

Eating Early

Terry Sanville

When Cynthia backed our minivan out of the driveway early Saturday morning, she almost smacked into the guy delivering newspapers. He leaned on his horn and drove up onto the sidewalk to get around us.

“Don’t you dare say anything,” my wife warned. “You know I’m no good when it’s dark out.”

“Your daytime driving’s not much...” She gave me the look and I shut up.

We had ten hours of mind-numbing motoring ahead, pushing eastward from the California coast, past Phoenix, into the Sonoran Desert. The back of our van was crammed with her easels, canvases, and all manner of artist’s claptrap that creaked and jingled with each road bump.

Two hours after leaving Santa Barbara, while sucking smog in the middle of Los Angeles, my pint-sized bladder and inflated prostate gave a warning twinge. Cynthia pointed us down an off ramp and we slid into a Chevron station. I had my seatbelt off and the door half open before we stopped, made a dash for the men’s room, and patty-melted into its locked door. After retrieving the key and almost wetting myself, I pushed inside. The stink from the urinal cakes made my nose run. But like a NASCAR pit crewman, I focused on the job at hand, groaning with relief. Back in the car, I took over the driving.

“Why don’t you just bring a pee bottle?” Cynthia asked.
“They sell fancy ones that can hold...”

“Give me a break,” I shot back. “I’m not an old fart yet.”

“What? Holding your water is something only young studs do?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

She laughed. “You’re just bashful...as if I haven’t seen...”

I clicked on the radio to shut Cynthia up but found only right-wing talk shows or rock music that sounded like my old garage band tuning up. I clicked it off. In relative peace, I drove into the sun and thought about the week ahead: winter mornings in the empty desert, reading escapist novels while my wife splashed paint on huge canvases.

“Did you bring your leg warmers?” she asked, breaking my reverie.

“No. Was I supposed to?”

“Remember that trip to Yuma? Your legs got so cold you could hardly walk.”

“If it’s that cold I’ll stay in the car.”

“And leave me alone with the scorpions and rattlesnakes?”

“They wouldn’t dare bite you.”

“Ha ha, very funny.” She pulled her sun hat over her eyes and fell asleep.

We ate lunch while buzzing along the Interstate east of Blythe. The desert wind pushed at the van. I white-knuckled its shuddering wheel while Cynthia shoved cashews, chocolate-covered raisins, and cold pear slices into my mouth. Hopscotching our way from gas station to gas station, we fought through Phoenix’s afternoon traffic and pulled up to the Best Western in Apache Junction just shy of four o’clock. The sprawling town was brown: brown desert floor, brown buildings bordered by the brown Superstition Mountains. Even the sky was brown from dust and car exhaust.

“I’m starved,” I grumbled. “Let’s unpack later and grab an early dinner.”

“Fine with me. But where?”

The desk clerk chimed in. “The restaurant across the parking lot has pretty good food.”

“Are they serving dinner this early?” Cynthia asked.

The clerk chuckled. “You haven’t spent much time in snowbird country, have you?”

“No, I’m here to paint the mountains.”

“Awesome. That’ll be a great conversation starter with the old far...I mean, ah, with our patrons.”

The lot was full of Buicks, Oldsmobiles, and Cadillacs parked crookedly in their stalls. We snaked our way between cars and I yanked open the restaurant’s front door. A blast of humid air hit us. The foyer was crammed with white-haired people sitting against the walls on padded benches. Only a few were talking to each other, whining or grumbling.

“Jesus, that woman looks just like my great aunt,” Cynthia whispered, motioning to a stooped lady grasping a walker with a built-in seat and a hand brake. I always wondered what those brakes were supposed to do: stop speeding walkers? Make parking on hills easier? There were three of them lined up, like some kind of showroom display.

After checking in with the hostess, we stood as more people crowded inside. Cynthia and I were the only ones with dark hair, except for one guy wearing an incredible rug that didn’t match his snow-white muttonchops. As seats became vacant, we let others take them.

