

The View from Within

Early morning
I wake to the songs
of birds outside
my small window.
To the east
Blue clouds turn pink,
the sky brightens
with the coming dawn.

From a storm drain
a young cat creeps,
feral, velvet black, white feet,
fixated on the singing bird above.

Floridas true orange,
the sun, bursts forth
above the distant tree line,
a symphony of light.

Clear beams illumine
cropped green fields beyond
And rouse bees from sleep
to tend the clover.

Such pastoral calm
is blemished solely by
the grumbles of gun trucks
Securing the prison within.

While the Music Plays Let Us Dance

Some things should not be left to chance;
Why should those with youth lay claim to love?
While the music plays let us dance.

We've lived and learned from circumstance;
With age should we lose all hope for love?
Some things should not be left to chance.

Across the room you risked a glance;
The angels whispered from above,
While the music plays let us dance.

Romance is not extravagance;
Holding hands is not enough.
Some things should not be left to chance.

Together our lives have substance;
Shallow youth pales in our new love.
While the music plays let us dance.

We will not yearn for past remembrance;
Or store regrets for long-lost love.
Some things should not be left to chance.
While the music plays let us dance.

Good Intentions, Undone

The boy followed the meandering dog,
a little red dog with pointed ears
and playful eyes, curled tail, trotting
away from the country house, beneath
a barbed wire fence across a field,
sniffing a rabbit trail through high grass,

pink tongue lolling, leading him away from home.

The child looked back once, expecting trouble
from his mother, get back in the yard, boy,
where do you think you're going? Do you
want to get snakebit, or fall in the creek?
But the back porch was empty, just a gray cat
sleeping in a rocking chair, silently assenting,
go ahead, a sign, no one there to tell him no.

An abandoned barn beckoned, weathered wood
falling from rusted hinges, door planks sagging,
scant shelter from wind and rain, sheet metal roof
gapped open to the sky, shadows moving across
the hay-strewn dirt floor, corn cobs scattered,
gnawed by mice, immigrants claiming empty spaces
where Grandma once milked cows long gone and forgotten.

The cool woods called the red dog, sprinkling odd tree trunks
leading downward toward Nettles' Creek, dark water
curving, little boy following, sitting on the grassy bank,
content to dangle bare feet, splashing, scattering minnows
as the dog tiptoed across wet clay preserving
tracks of birds and animals, a raccoon, lapping, thirst slaked,
child crossing, tracking, soft clay squishing, warm between his toes.

Above, among the leaves a blue jay scolded,
Warning off a fox squirrel wary of the dog
below, sniffing strange scents, unconcerned with
nervous chittering, satisfying olfactory cravings
while the boy discovered the blackberry patch,
ripe berries waiting to be picked and eaten by little boys,
juice staining lips, leaving telltale purple streaks.

Deeper into the woods, dog and boy encountered
an old cowpath, narrow, worn deep from years

of plodding bovines set in their ways and trails,
curving around long-dead trees fallen, returned to dust,
the red dog decided, turned left, continued through
sparse underbrush, trees thinning, sunlight shining
on the fallow pasture, quail covey startled into flight.

At the barbed wire fence the dog looked back,
as if to say, hurry up, boy, we made it home,
undiscovered by your mom, I'll lie on my back
while you scratch my belly, like we've been here all along.
Good plans go awry, sometimes, even good intentions
of little boys and dogs, undone by little things
like blackberry stains and red clay dried between bare toes.

Charles Norman attributes his storytelling to his grandmother, who told him tales of pioneer life in Texas, where he spent his early years. Serving a life sentence in Florida prisons, Norman won a MENSA scholarship that allowed him to continue his college education. Norman joined the PEN American Center Prison Writing Program in 1985, at the urging of a teacher who encouraged his writing talents. He has won numerous writing awards for short stories, memoirs, plays, and poetry. Most recently, PEN awarded Norman a prize in poetry for 2010.