

A Haibun Odyssey

Story 1

Bleacher Trash

-WHITE ONLY-

Tell a tale, Thaleia, of a boy, his mother and an ancient.

A summer of baseball, insight, love and laughter among people long since boarded the Punt of Fierce Brightness to cross Acheron.

-Seated fondly in the bleachers of the boy's heart-

The evanescence
of a lifetimes importance
a bunted foul ball.

Growing up in a small town in southern Virginia in the 40s and 50s unmemorable summers, hot and humid. This a summer to remember the boy and his mother, trying to nurture her scatterbrained son, were reading, the ancient's epic poem, and accounting for concession sales for the Danville Leafs, a New York Giants farm team. His mother managed the vendors and counter workers he filled their containers with drinks, popcorn and snacks to sell cheering fans eager to taste the coolness of the game.

Mother existing
in a memory sweetly
a soulful recall.

"Need Drank's here," Billy cried out, "more Nee-Highs this time the bleacher trash seem to be thirsty for them tonight."

Billy and Jessie were mill-hands by day vendors by night selling cold drinks and snacks in the -WHITE ONLY- bleachers, filled with working class folks- mill hands, farmers and their families; living without a second thought, for the most part, a Jim Crow way of life collapsing under it's own exhaustion.

The world struggles to
awaken from enthrallment
a hanging curve ball.

Crane necking around, to catch a glimpse of Ruby if he could. His lust for her was better known than his contempt. When women were not around, his thinly disguised misogyny exposed itself. Signifying that she would be a “tasty little red snapper.” Or referencing Santa Claus, “Ho-Ho-Ho Who Wouldn’t Go.” Billy never quite understood that not everything that popped into his head was of sufficient quality to pop out of his mouth.

In the hollows of
his chauvinist mind he strokes
the vision of her.

Billy barks, “What-cha think the Supreme Court goanna do bout Nigra-gation?” He was always trying to fluster the boy’s mother with crude brashness. Rushing now - to catch his filled container, before it fell over the side, he scolds the boy for being so clumsy never occurring to Billy that fucking with a boy’s mother came with consequences.

Select a wrong pitch
nature will be a ruthless
critic of your choice.

“Well Billy- maybe, if they take away the –ONLY-, you’ll finally get a chance to work the –colored- bleachers for a change,” Mother replied. “Not in this lifetime,” Billy mumbled, defiantly, walking down the tunnel with his Nee-Highs. Passing, a slightly bowed, Edgar Lee who servilely greeted, “Mista Billy.” Ignoring the colored man with enmity, Billy, bottles rattling, went about his way calling, “Get-Cah Cold Dranks Here.”

Candor shortens the
distance between a preferred
attitude and truth.

Edgar never used his –white only- voice with the boy and his mother; he was always polite but never obsequious.

Colored people had a keen sense of when and when not to be sycophantic. Edgar was a teacher, in the colored school, by day vendor by night. Most everybody had two jobs. To feed clothe, house and educate your family was hard for poor folks, colored or white one of many shared commonalities, hidden in plain sight, by centuries of racism.

No matter how hard
the road; you have the right of
traveling on it.

From the time, the boss introduced a small commission on sales, for the vendors, Billy and Jessie became suspicious Edgar and Hue Willy earned more than they did and were endlessly fishing for the answer; - they did - but the boy's mother would not give them the satisfaction of knowing. She told the boy, "Billy and Jessie spent more time watching the ball game than working the ball game and deserved to stew in their jealous juices." The two would never miss an occasion to state, with authority, "Colored bleacher trash spends mo money than white bleacher trash."

A truth you impose
Is not equivalent to
a truth arrived at.

** "Drawing the door shut with the silver hook,
sliding the door bolt home with its rawhide strap.
There all night long, wrapped in a sheep's warm fleece,
he weighed in his mind the course Athena charted."*

* The Odyssey of Homer- the second of two epic poems attributed to the ancient Greek poet Homer 8th century BC.

Story 2

Bleacher Trash

-BLACK ONLY-

A gentle breeze wafting down the tunnel, under the grandstand, where the boy and his mother worked, seemed to blow in Hue Willy, store merchant by day vendor by night. Hue Willy and Edgar Lee worked the –COLORED ONLY- bleachers, selling cold drinks and snacks. They would frequently travel together, or “Craighead Clarence,” a very large menacing man dispatched by “The Major,” was lurking nearby. “They do that,” the boy’s mother explained, “because it’s safer for colored people in groups, especially when hazarding out of their place.”

