

THE PAST

By Verna Kwiatkowski, who, when reading The Red Wheelbarrow by William Carlos Williams (© 1962), heard it more as an assignment than as a poem. "The Past is my answer to the supposed assignment: 'Write a poem that begins with these words.' The Red Wheelbarrow is quoted in its entirety in the first two lines," Verna says. The reference to the Rear Guard is in the Bible in Isaiah 52:12 and 58:8. A Sky View poem.

"So much depends upon a red wheelbarrow
Glazed with rain water beside the white chickens,"
He thought as he neared his childhood home,
Hoping to see again the white rooster and two hens
That served primarily as functional doorstops,
And secondarily as his playmates and friends.
What fun he'd had creating games for them!
His creative nature was on display even then!

The red wheelbarrow carried a different story.
On his eighth birthday, there it was! Oh, glory!
The greatest thing about it? It was NOT a toy,
But a piece of farm equipment, sized to fit a boy!
He felt so manly working with his daddy in the fields,
Wheeling home to Mother whatever the garden yields.
His family moved to the farm when he was seven.
It was a happy, healthy life – maybe a taste of heaven!

Then when he was only nine, his dear daddy died,
Killed in a tragic accident. Mother and son both cried,
Silently understanding that they'd have to sell the farm;
They couldn't run it without Daddy and his vital charm.
Soon they were packing, returning to their former life.
Maybe this time there would be less stress and strife!
"Only take what's necessary to our apartment in the city,"
Mother said. "No need for barrow or doorstops, what a pity!"

At once his mind devised a plan to keep them all together.
If they missed him, he thought, they'll comfort one another.
Clutching the chickens, he ran from house to barnyard
Where he got the barrow, wet with rain – this was hard! –
And tucked them into a corner of the barn out of sight,
Not knowing until later how much he'd grown that night!
In time the years on the farm took on a kind of magic,
Yet he never went back to the place that was also tragic.

Forty years had passed when he saw an advertisement
That filled him as he read, with increasing amazement,
About the farm and its contents, soon scheduled to be sold
At a public auction. "All invited!" it said, though, truth be told,
It felt like a personal invitation that he could no longer ignore.
That's why today, in keen anticipation, he shut the car door

And began a magical journey that was just about to end,
For he was sure the farm would appear just around the bend.

There it was! Following instructions about where to park,
He opened the car door behind the barn, anxious to embark
On the next phase of his adventure! This was feeling good –
A mature man standing where his younger self once stood!
He took a few deep, calming breaths, then started out at last
To learn from, appreciate, and maybe understand The Past.
But first things first! He wanted to meet the owners of the farm,
Which, while thoroughly modernized, still retained its charm!

He arrived early for just this purpose, and on the sidewalk
Outside the house, he found them! Easily they began to talk.
He told them about the chickens and the small wheelbarrow
He had hidden in the barn. “We found them in a place so narrow
We could hardly get them out! And it left us with a question –
Why did you hide the doorstops? Was it for their protection?”
They asked with genuine interest. They wouldn’t have guessed
He saw them not as doorstops, but as friends, ’til he confessed!

“Are you sad to leave the farm?” he asked, and they both said No.
“We practice living in The Present, and this is the day we must go,”
She explained. “We are leaving on a high; this day is so exciting,
And the place where we are moving is tremendously inviting!
The farm was the scene of many highs, and yes, some lows, too,
But it is in The Past now, and our Rear Guard knows what to do
When The Past comes up to harm us. We heard a preacher say:
The Past is a good place to visit, but it’s not a place for us to stay!”

The owners had to leave him then: the sale would soon be starting.
“Please feel free to look around,” they said as they were parting.
He took them at their word, and went throughout the house and barn
Where memories swept over him like an expert storyteller’s yarn!
On a table displayed with items for sale he found just one white hen,
Looking like a well-used doorstop, not a long-lost friend. And then
He spied the red wheelbarrow! That’s funny, it was dry, and yet
Every time he had thought about it, the barrow was always wet!

At the start of his trip he had no idea what he’d be bringing back.
Would sentimentality cause him to buy more than he could pack
In the car? Now he knew he didn’t need to buy ANY childhood relic
To remember the farm, which, in itself, was neither magic nor tragic!
This was proven at the sale, he thought, recalling how he’d smiled
When he saw the barrow, now barely red, being pushed by a child!
Something important had happened that day; later on he would see
That his childhood had been normal. The Past was setting him free!

EPILOGUE

In retrospect, he saw he HAD brought something back from the farm.
It was a fresh way of looking at life, one that he viewed without alarm
Because the owners, who taught it to him, also showed it was true!
At peace with the past; unafraid of the future; savoring this day, too –
He wanted to live as they did! So he created a picture in his mind
Of his Rear Guard standing close to his back, handling what's behind.
It was his Rear Guard who had sent him to the farm! It didn't seem odd
When he found out that Rear Guard is one of the many names for God!

© April, 2015 (March 28 - April 14, 2015)
Verna Kwiatkowski

www.vernakwiatkowski.com