Someone tugged on my shirtsleeve.

“Does your wife want to sit down?” an old guy asked between rasping breaths.

I glanced at Cynthia and smiled. “Thanks, but we’ve been sitting all day. It feels good to stand.”

“Ya don’t have to rub it in,” the man grumbled, fingering his cane. For a moment I thought he was going to whack me with it.

“He’s just trying to be chivalrous,” Cynthia whispered in my ear.

I leaned down toward him. “Is the food good here?”

“Reminds me of Army food. But it stays down, and the Chablis is cheap.”

I thought about ordering a carafe and drinking it right there in the foyer. But the hostess suddenly called our name and we hustled after a high school kid in a bow tie, winding through a maze of parked walkers, wheelchairs, and canes protruding from Naugahyde booths.

Cynthia sniffed. “I can’t smell anything over the lavender.” She held a Kleenex to her nose, her allergies in full attack. I kind of liked the perfume smell. Reminded me of my Granny, sitting at her sewing machine with straight pins clamped between her seamed lips, humming an old Polish tune while we neighborhood kids played “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours” in her backyard.

The bow-tied kid seated us at a table against the wall. A girl brought menus. I stared at the glossy photographs of delicious-looking food and compared them to meals just delivered to a table across the aisle. There was no resemblance. A crowd of seniors circled the salad bar. A woman who looked like Mrs. Claus bonked her head on the Plexiglas spit guard as she tried to bring the soggy-looking vegetables into bifocal range.

The wait staff ran everywhere. Made me tired just watching them.

We ordered. The food arrived hot, the drinks cold and appropriately intoxicating. I loosened my belt and leaned back in the chair. At the tiny table next to us a woman picked at a pork chop and drank green tea. Her long gray-yellow hair was

uncombed, her brown cardigan buttoned wrong. She retrieved lipstick from her purse and, with a trembling hand, began applying it, missing her lips and streaking her chin and cheeks.

Cynthia leaned toward her. “Ma’am, can I help you with that?”

The woman’s face flushed. “What? Am I making a mess?”

“Well, yes, a little bit. Here, let me.”

“I lost my compact somewhere, and my hands shake so bad...”

“That’s all right. Hold still for a moment.”

Cynthia dipped a napkin in a glass of water and gently rubbed the woman’s chin and cheeks. The lady smiled, showing off perfect dentures.

“I feel like a little girl getting my face wiped by my mother.”

“I’m sorry,” Cynthia, said, “I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“No, no. It’s a good memory.”

“Do you live here or are you just visiting?”

“We moved to Apache Junction in ’87. But my Harold passed two years ago... and I’ve been out of sorts ever since.”

Cynthia looked at me and frowned, then turned back to the old dear, holding the lipstick as firmly as one of her paintbrushes. “I’m an artist. Going to paint the mountains tomorrow.”

“I kind’a thought you looked the bohemian type.”

“Why?”

“My hair used to look like yours. You wait. Ten years from now it will be just like mine.”

Cynthia’s frown deepened.

“No need to be sad about it, dear. We all get old. Look at this crowd, a gaggle of geezers, all of us.” Her high laughter tinkled above the clatter of plates and silverware.

Outside in the parking lot, Cynthia scowled. “Ten years... I’m nowhere near her age and...”

“Relax, hon. I’d give you at least twelve years before you...”

“Look who’s talking, bladder boy.” She grinned and dug me in the ribs.

We slept well that night, glad for strong hot showers and a king-sized bed fitted with Magic Fingers to ease the ache of tired muscles, sore backbones, and bruised egos that just weren’t yet ready to surrender. Me, I hope to get a jet pack with my walker.