What shape is our place?
Unseen companion on walks,
brief glimpse in glances.

“The Major,” a charming but shadowy figure, notable for Craighead -Juke Joints- and his megaphone use at ball games; trash talking the visiting team and scolding the umpires. Laughter often rippled through the stands from comments that slid between his teeth. “Ump- if you were born with wings; you’d fly backwards” “Pray for rain son, only God can get you outta this mess” he had good timing and a sense as to what folks were thinking.

Comedy-
received every place
pleasantly.

“The Major” fostered his own concession, furtively, distributing small bottles of bootleg Gin, in Hue Willy’s peanut basket. Gin mixed with a Nehi produced a cool fruit flavored drink called “The Pink Lady”. She took the edge off a hot night at

the ball game and the abiding fear of getting to and from safely. Like the old song said "Run, nigger, run; the pateroller catch you."

Hard to stay
normal of heart
now and then.

The boy, accidently found a bottle; they missed removing, when Hue Willy came in for a snack fill-up. Trembling with shock, with complete discretion and in a moment of solidarity, he slipped the small bottle around the counter into Hue Willy's eager hands. Crassly supposing Hue Willy was drinking on the job, still, the boy was not going to be the one to rat on him. Something the boys father had said to him rang in his head, "When an opportunity to keep your mouth shut arises, you should take it."

Stereotyping
destination elusive
the hoary curve ball.

The boy's father, knowledgeable in the subtle art of the game, and conversational companion of the boss went regularly to the ballpark for an exercise program designed by the trainers, hopefully, to help in his battle with Multiple Sclerosis. Tagging along, in case needed, the boy would watch batting practice, the grandstand girls flirt with ball players, and sneak left over snacks from the concession stand. Picking up unreturned cushions, for the boss, gave him the chance to explore the bleachers for small change, an earring, anything of interest dropped by fans. Fifty cents would buy enough gas to drive south to Atlanta or north to Richmond.

First man ever met
Father- the one who taught him
how to step and throw.

Two young colored-boys ran quickly away as he approached the –COLORED ONLY- bleachers. Disappearing into the corner where the outfield fence met the woods, he noticed Hue Willy. The boys were the colored-mans sons and they were picking up all the small Gin, soda bottles and tops they could find for their two-cent deposit. “The Major” re-used the Gin bottles. Hue Willy explained his and “The Majors” enterprise, and said, “That the boys ran because colored boys had reason to be fearful in any white only situation.”

Unlucky sperm knock
on equally hapless eggs
asking to be borne.

Relieved to know Hue Willy was not a drunk, ashamed of himself, for jumping to the conclusion that he was, the boy suggested, he would help them gather all the bottles an tops they could find and put them into the milk crate in the corner by the woods.

The sincerity of the boy and the eager insistence of his sons convinced a cautious Hue Willy to go along with the plan.

Nobody ever questions the wanderings of a white boy or any friends, colored or not he might be Huck Finning.

Young enough to still feel that genuine fondness for one another they were born with and as of yet not been talked out of they became fast friends. The three boys, under the watchful eye of Hue Willy, playfully made short work of the bottle retrieval part of the program.

What pals we were then
flying June bugs on a string
boys at summers end.

Later that evening with the fans much in place, the anthem sung and the Umpire saying “Play Ball” Clarence, stepping from the shadows, says to the boy “Here by yourself?” Crouching down to make himself smaller he gives the boy one Silver Dollar and says, “The Major wants to show his appreciation.”

Two things were legendary, when Craighead Clarence said “Here by yourself?” You were not and “The Major” only gave Silver Dollars to friends.

Of truths the deepest
are not the ones screeching but
the ones whispering.

** "Fly, dotard, fly! With thy wise dreams and fables of the sky.
Your comrades-at-arms are ready at the oars, waiting for your
command to launch."*

* The Odyssey of Homer- the second of two epic poems attributed to the ancient Greek poet Homer 8th century BC.

