Fall 1987

Just Before the Dutch Elm Disease

Gerald Shapiro

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss29/26

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
My parents were married for thirty-two years. It was a terrible marriage, made all the worse because it was so long. I can't say with any honesty or accuracy when it was that I figured out their marriage was awful, but during the summer I turned nine there was something that stands out in my mind as a flash of sickening recognition. Perhaps I'd known, or had intimations, before then; I was, after all, a thoughtful kid, a good listener. And our house was small — I'd heard plenty of yelling from time to time. But that summer the dimensions of their marriage, its crumbling outline, floated into view. I turned my head away, as my parents must have themselves (they stayed married until I was twenty-four) but the impression had burned a hole in me, like a dot you see when you shut your eyes.

We lived in Kansas City. As in many Midwestern towns, city fathers there a hundred years ago were obsessed with planting trees — an effort to recreate the great forests of the East, where most of them had come from. My block, like many in the city, was full of trees. In my yard alone, there were two oaks, standing like watchtowers at the back corners of the lot, plus an elm, a peach tree, a pear tree, an apple, and a cherry. We climbed in them, my brother and I — we swung from them, built forts among their branches, snoozed away hot Missouri afternoons in the shade of their leaves.

All over Kansas City, elms were predominant — American elms, most of them, old and towering things, vase-shaped, luxuriant and stately, some of them a hundred feet tall. In summer, their graceful, leafy limbs bent down over streets and boulevards like dark green canopies, lending an air of grandeur even to sleepy middle-class neighborhoods like mine.

When the leaves began to turn their autumn colors, they brought the whole river valley to fire; it was something to see. I remember raking leaves with my brother every few days after school. We'd arrange them into giant, haphazard piles in the yard, then take turns leaping into the piles, throwing ourselves headlong into those peculiar, crunchy pillows. Then we'd rake up the mess and wait for my father to come home; he'd set the piles on fire and we would stand together, the three of us, our fists on our hips, inhaling the pungent smell of the burning leaves, the tang of which I've now forgotten.

For my father, the child of immigrants, born and raised in tenements far away from Kansas City, these moments in the yard, presiding over a plume of fragrant smoke, the essence of our foliage, must have been especially sweet. They constituted a ritual of the homeowner, the fruit of the G.I. Bill. This was his first house, the only one he'd ever owned — in fact, the only one he'd ever lived in. He never really felt comfortable with the finer points of home maintenance, and was more likely to call a professional than to attempt to fix anything himself. But the burning of autumn leaves he could do. I remember very clearly looking up at him as we stood in the yard. We never said anything. The moments were too satisfying to ruin with speech.

But then when I was ten, the Dutch elm disease came to town. City crews drove slowly from street to street, painting red X's on the trees. And within two years, most of the elms were gone.
On a sunny Saturday that summer I turned nine, the Kansas City Athletics were playing the Cleveland Indians at old Municipal Stadium. My father was working a half day, doing quarterly returns for some of his clients. My best friend, Brian, was on vacation with his whole family, and my brother was away at Scout Camp. Normally one of them might have gone to the game with me — in fact, I'd never gone, or even thought of going, by myself. But this Saturday I awoke full of that hunger for independence that occasionally sweeps over boys about to be nine. Given the chance, I might have gone to Paris. As it was, I went downstairs and announced to my mother very gravely that I felt perfectly capable of getting myself down to the game and back again in fine shape. I ticked off my qualifications: I was reliable, intelligent, good with money, and I never, ever got lost.

We bargained: an extra hour of violin practice the following week, plus an extra dose of Hebrew school homework. And a kiss. This last item was the toughest; for reasons I've now forgotten, that year I'd stopped kissing anyone, period. It had become a matter of principle with me. But Mudcat Grant was scheduled to pitch that day for the Indians, and so a kiss — just a fast, dry one — wasn't going to hold me up.

Mudcat Grant was a young fireballing righthander, with a wide, placid, brown moon face. He was going up against a Kansas City lefty named Bud Something-or-Other, who I remember had one arm longer than the other — his claim to fame. Bud was Kansas City's hero that season because somehow he put together sixteen wins, a club record. The A's were, as always, pathetic that year, locked in a fierce battle for last place with the Washington Senators. Cleveland, on the other hand, was making a mid-season run at the Chicago White Sox. Although it was the A's I rooted for in my heart of hearts, it was the Indians I really wanted to see. I explained all of this to my mother, throwing information at her, barraging her with magical names like Rocky Colavito, Tito Francona, and Minnie Minoso; I hit her with earned run averages, home run totals, and anything else I could remember from my baseball card collection. I think as much as anything, she agreed to let me go in order to shut me up.