Running

Brianna Cedes

I have worn all sorts of shoes: saddle oxfords; red cowboy boots with jeans in winter and even with shorts in summer; black patent-leather pumps with three-inch spike heels and pointy toes – dancing shoes, rubbed with Vaseline to keep them shiny; brown tailored high heels, with dresses or suits in the fall; flats, low-heeled shoes, in the lab or while walking in cities with uneven cobblestone streets; hiking boots; ski boots; Earth shoes; lots of sandals, one pair with white, soft straps to tie around my ankles, bought from a street vendor in Venice.

Now, I mostly wear sneakers – lightweight mesh and leather running shoes with lots of padding and marvelously constructed soles. They protect

my ankles, accommodate my orthotics, reflect light
back to oncoming cars, and never pinch my toes.
I replace them every three hundred miles
or every few months, when the cushioning wears out.

The saleswoman at the shoe store asked,
"Are you a runner?" Yes, I am. As I walk,
fast, around the mall or along the edge
of the high school track, I am running
from osteoporosis and heart disease,
high cholesterol, and all the other ails
that are racing behind and beside me.
The other walkers and I nod cordially;
we're not competing with each other.
The challengers are those invisible racers
relentlessly pursuing us all.

I am running toward what is next –
to the next stage of my long distance run,
out on my perimeter of time – not yet
into the final sprint, I hope. I am running.
I love the race. I run through fears,
singing an old song about a high and narrow bridge.
I run with hope and prayer.
I run with joy and gratitude.
In my yellow-banded sneakers,
I am running.

Flying Free

Ginny Greene

Two pretty birds
expensive, too,
perched on window sill
watching wild birds fly

Woman watching
let them go
out the door
higher, higher

Husband, home, asks
“Where’s the birds?”
“I let them go,” she said
“I had to let them go.”
“But, now
they’re gone, Hon.”

“They flew,
they flew free,
if even only once.”

What I Didn't Learn in School

Phillip J. Valentine

I was sitting in a meeting room the other day when a lady made the statement, “You need to process what you read.” A chill ran through my body. It was exactly what my fourth grade teacher had told me over and over again. I told the group about a boy and his struggles in school and why I couldn’t read very well: I had trouble “processing” sentences.

My story begins in small-town rural South in 1956. When I began first grade, I was the last of a family of twelve children – three deceased, four married, and me the youngest of the five living at home. I mention this because my family was very close-knit and supportive. This would prove to be both good and bad for me.

Miss Ward was the first grade teacher. As best I can remember, she taught the children their colors first, then reading. I didn’t learn my colors; didn’t learn to read either. The school was so small the elementary teachers each taught two grades. So, in second grade the same thing – I didn’t learn anything then, either. By then, I was the class clown and village idiot.

In third grade, my brother, Boo, three years older, took care of me. He fought my battles, did my homework, wrote my book reports, did everything he knew to help me get by in school. I also had three sisters still at home, so any book Boo hadn’t read,

they had. He could get enough from them to make any report sound plausible.

This continued until fourth grade. Then things got complicated. Teachers had always let me get by if I stayed quiet and turned in homework. But Boo got involved in other things and I got further behind. Once, he wrote a book report for me and signed his own name without thinking. Mrs. Cox hadn't realized until then that Boo was doing all my homework.

There are some things you just can't lie your way out of. After what seemed hours and hours of interrogation, Mrs. Cox came away with the opinion that maybe there was hope for me after all. She asked what my favorite subject was; I told her geography. She gave me a new geography book and told me to read it cover to cover – however long it took – to just keep working on it.

That wasn't bad. I was actually learning something and my private study of geography continued the rest of the term. The next year, I was back in fourth grade and Boo was in a new building across campus. The first time I didn't do my assigned homework, I intended to let Boo work my math problems at recess. But Mrs. Cox made me stay in at recess and work on it myself. She also made me read every damn day. The battle lines were drawn; the war was on.

Mrs. Cox and I had some interesting conversations that year, none of them pleasant for me, but when it was just the two of us, she let me say whatever I wanted and never sent me to the principal's office. I learned later from a classmate that if she had sent me to the principal, I would have been expelled.

