need to know about what matters in life.”

“I don’t know, Doctor. This is not at all what I expected.”

“I know what you expected. You expected to find out that you are sick, but not that sick. You hoped that with a little tweaking here and there, we can give you back some quality years.”

“That sounds reasonable to me.”

“That’s precisely what I’m doing, Mr. Klinski. Help yourself
and I can help you."

When I got home, Nina was in the hot tub burning off her excess lactic acid. "Zero, where have you been? I’ve been calling all over. When are you going to learn to turn your cell phone on?"

"I had an appointment, Nina."

"Is that a jelly donut you’re eating?" she said, her mouth opened in disgust and disbelief.

"It’s very good, Nina. Would you like one?"

"What’s wrong with you, Zero? Did the doctor tell you you’re terminal or something and have six weeks to live?"

"No, I’m on a new diet. That’s all."

"You mean the Governor Christie diet?" Nina was blotting up the excess sweat and testing her acidity with litmus paper.

"I’m not dieting anymore. I’m not exercising. From this day forward, I’m sitting back and enjoying life."

"Zero, what’s gotten into you? I called Dr. Schneider and he told me all about your arrhythmia. It’s not the end of the world as long as you follow Dr. Mann’s advice."

"I didn’t go to see Dr. Mann."

"What?" She lifted her bronzed body out of the hot tub as if she were an angry sea goddess rising up out of the boiling water, the steam clinging to her wet skin.

"I went to see Dr. Assmus."

"Never heard of him," she said as she wrapped herself in a thick terrycloth robe.

"He’s doing some cutting edge stuff grounded in the Epicurean tradition."
“Never heard of it. What does that mean?”

“It means that my love-handles are okay. They’re part of the new aesthetics."

“I think we’d better call Dr. Stahl and discuss upping your Prozac.”

“I’m off that too, Nina.”

“Give me this Doctor Assmus’s phone number. There’s something wrong here.”

It was then that the doorbell rang. Two men dressed in overalls with the logo Cradle to Grave Service carried a polished oak casket on their shoulders. “Set it right down here in the den,” I told them.

“Zero, is that a coffin? What in God’s name is going on here?”