I left the house around noon, money securely in my pocket, my A's cap square on my head. I was giddy, buzzing with a sense of myself as a person independent of my family for the first time. I walked down to the Paseo, a broad and beautiful boulevard running the length of Kansas City — at least the length of the city as it was twenty-five or more years ago — from north to south. At that time the Paseo still had its streetcar line, with old green cars left over from an earlier day. Their seats were cracked wine-colored leather, with horsehair stuffing peeking through. They had dusty wooden floors and peeling paint. The fare was a dime.

At the corner where I boarded the streetcar there were small, neat, undernourished frame houses on the Paseo, very much like the one we lived in. Mixed in among these were big old craggy houses made of native stone and brick, with many chimneys poking up through their gabled roofs. Their porches were wide and shaded and looked cool; their lawns sloped down to the boulevard, immaculate as putting greens. I wanted very much to live in one of them, I remember. In those houses life had a different quality, I felt certain — perhaps it was supported more completely by those hardwood floors, surrounded more securely by the thickness, the solidity of those brick and stone walls. There was a reliable placidity there unlike the tense atmosphere of my own home. In those giant houses there was excess, a surplus of everything. They were fat and timeless; they dated back to a time
when everything was different, when my parents were squawling infants in crowded cold-water tenement flats, when this neighborhood of south Kansas City would have seemed more pasture than city — when the Athletics were still in Philadelphia, managed by that great gentleman of the game, Mr. Connie Mack.

I thought about those houses as the streetcar travelled north. I coveted them — or rather coveted something about them that I could not name.

At Brush Creek Boulevard, less than a mile north of where I'd boarded, two women got on the streetcar and sat down across the aisle, one row in front of me. They could have sat almost anywhere — the car was rather empty. They were young, in their late twenties, I imagine, judging from my memory of their outfits and their hair, though at the time they seemed quite old to me — younger than my mother, but still grown-ups.

If they noticed me at all, I doubt they saw in me the self-reliant adventurer I felt myself to be that day, but rather a dark-eyed little boy in a baseball cap who stared at them under his bill as they walked down the aisle. One of them — she looked vaguely familiar, although I couldn’t remember where I might have seen her — wore her blouse tied up under her ribcage, with a big knot over her midriff. Her pedal pushers were a bright shade of blue that caught my eye. Both of them wore red lipstick, and had their hair cut short, like Shirley MacLaine in “The Apartment.”

I stared at them a moment longer, then turned my face back to the window, counting telephone poles.

The one with the knotted blouse sat next to the window. The two of them were giggling about something, not saying anything, just breaking up into short, pallid bursts of laughter every few breaths. It didn’t sound like real laughter — there was something strained about it, awkward and unpleasant. Finally the other one said, “So what’s his name again?”

“I told you,” the woman next to the window said. “Sam.”

My ears picked up instinctively, and I stopped counting telephone poles. Sam was my father’s name; I’d never known any other Sams, and the name had always meant “father” to me.

“I still can’t believe it,” the other woman said. She shook her head. “Honestly.” They both started laughing again. One of them was wearing perfume, and its flowery odor was beginning to make me ill. I tried to open my window, but its old and rusted latches were stuck solid.

“Do you want to see a picture of him?” the woman next to the window asked. “I’ve got one with me. He’s a dreamboat.” I remember very clearly hearing the word “dreamboat” and being suddenly sure that the Sam she’d mentioned couldn’t be my father — that no one would ever refer to him as a dreamboat, that therefore everything was all right, that the vague uneasiness I’d felt a moment before had been groundless.

I heard her open her purse; it made a tiny, unmistakable metallic click. She sighed once or twice as she picked her way through the purse. Finally she held something up, and said, “There!”

As she passed the picture over to her friend, I caught a glimpse of it — not a very clear look, just a flash, really — then her friend snatched it away and poured over it out of my sight.

I’d seen enough, though. I knew the picture. I’d taken it with my little Brownie, the year before, on the dock next to a rented cabin at the Lake of the Ozarks. I’d gone snapshot crazy with it, recording cracks in the sidewalk, earthworms, anything that would stand still for a minute. The photos came back from the camera
shop with serrated edges and wide white borders — every one of them, to my eye, a work of art.

"He’s such a dear," the woman next to the window said. I tried to move my arms, but they were like wooden blocks occupying the seat with me. I felt a terrifying need to take in air, as though out of nowhere I’d found myself buried in sand. I could think of nothing.

"I just don’t see how you can do it, that’s all," the other woman said.

"Look, sometimes you just do something, okay? Everything isn’t always the way your folks told you it was going to be, you know what I mean?"

"I don’t know. I just don’t," the other one said.

The streetcar stopped at the next corner to let on some passengers, and I suddenly found the strength to scramble out of my seat. My legs were numb, and I had to hold on to the backs of the seats as I made my way stumbling up the aisle to the mid-car doors. I remember listening to the squeak of my sneakers rubbing against the dusty wooden floor, knowing that as long as I was squeaking, I was still moving forward.