A few days after I first had to miss recess, someone smarted off at me. I jumped on him and he beat the crap out of me. The teacher had separated me from my "enabler" brother and I was on my own. Boo had joined the basketball team and a lot of other activities. He didn't even have time to write book reports

for me anymore. My sweet brother was turning into a calloused teenager. Very seldom I did my homework; very seldom I went to recess with the other children.

My reading was improving, though, and I could identify nouns and verbs. Every day, Mrs. Cox had me read while the other children were out of the room. She didn't actually teach me how to read – she taught me how to survive. Every day she reminded me, “You'll need to process everything you read.” I tried to block this out of my mind and I think I did for thirty-eight years. I left school thinking she was the worst teacher in the world. From fourth grade to graduation I referred to her as “Warden Cox.”

In fifth grade, a new teacher, Miss Wayne, first moved me to the front of the room for talking. About a week later, a photographer came to take our picture for the yearbook. It was early September, and I was barefooted. Miss Wayne thought it would make the school look bad to have a barefooted boy in the new yearbook and wanted me to move to the back of the class again. Before I got out of my desk, a little skinny twelve-year-old girl stood up beside me and looked Miss Wayne in the eye. She said, “If you make him move because he doesn't have shoes on, I won't have my picture made with this class.” The other kids jumped on the bandwagon and Miss Wayne left me in my seat.

We couldn't afford a yearbook, but I've seen the picture in other people's books. That was the day our class grew up – the girls for sure; the boys maybe a decade later. But after that, the fighting stopped in our class. We helped one another when there were problems and we have remained close through the years.

I finished fifth and sixth grades and moved on to junior high. Daddy died but the family struggled along somehow. Boo and I worked during summers to make enough money to buy school clothes. Mother made the girls' dresses. We ate pinto beans and

cornbread almost every day. (After leaving home, I didn't eat another pinto bean until I was fifty years old.)

The only time I ever got cross-wise with Boo was when a bunch of wild boys and I planned to have a big drinking party one weekend while their parents were out of town. Boo found out about it, like you always do in a small town. He sat me down and explained the situation to me. "We're just barely paying our bills, Sonny. You can't go with those boys and take a chance on getting in trouble and wasting your money. Do this for me. It will be the payment for me taking care of you all these years." If not going with the rowdy boys would settle all the debt I owed Boo, it sounded like a good deal to me. We shook hands. And to this day, I have never drunk a beer.

By that time, Pam and I were dating and things were getting serious. She was a "straight-A" student, but I thought I would be able to tell her how poor my grades were. She told me that she had never made a "B" in school. I told her I hadn't either. (The only test I ever made an "A" on was a blood test.) I guess Pam wasn't all that smart because later she married me, anyway.

At graduation time I thought, Oh, boy – go to work; make some money; have some fun. Then I received "Greetings" from Uncle Sam and went for my physical the next Wednesday. The doctor said, "You can't go airborne."

"Why?"

"You're colorblind."

I stepped back up against the wall and slid down to the seat. The good doctor said, "It won't hurt you."

I asked him, "Are you colorblind?" He said no. I said, "Well, how the hell do you know it didn't hurt anything?" The doctor had no way of knowing how much frustration and aggravation being colorblind had caused me. I remembered that not being able to distinguish colors was the reason my first-grade teacher

had given up on trying to teach me to read. Anyway, the next week I was reclassified 1-H and was never drafted.

Thirty years later, after working in the wilderness piney hills of north Louisiana, I reached the point where I was ready to go back to my home town. Mrs. Cox was deceased by then, so I went to the cemetery and gave her one last cussing – for dying before I could apologize to her, face-to-face. As I departed the cemetery, I stopped and buried my old memories there. To my amazement, on the other side of the cemetery gate, I found my “dreams” waiting for me. I think they had been there all along but were covered by bad memories.

