

Each Moment a Culmination: The Poetry of Gar Bethel

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Gar Bethel is the unofficial poet laureate of the city of Winfield, of Southwestern College, and of the Bridges Conference. He has supported the conference with poetry and readings from its inception. He has for decades supported himself as a poet by doing poet-in-the-schools projects in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Georgia, Iowa, Oklahoma, and Kansas. In conjunction with visual artists, he has exhibited his work in Dallas, Little Rock, Pittsburgh, and the Smithsonian Institute. He has also served as a member of several faculties including Oklahoma University, University of Pittsburgh, a high school in Maryland, Southwestern College, and the Oklahoma Prison system.

In the poetry that follows, Gar works a bit closer to the bone—literally and figuratively. "The First Step" describes struggle and discovery in the daily effort the speaker undertakes to place one foot in front of the other. As usual in Gar's work, the result is a fusion of grace, dignity, and grit. Professionals call this "confessional poetry" but always in the poetry the personal and the public unite to transcend simple and simplistic categories.

"A Small Boy, A Mouse, and the Universe" returns us to the poet's relationship with his young friend, Joseph. The dialogue is about life and death. We are reminded not only of our mortality but also of the origin of wonder and of science in a child's questions. I recall once asking why John Conway invited a young child to the stage at Nat Friedman's conference in Albany, New York. I asked the mathematician I was with why Conway thought a child could solve an intricate problem in knot theory. "We never know where solutions will come from," was the answer. "Children sometimes see things older mathematicians can't see."

Joseph appears again in "Four-and-a-Half To Sixty-Four." The way things work is again the subject as the simple acts of a child are transmuted into speculations on time and space, the evocation of the Lascaux Caves in France, and the duo's satisfaction at the end of a single, shared day of mystery and routine.

I am pleased that we can offer to another conference gathering a small sample of Gar's poetry. The conference sponsors hope that you too will join with us in discovering in Gar a friend and a colleague.

THE FIRST STEP

You are the witness. Movement is the art.
Forget where you've stepped or where you step in.
Bend over backwards. Never bend your knees.

To keep your balance in equilibrium,
to strike out slowly, set to make it there,
only lean forward over your center.

It's less what you see than a feel inside
that gets a hold-on without taking arms.
Reach out with a hand to keep a balance.

Consecutively, you're never at rest.
Gather for the rock in your inner ear.
Never bend your knees while shifting your stand.

There's always the chance that's how you will fall.
To keep your balance within some limit,
you pass beyond art to say you made it.

You become conscious of your unbent knees
which are bound to trust however it's said.
No longer content with what is beyond,

inevitably, you are opened up.
You split and you merge what's right and what's left
for transcendent grace, a power outside.

The fact you witness, that you're determined,
testifies someone wants you to do good.
To take the first step, you need warmth around.

A SMALL BOY, A MOUSE, AND THE UNIVERSE

What do you say
when he asks about death?
He wants to know what will happen

to his toys.
There's no use in complicating things
before he can understand,

if he ever can.
I tell him
he can take them with him.

Heavens, the Pharaohs
thought they could take
their boats, their staffs,

and their gold masks with them.
The three great pyramids
are a map of the belt of Orion

where they must have hoped they were going.
Even Neanderthals placed a stone
at the head of their dead.
Is a mouse alive? *Yes.*
Is Moma alive? *Yes.*
Is a rocket alive? *Yes.*

No, a rocket is a machine
that enables us to soar.
A leaf? *Yes.* A bed? *No.*

What's alive has juice.
Yet a poem is a machine
juicy with words and emotions.

It's common to complain
that life is short.
Yes, if you compare it

to the age of the universe.
But our life is somewhere
in the middle,

longer than a year, a day, a cell, a quark,
longer than a chronon,
ten to the minus fortieth power.

*When you get old,
do you lose your juice?
Do you lose lightyears?*

Yes, I tell him,
you are the winner.
I accentuate the positive

to keep the juices flowing and the light on.
No, I tell him, I'm not going to die
like a t-rex.

It is all a lie
to keep him joyful.
I hear the mousetrap

crack its machine.
In the morning he will want to see
the blood and the head guillotined.

Is he alive? Yes,
and learning success
expects success.

FOUR-AND-A-HALF TO SIXTY-FOUR

If we could live our lives
so that each moment
is the culmination of all our moments,,

then someone writing, fat chance,
our story could use
that moment as a final sentence,

supposing, that is, he knew the straight
skinny, which they rarely do,
and even if they do

would we recognize our acts
after the writer has misconstrued
the significance of his noted facts?

Even for those who are on the lips
of millions for generations,
we know little of how they lived.

It's morning time. Time to get up,
he says to me,
as I lie here supposing too much,

and I know it's time to brush my teeth
and soap my balls and comb my clean
wet hair while ignoring the mirror.

Suppose our work could live on
after us. Would it be us?
And as soon as what we make is gone

from our hands, our lips, our sight,
it is no longer ours, those surviving words,
but what others can make of it

to use or abuse for their own
purposes, not what we thought
we meant, or meant, at all-

and is any work the whole of us
or its tangible consummation, supposing
of course, the word could last past Saturday?

Obscurely, we live in remembrance
a year or two. With a few
we last until *they* die.

*Let's make biscuits and gravy
this morning, I say.
See that wheat weaving on the wall.*

*If they grind those seeds
between those hairs on the heads,
it becomes this white poofy flour.*

With baking powder, soda, and salt
and each of us cutting-in *Crisco*
with a fork and adding milk

how we live with pressure
surrounding us always, pressing us
always, despite being invisible.

He chooses to outline his hand
and cut, for practice, around it with scissors
and glue several together

to give to his mother-
that ancient desire for personal prowess
like the handprints on the walls of Lascaux.

After that I tell him,
*You can paint with your fingers,
or we can play pick-up-sticks.*

Then we water the flowers
and fill the bird feeders with seeds,
and he probingly plays with a long stick.

If, for some reason, I could live
each moment as the culmination
of my life and at the same moment

make it the first of a new life,
if, as my mother says, I could build
that kind and tender a character,

I would die an intelligent human being.
But we have a whole day
of happiness to accept.

and baking mounds of the goo in a pan,
with bacon and eggs and strawberry jam,
we can eat breakfast.

If we could live in such a way
that every moment of our lives would be both
the consummating, final moment

and, at the same time,
the initial moment of a new life-
but that fantasy isn't possible.

One course recedes into the past-
a plot, a rhythm, a pattern.
The other course leaps toward the future

searching for meaning, rarely
looking back, the summary facts
from others being prone to autopsy.

*Today, I tell him, we will submerge,
with toothpick struts, an avocado
seed in water and see if it grows.*

*Today, we will make a parachute
out of string, a handkerchief,
and a smooth stone you find in the drive.*

And I will explain how the pressure
of air can billow things up
and rock them slowly to the earth,

And I have information, routines,
consistency, and security
to pass along in the midst

of uncertainty and mystery.
The babies have left the bird house.
A fly is difficult to swat.

And we have hands to wash
and teeth to brush, here and now,
and peeing to be done together

with comments on size
and the difference between boys and girls
before we lean back on pillows in bed

and listen to crickets and read several books
with questions and comments
on each limited page-

a happy satisfaction
with what there is,
as the nature of this day darkens into night.