Declaring April ‘I Hate Poetry Month’

I was to learn later that the bedtime story ritual began at once without waiting for me to master the art of bilabial drool. More to the point, a whole shelf of predigested pop baby books were skipped entirely. To be honest, Carroll, Baum, Aesop and Alcott were present and accounted for from the start, but quickly laced with generous portions of Whitman and Stein, Twain, Bronte, Hemingway, Yeats, Hughes, Dickinson and Keats (in an old edition with a soft, gray velveteen cover and embossed blue lettering). Dickens was there as well, probably reckoned in the former group. Joyce in the latter. On weekends there was ‘Puck the Comic Weekly Man’ on the radio, just to cover anything I might have missed during the week.

All this because, believing that the art of language was acquired through the practice of hearing it spoken, my mother was determined to see that I got the best of what sound had to offer. Her bedtime readings played over the whole range of cadence and dialect with perfection. It mattered little that it would be years before I would understand what the words meant. One needn’t know the meaning of ‘bird’ or ‘brook’ or ‘sunrise’ to have her mellifluous voice take flight with the beat of wings or splash over the tumble of smooth stones or spiral down into the musings of some whirlpool at the edge of a sea swept clean of answers. “Riverrun…,” she’d begin, in a tremulous brogue that was as far from her ancestry as I was from interpreting it.

No matter, Isobel’s nightly performances became the mother of my language, saturating the night air with its riddles of sound following me into the corridors of sleep. Reading, too, was an effortless acquisition after my first year of passively watching her fingers glide beneath the lines, slide the pages aside or nudge an occasional illustration into high relief. By the time most kids were getting A, B, C’d, I was blending pages into complex narratives and thoughts into chorused counterpoint.

I might well have put it all to good use and made something of myself in the process, but by eight or nine the art of great literature and poetry were all but lost on me. Neither Oedipus nor Ulysses could forestall my rebellion. Literature would bore me as much as rhyme would baffle. I’d have nothing to do with either of them. Oh sure, I had to swallow a little of both during my later years of dropping out of colleges. Generally, however, I regarded literature and poetry (as well as a good deal of contemporary art) with the same contempt with which other kids my age eyed their broccoli.

Give me a good auto repair manual, schematic blowups or typing manuals with an appendix on platen removal and instructions for replacement of those shiny oval keypads and their nickel-plated rims, and I’d be sufficiently engaged well into my late teens. A few years of guzzling Sci-fi filled in the scant reading spaces of most of my twenties; though I’ll confess I had enough sense to select from among the better fare of the day.
Still, poetry was always like diving into salt water with my mouth open, my eyes shut and my avoidance skills honed to a fine edge. And so it remained until my late twenties. Then, as they say, a strange thing happened on the way to somewhere else.

The late season emigrations were winding down. The annual procession of Cadillacs, Chryslers, a Mercedes or two and a few Volvos punctuated here and there with Lyon’s Vans and U-Hauls, thinned in their retreat from summer vacation homes high on the ridge above the opposite bank. It couldn’t be soon enough for us as traffic on the near side lightened and sped up on the two-lane that wound its way to the ocean alongside the companioning river. Along that length, rafting concessions shuttered their kiosks, cash-registers slowed and the price of gas and everything else dropped back into the 'just affordable' zone. It was the signal for permanent residents to breathe a sigh of relief and once again re-invent normal life from memory. The gravel turnout in front of the General Store by the river now displayed a reasonable number of empty parking spaces. Inside the store, old timers propped their chairs next to the pot-belly stove and jawed an hour or two on Sunday afternoons as the cool weather drifted down from the nearby hills.

Ice Box Canyon was aptly named and changed little in the changing light of late Autumn. The ground beneath a tall pine-crowded canopy rarely registered above deep shadow in any season. It provided a little relief during the occasional summer hot-spell, but otherwise only served as a perpetual font of mildew and cabin fever. As winter neared, most of us kept to our inside chores and a little close-by visiting. The rest of the failing light was left to the tall trees and the scurry between our meandering stocks of winter fire-wood and smoky chimneys. A single steep gash up the midsection of the canyon was a study in rutted treachery. To and from work was about all the traffic we cared to lay down on that furrow of unimproved dirt wound disguised as a “road”. After a solid week of torrential rain, it didn’t even remotely serve for reliable travel. Sometimes you made it. Sometimes you got stuck. On this particular storm-sodden night I didn’t even consider sloshing a set of threadbare Goodyear’s through the muck.

Still, a call to Isobel was a few months overdue, even by my standards of neglect. and Something must have kicked hard to haul me away from a cozy fire and hurl me into the downpour. What actually did that remains a riddle of instinctive behavior not worth wasting my time trying to solve. Do it I did, sloshing and sliding in a pitch blackness that put my footsteps somewhere outside the region of knowing anything about what my boots were doing. Reliable boots, though. I finally arrived at the gravel turnout that passed for a parking lot in front of the general store. The phone booth was to one side and the gravel was a couple of inches under water which I dismissed as runoff from the hillsides. The radio had crackled all day with news the river was approaching flood-stage. But then I hadn’t expected to be down in the flats, fifty yards away from the river, so the connection didn’t quite catch hold in my soggy brain. I plunked a pocket full of quarters on the phone ledge and dialed Isobel.

