

Seventy Three Summers

poems in retrospect



James L. Freeman



At the age of seventy something, James L. Freeman began writing poetry. In the beginning, his anecdotes of grandfathering, nature and social issues almost resembled poetry. He kept writing, attended his writing group and tried to improve. Today, he writes poetry that shows his understanding and appreciation of being old and young, our place in nature, love, gentle humor, and social and mental health issues. Now and then, his poems may touch something universal.

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The Young and The Elderly

Teaching Granddaughters How To Fish

At the cabin on Flour Lake,
ice out a recent memory,
two duos of cousins
ages six through nine
on the dock with Grandpa
teaching them how to fish.

Lime green and lemon yellow rods
Zebco and Disney reels
seemed oddly used
for the potential meals, but
no matter the sizes
they were prizes
to the squealing bunch.

My worm fell off Grandpa.
Take my fish off Grandpa.
I need another worm Grandpa.
I need another worm Grandpa.
Take my fish off Grandpa.

There was no end to the fun
until Grandpa said--
next year you'll put the worms on,
I'll teach you of course,
to which they chorused---
Euuuuu!

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On the dock at Spirit Lake the grandfather
dozed in his lawn chair
while the June sun chased poplar leaves
across his chest
as if looking for his heart.

Soon his small grandson will arrive and
he will catch resident sunfish
crumb primed and eager to flash
their yellows, golds and greens.

The boy will demand more tales
of giant fish, eerie birds and
fishing secrets.

Seventy three summers ago
gray vapors lingered above dark waters
holding longer the hush,
then turning golden for the rising sun.

Soft steady creaking of old oars
powered by small thin arms,
in a red and green crazed row boat
shadowing the black shore,
perfectly blended that quiet world.

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Trailing slightly below the surface---
a Creek Chub Pike.
Around the bend surely
that old moss back lurked
waiting to explode at the next
unwary being.

Rich fish odors as from the seashore.
Ponderosa and Black Pine sharp smells.
Turtles upon approach sliding off logs.
Trout rising to the hatch.
Chirpers waking at dawn.

The Appraiser Cometh

The arms of the Morris Chair
glow with the patina
of comfort.

Stanley planes rest
well oiled and
rakes and shovels
and hoes wait
in their home
by the garden.

Salt and peppers stand neatly
in the curio cabinet.
Wear Ever is nestled
in the kitchen cupboards
beside pink juice glasses.

Depression crystal sparkles
in the sideboard
with no key
and the sterling flat ware is black.

Dear Granddaughter

Granddaughter, dear granddaughter
I will carry you on my back and
run like an antelope
to flee the charging moose.

You and I will leap across the lake
to capture the rising trout and
chipmunks will be calm in our hands.

For you only the largest bass
will take your bait
and our pontoon boat will
ever float on still water.

Granddaughter dear
boredom will be a stranger and
soon you will fly like an eagle
over the stormy waters
of teenagehood.

Pluto and Venus In The Nursing Home

Wooden chairs, easy chairs and sofas
lined up around the sunroom
like round dancers hoping for a partner,
eager for some action and the caller
to begin the dance.

Slowly they enter the room---
walkers and wheelchairs helping
the old people in--- to sit awhile
and wait for lunch, unaware
of hopes not their own.

Walter hopes that only Steven
will wheel him to the dining area
where tables like corporate work desks
wait to present dietetically correct meals.
A meal he may like.

Steven always listens with interest to
Walter's explanation of the working of our solar system
of universe oddities , formations and
competing theories as to the why of it all and
how much we appreciate a planet we have a name for.

Estate Sale

Perched on her rickety kitchen stool
her low shoe heels hooked onto
the bottom rung
old Gracie watched
as the fevered crowd
swarmed through her kitchen
examining the bottoms of her skillets
for Griswold and Wagner,
looking for Fiesta and Watt bowls,
for Farmer and Child cookbooks.

Gracie said nothing before they left
to storm through her dining room and
living room and quickly up the stairs
to the two bedrooms and her furniture there---
she could have prolonged her departure
if she'd only said something.

Eighty

My hair is yet there
and it is mostly dark.
You're looking good.

I'm not exactly slender
but I have no pot belly.
You do look fine.

I still hike with gusto
no bad aches and pains.
Thankfully that is so.

I see and hear beautiful things
just as before.
Your faculties are indeed sharp.

There's just one thing I wish
I did as before.
Dear one---
you're eighty.

Driving Blind In Inverness

Monday through Friday from his sun worn house
Ed would drive two blocks to the Post Office
of Inverness, Montana population 158
to hear from the children and Sears, then

four blocks to the Inverness Elevator
to assay the daily wheat quotes,
two blocks to Kenfield's General Store
for sundries and the local news
from his proprietor son-in-law
and back home to Fannie.

