

Two Poems

Gabe Welsch

April 29, 2010

Vice President of Advancement and Marketing at Juniata College

BACKSTORY

I have always hated roller coasters, not liking the nausea, the unhinged feeling, etc. I also do not like leaving the ground. But when visiting Lakemont Park in Altoona, PA, with my family, my dislike of the things found a new dimension while watching my family ride the oldest operating roller coaster in the world, the Leap-the-Dips coaster. It's on the National Historic Register. I did not know it at the time, but the ride was extensively restored in 1999 after standing for more than thirteen years without operating. As the poem suggests, watching my wife and daughter clamber around the rickety wooden structure was not the most pleasant experience, but it did lead to this poem:

The Oldest Roller Coaster in the World

Lakemont Park, Altoona, PA

Embalmed in chipping paint, its spars yawed
with each bump and shimmy of the cart
that clattered down the slopes with all
the excitement of gravity. The biggest thrill
and scare was watching loved ones slide
down as the whole structure lurched
and groaned, as boards popped out
of their joints and snapped back, as metal
whined with strained age, as the operator—
a shambling fleshy boy doomed to a register
life or to be shot dead in a desert—
pushed each cart the first few feet,
to let it latch the pull chain
and lumber and clack up the first incline.

What it must have been like before flight—
when sixty miles per hour was enough,
we knew, to tear flesh from a face,
when the moon was still made mostly of myth—
to climb in a cart and creep up, to feel
for perhaps the first time, the way
the planet pulls you back, how long a falling
rush can last and not kill you, how the heart
can yearn to be yanked down. How clever

we've become to trick a body with mortal fear,
and to set it up so you can do it every day,
and pay for the privilege.

(First appeared in *Tar River Poetry* 48:2, spring 2009)

BACKSTORY

Several years ago, while working on an essay about W.S. Merwin, I was interrupted by a telemarketer. I did not handle the call with any style, mumbling simply that I wanted to be on the don't call list. I fumed about it for a while, and then imagined what would happen if the poetic persona of Merwin had answered the phone. The first of what people now call my "telemarketer poems" was born. I started writing conversations imagined between a telemarketer and poets like Billy Collins, Wallace Stevens, and Basho, among others. The poem here imagines the telemarketer speaking with the uber-loquacious and manic Albert Goldbarth.

The longer I worked on the series, the more a story emerged. The poems are now part of a book-length story in poems, incorporating the telemarketer, her loser husband, the salesman who pines for her and lives in her building, a disgraced surgeon-turned-pawnbroker who buys her possessions as her marriage dissolves, and a woman running a shelter for domestic violence victims, who befriends her. The book is titled *Four Horsepersons of a Disappointing Apocalypse* and, with any luck, will be published soon.

The Telemarketer Basically Enjoys Talking with Goldbarth, Though It Ends Too Soon for Her Preference

Is the man of the house at home?

I can't believe you just said that, your throwback euphemism
drags up a past to lament and praise, supernova twice, bigness
a narcoleptic paradox running the lice-ridden rungs of time—

—so you're the man, er, the head of the household.

You could say that.

Excellent. I have some questions?

Is it excellent? Do you know what you're saying? Or are you
the loquacious cockatiel, your exuberance a feathered haste,
chit-chat scattershot like rejected millet flecking a shag carpet.
We discuss you, you know, over dinner, over grilled fish or
a burger flame-plump and greasy, while the moon, at once pale

and thick, opaque as sperm, like turned milk, looks nailed
to a frail horizon, and we complain, bitch about the everyday
invasions, grudge and shrug, admit some utility in the cubicled
greeting mills

[this is easily the best call I've had all day]

put up with coy asides and pomegranate
scatters of salesmanship, of salespersonship, of the multiple
mutations of commerce, while some of us raise the specter
of a forgotten conquistador who arrived on palm-sotted shores
in 1570, rifle-pricked and steel-cowled, cowed the first native
he saw with a plea for water, for anything other than salt,
anything other than the lexicon of distance and its flat
horizons, and in effect exercised the great prerogative
of free markets, or free enterprise anyway, sans the lovely
parting gifts of affected tele-purchasing by simply getting
to the point and asking, right out there, crackerjack
simple, for exactly the thing he wanted and nothing more.

Okay. We're running a special on appliances.

Don't need any. See ya.

[click]

(first appeared in *Missouri Review* 27:2, 2004)