I tried to regain control of my legs as I stood in the door, but then panicked at the thought of hesitating, then being trapped in the streetcar for another block or two. I pitched myself out the open doors, missing the two steps that led to the ground, and landed on a strip of lawn which ran between the sidewalk and the curb. The streetcar took off, its awkward, shuddering acceleration and clacking wheels echoing in me down to my bones.

The air was fragrant and not yet humid. I sat there for a moment or two, my legs spread out wide in front of me; I stared at my sneakers, at the knots in their laces, at the grass stains along their rubber edges, at the round insignias on their sides. I breathed deeply.

I can remember certain moments of that day more vividly, more intensely than I can remember events of an hour ago. I can recall exactly the route I took. First I crossed the Paseo, stopping in the middle of the median strip to get a drink from one of the giant water fountains which dotted the boulevard every two blocks or so, like enormous buttons. Two years earlier I’d finally managed to take a drink without being hoisted up by my brother. (My first solo slurp had ended up more on my t-shirt than in my mouth, but I felt as though I’d conquered the Matterhorn, nevertheless.) Now I could sip from the fountains casually, having grown a bit. The water, sharp and cool, was a welcome shock to my system.

I walked north along the boulevard and turned west at Gilliam Road. There was an apartment building there, where a friend of mine from Hebrew school lived. He was the only person I knew who lived in an apartment. His parents were immigrants, refugees from Europe, small, dark people with tattooed numbers on their arms. I always felt vaguely sorry for him, for having such small parents, and for having to live in an apartment, instead of having a yard with trees. The thought crossed my mind that I might stop and ring his doorbell, say hello — but then I realized that I would have to explain my presence in his neighborhood, and that would mean I would have to confess that there was something terribly wrong. And that was something I wasn’t willing to do, wasn’t able to do, not even in a whisper — not even in silence, to myself.

I had lunch at Sidney’s on the Plaza, then spent the afternoon at the public library there, where I sat reading a Landmark book about the Wright brothers. It was a wonderful book. They fixed bicycles together and lived in Ohio, which wasn’t far from Missouri. They called each other “Orv” and “Wilb,” and I couldn’t wait to
tell my brother about that, as soon as he came home from camp, so that we could make nicknames for each other and start using them. I wanted us to start fixing bicycles, too, and figured I would start by taking mine apart the next morning and then seeing if I could put it back together. I would be a humble bicycle repairman. That was what I would be. A humble bicycle repairman who would never get married, never, and who would invent fantastic machines which would change the course of history.

I took the Troost bus home about five-thirty that afternoon, when the sun was still high and there wasn’t even a hint of evening in the air. My mother was getting a brisket ready for the oven when I got home. She asked who had won the game, and I stood still, staring at her for a moment, not knowing what in the world she was talking about. My head was still swimming in Wright brothers joy.

“This Mudcat Grant — the colored fellow — did he do all right?” she asked.

That reeled me in. I sat down heavily in a chair at the kitchen table. “It was good,” I said. I couldn’t think of anything to say. All I could think of were the many things which were unsayable. I started at my hands, which lay splayed on the yellow fomica tabletop.

My mother stopped slicing a carrot into a pan, put down her knife, and wiped her hands on a towel. “So who won?” she repeated.

“I — I’m not sure. I left before it ended. I think it was tied, maybe.” I peeled a scrap of fried egg off the table.

“You think,” she said, and made a disapproving, clucking sound. “My dream-boy,” she said.

I nodded and tried to smile. On the way upstairs to my room I left the change from the money she’d given me that morning on the dining room table, being careful to hold out the extra two dollars the ticket to the game would have cost. Later, I went out into the early twilight of the backyard and climbed up into the elm tree, where I kept my duplicate baseball cards — extra Mantles, Berras, Haddoxes, et al. — stashed in a series of discarded Band-Aid cans. My brother kept his Mad magazines up there, and I leafed through a couple of them now, wishing he could come home from camp soon.

When dinner was ready, I sat at the table with my mother, picking at my brisket. I ate my carrots and my potatoes and drank my milk; I put my peas in a straight line, then in a circle. My mother told me my father would be home late; he was doing some tax work for Bert, the auto shop man, in exchange for some repairs to the Ford, she explained.

When night came it seemed to descend with frightening speed; we’d begun our dinner in late twilight, but by the time we were done, I walked into the living room to find it plunged into darkness. Most nights I would have begged to stay up another hour, but tonight I felt exhausted — more tired than I’d ever been in my life — and so I called out to my mother that I was on my way upstairs to bed.

“Dad’ll come up and kiss you goodnight when he gets home,” she said. She came out into the living room, and stood there in the dark with me.

“I’ll be asleep already,” I said. “He’ll get home too late, he’ll wake me up.”

She was silent a moment. “I thought you liked being woken up by your Dad,” she said softly, and reached out to stroke my hair.

I didn’t say anything. She kissed my head and said shluf gezunt — sleep well — and whispered something else, something unintelligible, a soft, sweet nothing I carried up the stairs with me in the dark.

Gerald Shapiro