

North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

It's one of the Old Man's anniversaries again, and we mark the time with these words which appeared last year in Madison magazine.

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It snowed today, starting early, a Christmas kind of snow in the month of March. By mid-morning, the words no longer came, the writing freezing up like the creeks outside.

I built the fire up, swept my little corner clean, put a pot of chili on, got the kettle going good for tea.

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It was this kind of day
that had been the Old Man's last
in that terrible hospital bed.
Shrunken, shriveled,
all the Light leaving him
Like a fire that has
nowhere to go because
there's nothing left to burn.
In that small north country bed
that small body was my father.
My God. My God.
Where did the rest of him go?

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It came to me then that some of him had gone into me. In the mirror, I even saw parts of him there for the very first time. *That is your nose*, I said out loud. *Man, that is really your nose*. As a matter of fact, that is really your face. What is happening here? We are no more father and son. We are brother and brother.

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My father would take us
for the fish.
On the U.S. Government pier,
foreigners thick
as the Green Bay flies.
They had their trolley lines
for the perch.
We carried the bait
and the galvanized pails.

Waiting, we watched
the young men diving.
They went like rocks, like stones.
My father on the great stone wall.
Looking and looking
and tending his lines.

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There was a baker called Vogl
who fished with my father
and drank like a fish
my father said.
They knew the lakes
around Milwaukee.
Pewaukee, Tichigan and
the treacherous Wind.
In Spring, they drove North
and followed the walleyes
into the Wolf.
In the New London nights,
the taste of snow
and heavy fish
bagging with spawn.
Big Lake Winnebago
breaking up in the dark.
The German baker
shaping his dreams
in baking pans.

His life measured out:

Fifths and pints and poppyseed.
My father told me once, no more:
Louie Vogl afraid of Tomorrow.
He lost *something*, my father said.
What it was, he would not say.

One day, the baker
in his basement
hung from the soilpipe by his belt.
That was the Winter.
The very next Spring
The Old Man and me.
On the Wolf River
for walleyes.

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The crows are coming
to clean our woods.
Beneath their wings,
a littered world waits.
The snowfield
like some frozen surf
Releases dead things to the sun:
Little bodies and bits of fur
dead these hundred days and more.
The Old French called it
Butte des Mort
Hill of the Dead.
We mourn them too.

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When I was young, I spent this kind of morning in church.
This kind and every other kind, too.
Walled-in we were in those days. The sun was shut out.
We lighted the candles and waited for Something to happen. Now we are not walled in that way anymore.
We walk the woods on this kind of morning and nothing more has to happen at all.

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The whole day went that way, funny, not really lazy, funny kind of day. Snowing, chili cooking, didn't do much. Straightened up my little hutch. Just sort of hung out with the Old Man. I even lit a candle for him. It wasn't sad or anything.

It was a green bayberry.
It made everything smell
like Christmas.