I remembered that Mrs. Cox had me read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. It was very appealing to me – a book about the South, with adventure and humor. What more could a person ask for? When I went back to visit Mrs. Cox was when I decided I wanted to be a writer, to tell the stories of the people I knew and the area I lived in.

My wife told me, “You can’t be a writer. Your grammar is awful and your spelling is worse.”

I told her, “I’ll write in my native language – Hill-billy-omics – until I can find a translator, or learn.” So I started writing. This is the beginning. I’ve learned a lot; I have a lot to learn. And, just for the record, I saw a rainbow the other day that was the prettiest I’ve ever seen – all three colors were as beautiful to me as all the shades anyone will ever see.

On Being Seventy

Barbara Darnall

Seventy is old.
My step is uncertain,
my muscles and bones complain,
and breathlessness belies
the eagerness with which I greet
the light of each new day.
Seventy is old,
but my heart still quickens
at a toddler's laugh or lover's touch,
at singing birds and stormy nights.
Occasionally, I find myself
wishing upon a star.
Seventy is old.
Still, I have decided
my body may be seventy, but my mind
reels with thoughts still unthought,
songs not yet sung,
and my heart, oh, my heart
is not yet twenty-one.

The River Maze

Janet Hartman

As a seven-year-old on vacation in the 1950s, I played endlessly in the salt water behind our summer home. I seemed to channel energy from the tidal water. The river never slept – waves rolled into shore, boats and water-skiers zoomed up and down, fish jumped. Occasionally it appeared calm and flat, but even then crabs scuttled along the bottom and fish swam beneath the surface. The stillness yielded to a gull coming in for a landing or a mother duck passing with her flotilla of ducklings.

From our beach, we could see far up the river, presumably to its source, but it was too distant to tell. One day, Dad took Mom and me upriver in our 14-foot wooden runabout, considered a mid-sized boat back then. We passed patches of beach between stretches of spartina backed by shrubs and trees of cedar, pine, and an occasional oak. The banks gradually closed in on us and we entered a watery maze lined with dense marsh grass sprinkled with mostly dead trees and a few shrubs. Toppled tree trunks protruded into the narrow waterway. To me, it looked like a strange new world.

Dad slowed down the outboard engine until our boat was barely moving. An eerie quiet surrounded us. The air and water were still, and cormorants sat in the dead trees like sentries watching us. As we passed, they did not move. This was their domain, and they knew it. The relentless sun seared everything into submission. Even breathing required effort. Dad held an

oar over the side, rhythmically dipping it in the water to test for depth and sunken objects. No beach appeared on either side, no place to stop and go ashore. The waterway divided several times as we went deeper and deeper into the marshy maze. Did Dad remember the way out? I didn't. I thought of Hansel and Gretel, but even if I had crumbs to mark our trail, they would not stay put in the water.

The cormorants began to give me the creeps. Why did they keep staring at us? What if we lost our way in this labyrinth? What if the propeller hit a submerged tree trunk and the engine died? No one would find us. We could die here, surrounded by water without a drop to drink, shriveled by the sun or eaten by birds just like in the Hitchcock movie. I dared not voice my fears – one never questioned my father. Mom had the power to make him see reason, but her face showed she did not sense danger.

We followed a sharp bend in the water, then ducked quickly to clear a branch. At least there were no birds sitting on it. Then the oar hit something in the water and a thump on the bottom of the boat stopped us. I held my breath...were we doomed?

"Guess it's time to turn around," Dad said. He put the engine in reverse and turned the boat. As we rounded each bend, I leaned forward hoping to see the river. Should we have turned right instead of left at that last divide? Dad looked around, too. Did he really know where he was going? After a long series of turns, we exited the maze and the river widened before us. I exhaled, grateful for my deliverance.

* * *

Decades have passed since that excursion and the river has changed. Houses parade up both banks. Stretches of marsh grass became stretches of alternating sand and docks before new laws protected the wetlands. Ducklings are a rare sight. Marinas expanded to berth larger boats – thirty-footers look small today. Fish and crabs are so depleted that few people attempt to catch

them. The river is now a highway for boats headed to the ocean. The changes came slowly at first, but finished in a burst before we knew their full extent.

