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**Eight Months by Gilbert Arzola - CRAFT**

**January**

Two old men used to live next to each other. One is dead and the other is dying. The one that is dead planted a garden. The one that is dying is my father.

My father sits in front of the apartment wearing an old Chicago Cubs hat and looking like a man waiting for a bus. I sit beside him making small talk. When I was growing up we rarely had conversations of any consequence. He was not one for giving fatherly advice, solving the world’s problems, or discussing his dreams and disappointments.

And so that we speak of nothing is not unusual.

But it is different now.

Now it is the small talk of strangers.

His second stroke two weeks ago took some of his memory and somewhere in the plethora of doctor visits they found cancer in his neck. He doesn’t seem to notice or care about any of it. He mentions the weather and stares into it as if he were watching a movie.

For the last few months I have measured my weeks by doctors’ appointments, medication, and sitting on the porch. I keep my finger in the dike. He is disinterested. He is waiting for a bus.

I can’t tell you anything about my father that you couldn’t learn from the bartender at the Center Tavern where he used to sit for hours every Friday payday when I was a boy. I waited in the cold car, peering through the window sometimes but never complaining when finally he came out with the carryout dinner he would give to my mother as a peace offering.

I can describe his face, the stubble of beard that poked out of his brown skin like sandburs and one of my earliest memories of him coming home from work down a dirt road.

I was five or six and the summer air seemed thicker and heavy like someone had tossed a wool coat over your shoulders. My father was a farm laborer who worked from six in the morning until five in the evening for Richard Gumz, a red-faced German farmer who owned everything as far as we could see in every direction.

My father had been a Mexican migrant two years earlier. But he had stopped moving when Mr. Gumz offered him a full-time job working in the winters repairing equipment and minding the livestock. Together with my mother there were five of us living in the second of three tenant houses surrounded by weeds and with paint that peeled off in patches as big as your hand.

He was still young then and full of the promise of being young. He walked slowly.

Just a thin line in the distance at first, dark against the sandy road like a pencil mark on a clean sheet of paper—as he got closer I could make out his face weathered from the sun and the thin shiny layer of sweat and dust from the fields covering his bare arms. He greeted us wearily, drained by the day, and disappeared into the three-room house to have his supper.

The screen door slammed behind him with a sharp clap.

Most of the time he would not come back out until morning. And the cool evening would settle slowly over us. But sometimes if it was too hot inside he’d sit on the two-by-eight boards laid across cinder blocks that were the steps to the house and watch the sun set. Meanwhile my brothers and I played at whatever game we had invented that day, stretching out the last bits of sunlight.

He smiled at our games. And only joined in once that I remember. Most of the time the day had worn him down too much but once when my brothers and I were tossing a baseball, he took the ball from us and showed us, in great detail, how to throw a curveball.

His eyes sparkled as for a moment, he became a boy again, sweat beading on his forehead and lips pursed in effort.

We marveled and laughed as the ball did its dance.

It is the only time I remember spending time with my father when we were not working. Mostly he just sat silently every evening, dreaming some dream, planning some plan. Doing what men do who scrape out a living with their hands and live every day one step from disaster.

He hoped.

It was the same every day.

Inside the house smelled of damp weathered wood and tortillas. He ate quietly, surrounding his food with his arms as if he were protecting it from some invisible foe, his black curly hair pointing in all directions.

I don’t remember conversations, how the day had gone, plans for the future. There must have been conversations but I don’t remember any.

Instead I remember the beginning and end of days. Country mornings crisp and wet with dew and the fog lying across the fields so that it was like looking at everything through thin lace curtains. I remember hot days melting into evenings. At night sometimes I would fall asleep to the sounds of my mother and father talking through the walls. Their talk was quiet and emotionless, matter of fact.

But I don’t know what they talked about.

Dreams maybe. Or the lack of them.

Most of the time it was only mumbles that competed with the crickets and tree frogs. And I could sleep.

He smelled of farm ground and green corn fields. I remember that too.

**February**

The room where he lies today smells of bleach and sweat. Outside, the waxed halls shine and echo with a hundred steps all day long. In every room machines hum at whatever work they have to do and people wait.

It is as stark and cold as the winter outside the window and he is smaller than I remember, shrinking before my eyes inside these pastel walls and among the stainless steel machines and plastic hoses.

There is a single picture on the wall, a painting of a barn. Balloons, flowers, and cards arranged and arranged again line the windowsill in a futile attempt to make it feel like home.

But instead they do just the opposite. Out of place like a flower blooming in an empty alley, they remind you that this isn’t home and that nothing is normal.

In my clearest memories of my father as a young man he was like a giant in the only world that I knew. It was a world that reached only as far as the horizon and as high as the sky.

I did not wonder or care then what was beyond that.

What I knew was enough for me then.

And enough is always plenty.

**March**

Bill, who lived next door to my father, died where Highway Ten makes a straight line west and east from North Judson. East it runs past the house where Sherman Davis lived across from California Township Middle School, which is a church now. Further on it dead-ends at Bass Lake where we went in the summers sometimes looking for out-of-town girls in bikinis. West is North Judson: one stop sign and the drive-in. Beyond that is farmland: corn and mint and soybeans.

It is beautiful in a way you don’t notice until you’ve been gone. And then you are surprised by the calm: the corn and soybeans waving in the breeze and how the sun settles quietly in the distance, stretching its long yellow-and-orange arms between the trees in the woods.