Story 3 The Counter Ladies

“O-dys-sey!” Ruby exclaimed, “Is this what y’all are on about?” Ruby was a handsome woman with striking natural red hair, which for some reason gave her freedom to be out-spoken. After some of the things that would roll off her tongue folks would just shake their heads and mumble “Red Heads.”

She smoked Pall-Malls and left long butts with bright red lipstick stains. “What’s it all about?”

A trap set
bait hangs in the air
nibble – bite.

Atypically, Edgar Lee spoke up, "It's about a man, trapped on an island with a Nymph, trying to get home to his wife and son." Looking over the rims of her glasses she hummed a suspicious "Umgh-Humgh, have not heard that one before" Ruby replied. "It gets better" Edgar said. "Hope so - for his sake, the stuck on a island with a Nymph shit is pretty thin" Ruby retorted.

The hitter digs in
catcher decides on a pitch
batter squares - Strike One.

Trying to recover Edgar explains, "He needs a boat but the God of The Sea is mad at him because he poked his sons eye out with a stick." Taking a long drag on her Pall-Mall Ruby said "Ouch!" "Now God can't be everywhere at once." Interrupting Edgar Ruby rejoined, "So he needs to figure out where in the ocean God is?" "Yes Mam he does" Stepping her Pall-Mall out, long as usual, walking back out to the concession counter, Ruby said "Well now! That could be as tricky as taking a whore to a prayer meeting."

Batter swings
Infield pop up caught
batter out.

Hurrying down the tunnel, shaking his head Edgar mumbled, to Hue Willy, "Red Heads." "Peanuts here" called Jessie stepping up to the counter. "What-cha mean God can't be every where at once?" "Well not in this story" the boy explained. "It was written eight hundred years before Christ" "You shouldn't be reading that communist trash." Jessie exclaimed, "Tweren't nothin worth nothin before Christ." The boy's mother poked him, in the side; glancing up, he saw her clear eyed sparkle and sly grin. Remembering her words, "He who argues with a fool is the bigger fool" the boy, bit his lips shut, filled Jessie's basket and sent him on his way.

Thinking to himself, "The ancient and his fans believed just as strongly in their Gods as Jessie did in his."

Ancient written text
various significances
multifaceted.

Ruby passing Becky, serving a city councilman swatting a swarm of flies attracted to his cologne said, "It's just them old circle flies Mr. Childress, they wont bite." "Circle Flies," he inquired? "Yes sir you see them flying in circles around horses butts."

"YOU SHORT TALKING I'M A HORSES ASS GIRL?"

Turning as crimson as the cherry cone he had ordered Becky stammered a polite "Nn-no sir, not at all sir. I was raised better than that." Completely flustered Becky darted into the back for a time out and a smoke. Before Becky burst into tears the boy's mother said, softly, "It's hard to fool them flies sweetie."

First base
runner extends lead
pitch- OUT

The boy liked Becky, she was short and cute pulled her hair back into a ponytail. Smoked L&M filtered cigarettes, saved the butt to smoke later, blew the smoke back through said it kept them fresh. "Married to a good-for-not-much, abusive, man who drank too much" the counter ladies would say. The boy's mother never made Becky stay for settlement. They counted everything left over and reconciled it to what they started with. Becky's husband would drive up to the gate and flash his lights with displeasure if she did not scoot right out. The boy dreamed, how cool it would be if, one night, out of the darkness Clarence would step up and say, "Here by yourself Miss Becky?"

In the corridors
of his heart, he vainly looked
for fragments of hope.

Maythell (May as she preferred) was a short order cook at the Trailways Bus Station. A heavysset older woman who dipped snuff and spat into a, reeking, can she kept for the purpose. Ruby would tell her, "Dam-met May, clean your can, that thing could knock a buzzard off a shit wagon." May took care of cushion rentals and special grandstand orders for the quality folks who count vainly living in the echo of an aristocratic concept that should have ended in that modest house in Appomattox.

Are dreams disposed of
raging on the winds of time
like dead bird feathers

Cushions rented for fifteen cents you got a nickel back if you return them at the end of the game, a huge attraction for the kids rounding up as many as they could, and pocketing the nickels. Quality folks left their cushions for trashy white kids to collect. The cushion service was not offered to colored folks, as white folks did not trust that cushions were being stored "separate but equal."

Knuckleball drifting
from pitcher to catcher's mitt
direction unknown.