When I heard a new marina was built upriver, I had to check it out. I had not seen that area in years. From the main road, I drove down a mile of rough blacktop and gravel to reach it. Smaller boats were berthed here, right next to the scary maze I remembered from childhood. I asked a group of boaters if they ever went up there. They stared as if I were an alien. “No one ever goes in there,” they said.

Chicken, I thought, a smug smile on my face. No sound came from the maze. From where I stood, it looked as I remembered. Nature and the river had stood their ground against further human intrusion. The place I once feared, I wanted to preserve. I wondered if birds still sat sentry in the trees, but I did not attempt to find out. Other people might get ideas.

Wafting

Richard T. Rauch

walk hard walk solid
take stands make impressions
and then go lightly by
like a pennant tracing
breezes in the sky

Mother, May I?

Sarah Getty

During the screened-porch dinner of corn on the cob,
pork chops, tomatoes like red meat, warm and bleeding,
I felt the first stirring. The air moved, cracked the damp
heat that stood around the house in blocks. The backyard
maple rustled, twenty thousand green hands waving
a signal. Robins up and down the block began
scattering their coded notes. Our yard stretched larger
as the sky lost light. Out by the lilac hedge,

imaginary shapes conspired. I had to scrape
scraps into the kitchen can, rinse and stack the plates,
while outside, I knew it, everything was starting
without me. On the porch, the kittens, one tiger,

one marmalade, were climbing right up the screens
to chase the white moths that bumped on the other side,
dying, like dumbbells, to enter our box of light.
I stood on the sill, where tomatoes were lined up

to ripen, and unhooked the tiger from the screen.
Under the fur my fingers felt her secret, hot,
skinny body; her heart like a tom-tom hammered.
Then I heard Roger calling down the block, and John

did that whistle with his fingers. The dishes clinked
in the pan. Better not ask. Just, carefully,
open the porch door a crack, so the kittens won't
escape from safety, and slide out, like gliding

into warm, easy water. I ran on the grass;
I was gone. The air had a secret – sweetened
and heavy, like Hawaii, like honeymoons. Kids
were lined up already, across a yard where no

father was watering, solemnly wig-wagging
his hose. "Red Rover," was first. Whoever got named
had to charge like a ram into the other line,
try to break their phalanx of linked arms. Over
and over we flung ourselves, crashed and bounced and broke.
Later came "Mother, May I?" and then "Statues": grab
somebody's arm and whirl him around and around
and let go! He must freeze in whatever funny

pose he's flung into – Frankenstein, ballet dancer,
airplane, ape. Our bodies amazed us, taking shapes,
by chance, stranger than we could plan. Then, suddenly —
"Not it!" "Not it!" "Not it!" – we switched to Hide and Seek.

It was real night now, moon blue and humid. Mothers
would be calling soon. I hid in the hydrangea;
John was It. Lightning bugs rose in constellations
and sank, and rose again, blinking their welcomes. Sweat

prickled my neck, my scraped knee bled. I was hidden,
but anyway my heart beat hard. I was holding it,
secret, like a lightning bug cupped in my hand.
I let it rise in rhythm with its kind.

Exile

Kerín Riley-Bishop

We have allowed magic to slink off into the corner,
hide in the shadows and lie in wait.

It is patient; it has learned to linger

Magic is always near...

It is in the slow-flowing stream
which trickles gently down the side of the mountain,
and in the thunderous clouds pouring life
back into the earth's waters.

It is in the glittering stars of night
as they cast their subtle glow
on the worlds surrounding them.

It is in the first green buds of spring,
the blazing summer sun along the beaches,
the last orange-red fire blossom leaves of autumn
and the crystalline snows of winter.

Magic does not hide,
it throws itself in our path
makes us look, listen, love
until we are aware of it.

And then it grows