The country is the most beautiful then, in the soft moments that separate light from dark. And it is when the sun is setting that the light shines off the stones of the road like a thousand little mirrors and it is very difficult to see if you are looking west.

Bill died there pulling out of the cemetery where he is buried now alongside Donna, who he was married to for sixty-five years.

I don’t know much about Bill except that he spoke simply and lived simply. I saw a picture of him once posing with his high school basketball team. But I don’t know what he expected out of his life then. He and my father had both been farmhands and both were retired. By fate, accident, or grand design they became neighbors, my father forever fixing some motor and Bill tending his garden.

Bill talked slowly but with a purpose, like  a muddy river taking leaves and branches with it after a heavy rain. A river that is relentless, but that moves without effort.

Making its point.

My father meanwhile spoke with an accent and put words together in starts and stops. He spoke like there was somewhere he had to be. And both spoke with economy, using only as many words as were necessary.

When there was nothing to say, they said nothing.

Silence was alright with them.

**April**

My father did not know me after his stroke. But that was okay, because I didn’t know him either. We looked at each other the way you look at someone you’ve seen before but can’t place, someone friendly that maybe you passed on the street.

There was something about me that meant something to him, he knew that. And I was not there to harm him, he knew that too. The way you can sense that someone is kind or that they are up to something or how someone just gives you the creeps. Out of memories that were blurred, upside down and in pieces, he looked at me and smiled.

He didn’t know my name.

“Who is that?” the nurse asked. And he stared into his hands, trying to draw it out of the suddenly empty well. I was someone he should know apparently, since the nurse had asked…and so he looked at me again.

There was something familiar about me, his eyes said. But it was like trying to hold a slippery fish.

There had been something but it was gone now.

Something.

**May**

Bill planted a garden that was twenty by thirty feet. And in it he drew straight lines, geometric certainties that made sense out of what had once been chaotic. In what had been weeds and dirt and patches of grass without order, he carved perfect rows of tomatoes, carrots, corn, and flowers.

It was a garden tended, not worked. And like magic, it grew.

We could never visit my father without stopping to see Bill. Most of the time he’d be sitting on the porch, like he’d been expecting us. We would chat about nothing.

And he would lead us to the garden, walking in between the rows like he was walking into a chapel. He walked as if he were knee-deep in water, shuffling and barely raising his feet off the ground.

And because he walked slowly, we did too.

**June**

My father lies with hoses and wires attached to him and a monitor that beeps every few seconds.

Beeps to tell us what?

To announce that we are still present, to tell us that even though his eyes are closed he is still with us—dreaming some dream, hatching some plan.

I am holding the newspaper I brought and I squeeze it hard, like a rope that binds me to what is normal. There is still the weather to consider and the sports scores to discuss. No matter what happens here, there is police work to do and meetings to hold.

The world goes on and that is the sadness of it.

We make no difference.

He moves a little, stirred by something only he can see and the day just moves along…kindnesses, envy, greed, and generosities. Moving like a muddy river….

We are full of it and the world goes on.

But he hears none of it.

**July**

Bill died a few hundred feet from where his wife was buried. And after she died he’d visited her grave every day.

Every day.

Rain, winter, snow, and heat.…

Every day.

People who knew him, and because it was a small town everybody did, would say how sad it was. A few understood, but others said he should let it go, move on; that it was what she would have wanted. Women’s eyes would tear up when they saw him driving slowly past but the men would just wave.

They’d lived together for sixty-five years. For 23,725 days, he could call from the front room and she would answer. For 569,400 hours, he could walk through the back door and into the kitchen and find her. For over 31,000,000 minutes, he could touch her hand.

What are you supposed to do with that when it is gone?

**August**

Most of our conversations with God begin with trouble.

When we’re standing in a funeral home lobby mulling over death, we all talk to God then.

We ask for an explanation, for a purpose for living and a reason for dying.

But God never answers.

We talk to God when we’re being mugged; during wars, bankruptcies, and divorces. We talk to God when the game is on the line and when the shit hits the fan.

I talked to God in waiting rooms. Silently, without getting on my knees and inside my own head instead of a church. I asked for direction, for strength. I asked silently and talked to God from behind the steering wheel of my car on the day my father died.

Other cars passing on the street or parking nearby took no notice. People helped people up steps and others came carrying gifts and flowers for someone I didn’t know.

Uncertain, unimportant, and all of great consequence—people I didn’t know went about their own business.

GILBERT ARZOLA is the second son of a former migrant worker, living in Valparaiso, Indiana, with his wife, Linda. His family arrived in spring of 1954 in North Judson, Indiana, when he was three, to work in the fields, deciding to settle there. Gilbert was named Poet of the Year by Passager Press in 2019. His first book of poetry, *Prayers of Little Consequence*, was published in 2020. *Rattle* published a chapbook, *The Death of a Migrant Worker*, in September of 2021 after selecting it from two thousand submissions for their annual prize. His story “Losers Walk,” originally published by *Chaleur Magazine,* was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2018. A poem called “Richard Smith” has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize this year. Gilbert’s work has appeared in *Whetstone Magazine, Palabra, Crosswinds Poetry, The Tipton Poetry Journal, Passager, SLAB,* and *The Elysian Review,* among others. Find him on Facebook @ArzolaGilbert.

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