And on his drive the angels shouted
Watch out! Ed is coming!
while he caromed the gravel and holey street---
curb to curb.
The town folk begged Harley and Anna
to take away his keys---he's eighty five and blind as hell.

After Fannie died he was driven to another treeless place
in southern Minnesota to live with Roland and Mearl,
where he camped in an easy chair
smoked his cigars and swatted phantom flies.

Ed was driven again to the rest home
where he waited ---
in a luminous sunroom
with his friends.

Fishing For Perch

The perch kept on biting,
the small ones were fighting.
We caught a lot
in our sunny spot.

I counted twenty
but Bob wanted more,
that's not aplenty
as this is such a score.
Fishing was so much fun
my first time on the run.

Why was I so surprised today,
when father heard the principal say---
they'd no need to search---
as I'd gone fishing for perch.

Lime Green Dragon

Sally colored the dragon
thoroughly with lime green crayon
between the lines
as only a serious six year old can.

*He could have zebra stripes and
leopard spots.*

She looked at her grandfather
as if searching a dresser drawer
for the coolest socks
and not finding them.

A week later
she showed her grandfather
her lime green dragon
sporting zebra stripes and
leopard spots.

Reminisces

I Remember

The vivid Red Maple bowers
over the narrow two lane blacktop
guiding us to our honeymoon cabin in Copper Harbor
whose waters hinted of the mysteries
yet to come.

Our long autumn walks on leaf softened paths
our air spiced with dying maple and aspen leaves
the path that led us timeless
along the Cloquet River and only
interrupted by love off- trail.

Cold winds and rain ripping leaves
off bushes and trees
as we resolutely completed
our morning walks in our
Woodland neighborhood
bereft of its red and yellow crowns.

Truly were those times ours only.
Oh! to have you here to help me
remember more.

My Summer On Sourdough Peak--1954

There is a bowl, a very special bowl
that rim to rim
touches Oregon and Montana.

Tilted, the bowl drains itself northward
and in its cracked bottom
the South Fork of the Clearwater River
takes streamlets and streams westward
on a ride through Hell's Canyon.
Southward, the Gospel Range
holds the bowl firmly on Earth's table.

Sourdough Peak sits in this cockeyed bowl
like a dark highway cone
reigning over lesser peaks.
A National Forest Service cabin
moored on its bare rocky knob
is anchored by large compliant stones.

On the cabin roof is a room---
a room like a lighthouse room
with a round azimuth map table
showing a world of contours, elevations
creeks, canyons, streams, peaks,
rivers and ridges---
Sourdough Peak is at the center of this world.

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Winds that command your ears to sing,
winds with gale force gusts,
breezes of Balm of Gilead,
breezes that let you hear
the ka-a-a-s of Clark Nutcrackers
the dee of Chickadees---
all visit sourdough Peak.

When thunderstorms came rocking my bowl
when thunderclaps echoed
as if applauding themselves
when the lightning struck
and when hot blue tennis balls could come
rolling under the doorsill
and up my pant legs---

I was there---
exercising my appointed authority
to record the strikes that pierced
the points on the map I had memorized.

For days I would scan my world
for smoking snags and chimney wisps
scanning Stoddard's Ridge, Fireman's Creek
Piney Ridge, Rosy's Ridge, High Meadow,
Elk Knob, Endless Gulch and et cetera et cetera.

The bowl's ridges face east and west
marching into a purple fade---
a sea of green wrinkles
thick with Douglas Fir, Larch
Spruce and Jack Pine---
with aromas of their own delight.

The ridges funnel Sourdough Peak Road down
through dust and hairpins
that make your head spin
to Clearwater River Road---a washboard road
that bounces and bucks your back so bad
your eyeteeth go blind.

This is the road Old Man Henry drove up
in his Cadillac with an angel hood ornament
to where no drunk dared go before.
This the road I took back
to the University of Idaho.

Montana Winds

On April 10th, 1953
in her sixteenth year
like an excited debutant
with cheeks of rose silk,
chestnut hair tossed by the wind
and clear hazel eyes,
she waited for
her date, that awkward stick of a boy,
to escort her to the prom
in Inverness, Montana.
She wore a plum velvet gown and
he was lost in her eyes but
yet could hold her shy hand in his
as they danced.

Her hands could tame behemoth
wheat combines and wring doubt out
of the eyes of male farm hands.
Yet, to him, she was a slender stem of wheat
facing Montana winds born to race
unchallenged across short grass prairie.

A vibrant memory needed
by an old man
trying his best
to age gracefully.

Old Eyes Look At Autumn

Long before there is Autumn
there is just for awhile
the vanishing of the final snow patch.
Then the hostas rise up and
daffodils awake to say--- it is Spring!

