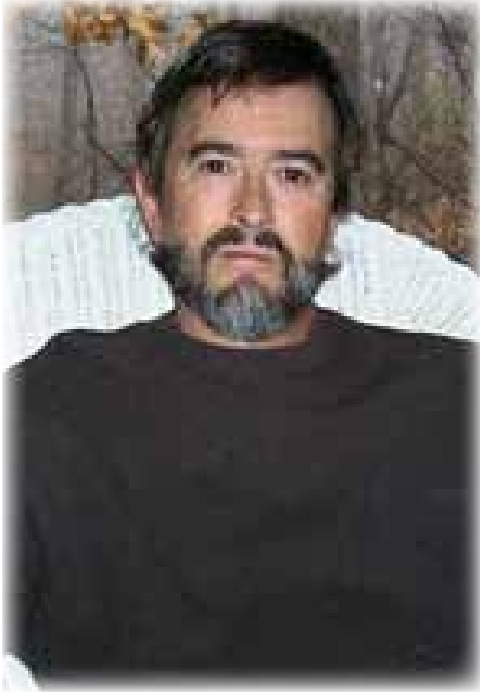


Five Poems



Bill Brown

Tennessee Writers Alliance
2011 Writer of the Year

Ichtheology

Somewhere in the river
of the heart a trout swims
upstream facing the future,
not dwelling on what just passed,
glimpsed, but unrecognized
as nourishment, caught in the flow
toward some distant sea.
Yet she is content to swallow
what she can, glad for the hatch
of gnats in spring, hoppers
in summer, glad for gill flesh
filled with oxygen, mystified
by the cottonwoods big bang
drifting across the water surface
like stardust. Then there's always
the longing she feels—to know
the golden trout high in the Pyrenees
before the first spawn got kicked
from the garden for tasting fry,
to multiply in the watershed.
She longs for the time she
can return to that fishery
and know it for the first time.



Passover

"For when Jehovah passed through Egypt to smite the first-born, He would see the blood, and would spare these houses." --Exodus 12:13

My visiting grandniece, Caroline, looks at my sister (her Grandmother) and says, shoot, Mam, God is coming for supper, we have to hide all the babies. Turns out her older cousin, Ella, has been making up games from Sunday School: The Story of Passover. After blood, frogs, lice, wild beasts, blight, boils, hail, locusts and darkness, the last plague caught her attention: slaying of the first born. Sprinkle the blood of a paschal lamb on the upper post or door lintel, and God will keep the destroyer from the dwelling.

For Ella, killing a lamb wasn't an option, so she and Caroline finger-painted the blood mark on the door. I awoke the next morning to find the door open. Under the backyard bird feeders two small bodies lay prostrate in sunflower hulls. We're playing homeless, Ella whispered. Having taught twenty years in a city one block from the Union Mission, I knew many homeless by name. So I asked the kids to make room, and still in my pajamas, I lay on my back, felt the rough seed crust in my hair, and stared though maple leaves at the hobo sky. The first born was safe. I could smell coffee brewing. The soup kitchen would open soon.

The Peasant Woman with My Father's Hands

On a painting by Jean-Francois Raffaelli

Your eyes, meek and forlorn, will not look my way, but your hands see everywhere as they perch in your soiled lap. Fingers are eyes of sorts.

I would reach in the painting and take them as if they were my father's. Your nails chipped from labor, dark stains tattoo your skin like a coal miner's, like my father's, from handling engine oil and hot metal. Creases in your palms spread up thumbs and forefingers, mapping your life line, a swollen cartography.

Your rough-hewn knuckles are scabrous but not unbeautiful. I think about the miracle of the hand bones: radius, ulna, carpals, meta-carpals, phalanges, dressed in tissue dense with nerves,

designed to pick up a grain of sand, bludgeon an oak post with a maul, monitor a fevered brow. To touch, an infinitive that can mean to cheat, to heal, to love.

It's baffling to think how many hands I've touched in 62 years, and it might be naïve to consider what a handshake once meant.

But my father reached out his hands to strangers, tuned cars, swept walks, fed pets, tied sailor's knots, taught boys, worshipped girls, cleaned fish, tethered horses, maneuvered boats, and mixed the perfect pancake.

And I know for certain that a peasant woman's hands in a 19th Century painting can touch.

Pink Slip

Fired for the day,
my heart seeks a different pulse.
Under a ragged sky
there's no reason to set boundaries,
to say this is where
I was when the message came,
when the song ended,
when hope for a savior turned inward,
and eternity grew
small enough to hold and drop
like a china plate
or crystal goblet, or hand of a frightened
child who won't let go.

A tapping emerges
at the forest edge, a downy woodpecker
nailing oak bark for grubs.
The thought of a beautiful creature
banging its head
against wood all of its life
has my heart imitate
the staccato pulse, and lets the child hold on
for now.

Wistful

The porch became the seat of our yearning,
hanging fern shadows like pulled shades,
phoebes' nest in the corner eave, confusion
between their melancholic songs and acrobatic
dancing for flies. Sunset captured by a
hilltop pond,
heron shadow sailing through sycamores.

Toads will mate and cease their belching calls.
Phoebes will fledge their brood and take
them to the forest edge to learn their trade.
We will be left with what we have—sprig
of Mint, grate of ginger, rosemary in small
doses,
a door that opens and closes. The porch will
grow
new shadows, our fates altered by scattered
songs.