The boss, sensing a market not served, resolved the dilemma by covering the cushions in red and blue fabric. Someone evoked, "Shouldn't those be red, white and blue."
To which the boss replied, "I only have two Asses to make comfortable, smart Asses and dumb Asses."

Pitch looks outside
slides back over the plate
call Strike three OUT.

** “All they really trust are their fast, flying ships
that cross the mighty ocean. Gifts of Poseidon,
ah what ships they are—
quick as a bird, quick as a darting thought!”*

** The Odyssey of Homer- the second of two epic poems attributed to the ancient Greek poet Homer 8th century BC.*

Story 4 The Grandstand Boys

Sunny, Chip, Barry and Mike, sons of prominent, old money families in town, worked the Grandstand. Home from college for the summer not needing jobs but “Getting the Experience” their fathers would say. They had an air about them clothes tailor-made everything matched conversation short-talk mostly and often condescending. Tending the needs, they would say, of “White Trash Royalty” and “Quality folks who counted for something.” Caught in that, reoccurring, dream of moving all the trash to anywhere but here without a thought of those needed to do the work they were to biggity to do.”

May those lofty dreams
expand to the heliopause,
of your cultured minds.

“The Odyssey, is Miss Giles still giving that out as a summer read” Sunny asked the boy. “We got The Great Gatsby” Mike offered. “YOU- understand it,” asked Chip in a disdainful tone. “Trying to” the boy, replied carefully avoiding the snare set for him. “Stay with it, you will get some important brownie points for it. Having Giles in your corner doesn’t hurt” Sunny said supportively. “Stop filling a scatterbrains head with false hope” mumbled Chip, “Those who know how get work those who know why lead; you are such a bleeding heart liberal.”

Trapped on a glass the
fly erupts with fury freedom
inaccessible.

Coming in with special orders from the Box Seats, for May, Barry asked, “Did you hear about the truck that overturned on the corner of Craighead and Worshom?” “Spilled an entire lode of garden tools,” Mike replied, “Rakes and Hoes everywhere held up traffic for hours” Barry rejoined. Taking Barry’s special orders May said good-humoredly “Who takes Rakes and Ho’s to Craighead.” Ruby quipped, “That’s just bad Ho management.” “Should have called Clarence to clean up the Rakes they be gone without a trace,” May kidded, “Mans, Not a fan of competition.”

Ground ball to second
player shovels to shortstop
tag throw double play.

Ignoring the attempt, by the women, at workplace banter Barry snorted with conceit, “Fire Trucks and Police everywhere; way more than was needed.” “A Waste of money,” Chip said, “They should be out slapping sass out of trash, that’s what we pay them for.” Mike asked, “How many Red Necks does it take to screw in a light bulb?” “Five” said Chip, “One to climb the ladder,

two to turn him and the ladder and two to make dumb assed jokes.” Chip was a short-talk master insisting on being right no matter wrong he was, with clever semantic infiltration. Taking the special order of Chili Dogs from May, the boy’s mother told Barry, “Be careful now that Red Neck Chili doesn’t scorch those quality mouths.”

Runner steps off base
that sneaky hidden ball trick
humiliation.

The boy’s mother explained, “White Trash Royalty was short-talk for white veterans getting a leg up off the GI Bill. You may be able to pay for Grandstand even Box Seats but you were neither. You were born and bred as quality or you were trash.” The boy asked, “How about colored families?” “They found cunning ways to leave them out; and not deliver on the promise for veterans of color.” “What are they afraid of,” the boy asked. –“THE VOTE – we outnumber them, their horror is living in a world where “The Major” is the mayor and Clarence the chief of police?”

The contour of gone
is more elusive than the
shape of never was.

The boy’s favorite uncle, prospering in California from his benefits, had been driving for a week across the country, full of nothing much, to try and convince the family to pack up and move out there with him. California, where people were not divided into two groups, quality folks who counted for something and trashy folks who did not. Your place was what you made it to be. The boy and his sisters could get educations free of prejudices and manipulations.

That night as he slept
dreams of things to come tiptoed
gently through his mind.

** “Dear boy—never fear you’ll be a coward or defenseless, not if
at your young age, the gods will guard you so.”*

** The Odyssey of Homer- the second of two epic poems attributed to the ancient Greek
poet Homer 8th century BC.*

END