For just awhile in midsummer our patch of iris
gold and maroon stand tall and grand.
Our Jackmani Clematis ends its journey
to the trellis top showing off its purple haze and
astilbes brighten the shadows of the Sugar Maple.

Then soon the maple shows a few leaves
of red and gold and I lament the inevitable.
But then the lavender asters surprise and
our maple turns bright and beautiful.
Soon I smell its leaves sweetly dying and
predictably, I want autumn to stay longer than
just for a while.

Water Main Break

Heavy rain falls
down the hills of Duluth
as golden brown rivers and
like apple pie servers
slice away black pavement,
sidewalks play like accordions,
autos fall into sinkholes and
the Swiss cheese water mains
force geysers up to the sky
to wear manhole covers
on their heads and
the people exclaim---
what power! how beautiful
are thy geysers!

Winter Reminisce

As beginners
at Jay Cooke State Park
we skied on expert trails---
learning to duck walk up and
side step down .
Our eyes watered as we
were launched over moguls and
the suspension bridge tested
our balance and verve
over the black Cloquet River.

For our fifth anniversary
on the North Shore Drive
at Cascade Lodge
we left our cabin and its birch log fire
at eight below to glide uphill
through six miles of old growth pine
to step into an ice popping deep freezer
called Deer Yard Lake.
Then over ice flows and thawed soil
with lack of caution and laughter
we flew down to our cabin
thankful our bones had not popped.

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Cloquet Forestry Preserve offers
flat trails curving through white pine groves
where as grandparents we
occasionally met a couple from church
and stopped to chat
about how this is such good exercise

Bones yet intact we are now
content to sit by our fire
in the sunroom
and watch snow fall as it may---
however, blizzards are best.

The Lava Field

Some ten thousand years ago
the Sawtooth Range wept
red rivers onto southern Idaho,
rivers that gurgled and burped and ran
and when the race ended they cooled
laying archipelagos of bubbles
as on coffee.

Bubbles like black noggins--not like
whitened cow noggins laid by
deep pioneer ruts nor like
Charley Russell signatures---
more like Winnebago burial mounds
some lanced offering up
deep crevices to gem blue skies.

On the west flank of one such lava field
the Little Wood River is forded by Herefords
in springtime to graze Little Bluestem grass
living on wind blown loess
sprinkled over the lava field .

Standing atop a creviced noggin
an ocher-red smudge pleads for company and
climbing out of the crevice---
a skeleton, Belle, iron shoes and leather shreds
still clinging---
remnants of a sad event.

Big Sky Country

Drive west on Interstate 94 across
North Dakota and eastern Montana
and you say, perhaps many say,
how plain the Great Plains are---
there are no mountains or tall hills
no forests or real lakes.

There are only wheat fields
sunflower fields, eye blink towns
and sparse grass range land.
This is a land to endure until
you finally arrive at the Rockies
and our national playgrounds.

As you race across the plains
and cover your eyes as if
meeting an ugly cripple
do you think about the farmers
ranchers and townspeople
who choose to live there?

Who feel the allure of reservoirs
coulees and campgrounds,
who know where the trout
bass and walleye live,
who know where to find shady groves
prairie grasses and joy
dances, cafes and rodeos
family, friends and potlucks.

And they deeply appreciate the rain---
sufficient and timely.
And above all they appreciate
the Big Sky---
can you see it?

On your left observe the cumulonimbus
casting shadow games of tag on the fields,
further away on your left
is a slanting rain shower blessing
a few grateful farmers---
on your right see the wisps and
cotton balls hanging about.

On the horizon ahead you may wonder
how the sunset will show itself---
timid and pale or
a rosy glow in a cloudless sky or
bold oranges and reds racing across
the underbellies of pincushion clouds.

Mountains and lakes
tall trees and geysers
may be captured on camera but
the Big Sky will not pose
as it is ever changing
ever on the move---
it has much to reign over.

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The Big sky may entertain
with clouds of fantasy and
lightning shows but
mostly it dominates and minimizes.

Yet if we allow it, the Big Sky will
fill our souls with the awesome knowledge
of our place on this planet---
and its place in the universe.

Peace At Flour Lake

Sitting in my folding chair
on our cabin's dock I'm unconcerned
if a Large Mouth Bass causes
my bobber to disappear.

Laying on the cabin deck letting the sun
warm me and dry my worries
I listen to the August breeze
spin and rattle the aspen leaves.

Liberated from all things electronic---
laptops, cell phones and television
I watch chipmunks stuff their cheeks
with my endless supply of sunflower seeds.

I've solved mystery and detective novels
early on, most of the time and
I've written long friendly letters and
know our dog and cats are home safe
with the pet sitter.

Yet, most of all, I'm at peace
because you are here with me---
feeling at peace.



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