“Hello mom. What’s up?”
“Hey Red! How are you? &etc…”
Occasionally I’d swish a work boot in the unseen pond at my feet. The water had found its way into the eyelets and was informing my once dry socks of that fact. The talk went on. We’d left the narrows of “are you eating enough?” awhile back and I was inserting my second round of quarters when I felt the rising lake around me beginning to flow over the scree of my boot like a mini-spillway.

“Got to speed this up,” I thought. “Hey mom, I’ve got a little confession to make, hope you don’t mind.”

“No at all, Red, What's on your mind?”

“Well, I know you had hoped someday I’d enjoy poetry as much as you do. You hand-fed it to me when I was a baby. But I have to tell you, I’ve never much cared for it. I tried to get the hang of it a few times, but never did. It doesn’t make sense to me. Just no taste for the stuff, I s’pose.”

“Oh that,” she said, “I guessed as much a long time ago. No problem.”

“No problem?” I said, with some relief, “You don’t mind then, all that time you wasted reading aloud to me?”

“Nah,” she said, “It really doesn’t matter. As long as your heart tells you what's good for your brain, you can't go wrong." "Wait a minute," she said, interrupting herself, "I'll be right back.”

I waited. I could no longer feel my freezing toes. It was pitch black. The phone booth had disappeared and I could hear the wind and the roar of something else outside. An embrace of a fear had been unfolding inside of me, coming closer and squeezing tighter with the passing minutes. My legs were dipsticks registering water at shin level now. I tried to gauge the distance to the hillside and safety. It was too dark to remember exactly how far it was. I waited…more minutes passed. My jeans were plastered to my knees with mud.

I strained to see through the rain-streaked panes of phone-booth glass and into the mapless night, scanning the lot for any hint of escape route, a faint trace of charcoal texture against the ink-black sea around me, anything that might hold the promise of stepping stones to safety. Sheet lightening flashed and a menacing rumble shook the small naked bulb overhead. My imaginary way out vanished along with the momentary greenish afterglow.

A ringing sound pinged in my ear. Somebody's cue stick bounced off one of the Tiffany shades over a table in the back room. It startled me and a little knot seized in my chest, until I realized I had already released the puck, my eyes tracking just ahead of the
graceful slow spiral it made toward the center of the board to tuck itself safely behind a split where it couldn't get knocked out. Something an old man had taught me not an hour before. Now it was busy piling up quarters on the side rail. A clap from an unseen table by the front window woke me up enough to taste the salt sprinkle on my finger and take it out of my mouth, gloating for a moment at the trick I'd just pulled off.

Short lived glory. My screams of pain would blot it all out in an instant as fat fingers and a familiar smell reached from behind and grabbed me by the ear, dragging me over to the bar, me yelling and kicking to get free.

"Eddy! What the goddam hell you thinking? He's eight year's old, for goddamn christakes. We've been looking for him since three this afternoon, you stupid son of a bitch. I could have you shut down here and now and have your goddamn license pulled."

It would be a few years yet before I really got the knack of tacking against the winds of other people's best intentions about where I was headed. By the ninth grade I'd be coming down off my morning paper route and heading into the fog bank that lay over Golden Gate Park every morning on the way to school. At least two days a week I never made it. A banking left somewhere on the other side of the Duck Pond would position me to arrive at the beach about the same time the first bell had all the other kids tracking into their classrooms.

"The cops are down on 48th right now, combing the sand dunes and looking in the dark for my kid, thinking maybe he's been butchered by some maniac. I swear, you'll be out of business before the Early Edition puts my byline on the street. Gone! Kaput! You hear me Eddy? "

He was still pinching the bejeesus out of my ear while the fat finger on his other hand was poking itself into Eddie's chest. It might have done that, poked a hole clean through, had the cop not stepped in, reached around me and pulled my father off the bartender and me along with him, nearly minus one ear. The cop's midnight blue sleeve was covering my eyes. I couldn't see a thing, but I could feel all the shaking and scuffle around me, and I could smell the panic and rage coming off my father. "Hey! Let go my ear!" I yelled.

Something crackled. The phone was painfully mashed against the side of my face. I relaxed my grip and woke up when the crash of a huge branch against the booth said I was getting in over my head. I looked around. The swirl of water was nearly thigh-high. My imagined escape route had vanished along with the small naked light bulb overhead. The power had gone off. The phone crackled again. Somebody was trying to tell me something.
“Hello, Red?” Her voice broke the silence, “Are you there? Red?”

“Yes, mom, right here.” I could hear the sound of shuffling paper punctuated with more waiting, more darkness and the definite creep of panic as big things crashed in the roaring river just on the other side of the road.

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre,” she intoned, 
“The falcon cannot hear the falconer, 
Things fall apart;…”

Her cadence, less Yeats perhaps than Orson Wells in a really spooky film noir, but I was hooked. My brain detached from the earth and my head filled with images darker and more foreboding than the inky flood that was fast closing in around me. I was tossed into a torrent of dark and something sprang loose.

“And what rough beast, its hour come round at last…” she finished up.

Moments passed. The darkness in my brain lifted as I came to my senses. “Would you read that again, mom?” I said, “A little slower this time.”

— red slider, 2011