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Momma's Eyes

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The other day, in a fit of unhealthy, but well-intended, house-cleaning exuberance, I happened to knock my Momma's picture off the wall. Not only that, but it turns out that I ruined the Magic Hanging Gizmo on the back of the frame. So now Momma's picture sits in the kitchen on a chair, her eyes staring straight over the table every time I enter the room. Those eyes.

The picture was taken by one of my relatives on 14 September 1985, the afternoon before Momma died of metastatic cancer at the Fancy Hospital in San Diego. Hospital? It always seemed to me, when I visited with my little girl, more like a psychiatric ward. "Don't worry, you only think you're dying." But the camera caught Momma in an interesting moment. Her head covered with a scarf to hide the effects of the noxious "chemotherapy" (isn't it fascinating how we buy into such concepts?), she was staring out the window of her little apartment in La Jolla.

Sharlyn Lee Kinney
17 April 1934 - 15 September 1985

She was, in fact, staring at a squirrel which was bounding about on the fence outside her window. I do not think that she was thinking about the poetry of Wallace Stevens at the time (one of her favorite poets), nor do I think she was reflecting upon the vicissitudes of graduate school life (she had graduated from Rutgers at 40 with a straight-A record, and now was enrolled at the University of San Diego in its poetry program). No, I think she was simply looking at a squirrel. One squirrel in a life of hundreds of squirrels. Yet is that not life for you? You study at math and language and technology and whatnot and whatbe, yet in the end you are puzzled by the way a squirrel dances across your fence outside.

Maybe that's the way God intended things to be. Maybe? Of course He did. Just as He plopped the daughter of a six-foot-eight Texan down in lil' ole Olive, California (which no longer exists, having been swallowed by miles of "industrial parks").

Now I'm going to wrap all this up in one blazing metaphoric, and brilliant, analysis about, as Brother Dave would say, "somethang or ruther." Or maybe not. Perhaps, like the Wallace Stevens' poem I read at her funeral, our time on earth is better spent measuring our hours their solitude. Now, if you've never read a poem at your Momma's grave site, let me tell you that it's a bit difficult. A bit revealing as well. Nevertheless, I read Stevens' poem, for I knew that she loved it (as I did also): The Idea of Order at Key West. It's a hefty little piece, both in length and in meaning, but allow me to quote the part I read:

She sang beyond the genius of the sea...

The sea was not a mask. No more was she.
The song and water were not medleyed sound
Even if what she sang was what she heard.
Since what she sang was uttered word by word.
It may be that in all her phrases stirred
The grinding water and the gasping wind;
But it was she and not the sea we heard.

For she was the maker of the song she sang.
The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea
Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.
Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew
It was the spirit that we sought and knew
That we should ask this often as she sang.

If it was only the dark voice of the sea
That rose, or even colored by many waves;
If it was only the outer voice of sky
And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,
However clear, it would have been deep air,
The heaving speech of air, a summer sound
Repeated in a summer without end
And sound alone. But it was more than that,
More even than her voice, and ours, among
The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,
Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped
On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres
Of sky and sea.
It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
She measured to the hour its solitude.
She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
As we beheld her striding there alone,

Knew that there never was a world for her

Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

As I read those words, my best friend, Bobby, and my sister, Alison (who would die four years later), stood by a tree, watching me. I wondered at the time if there were anyone who understood those words the way Momma did. Poetry tends to confuse folks, don't it? But I understood. And I understood why Momma understood.

"Our Dixie has eyes, just like my Momma's eyes that stare so importunately over my kitchen chair. The eyes of Dixie are the eyes through which those of us born into Southern families see the whole of Creation. We do not see the brown crowded tenements of Detroit, nor the slag heap of East LA. Born into our Southern families we see the promise of what could have been and what shall be. We see hot cornbread in a black skillet, and our Momma's hands quickly moving in the last of the day's light. We see a graveyard in the old Indian Territory, with our Confederate kin asleep in God's mercy at last."

She was indeed the maker of the song she sang. And then some. Her song, unfortunately, was brief and tragic. Her four children were taken from her (me included) when she was in her early twenties. Why? Well, that's a question that no one has ever answered to my satisfaction. It was the late 1950s, and Momma had been "out"; out too late perhaps. The cops were called. Strange women in police uniforms (social workers?) hovered about before taking us all to Childrens' Jail. Mistakes were made. She sang the song she had made, and I, at four years of age, stared out of my own window, one with bars to shield the moon from my eyes. Lesson One: All four-year-olds should have a momma.

Then she married a Yankee and moved to New Jersey. Oh, it's not as bad as it seems, perhaps. He was actually a decent fellow, and he gave Momma a place to light. He also introduced me to seegars (and that is the correct spelling for you Yankees who might be wondering). It was merely a place by which she walked to sing. But instead of changing her life around, as one might have anticipated, she instead dove headlong into what Matthew Arnold called "the buried life." (Another poet!) The buried life is simply the standard life that most of us seem to live out. Neither truly alive nor truly comatose. Washing those dishes, gassing up the car, shopping for meaningless bits of things that, ultimately, we shall never be allowed to enjoy, for the simple reason that, as Jesus pointed out, we are not of this world. It turns out that ole Stevens was right about that "tragic-gestured sea" bit.

Whose spirit was this? I asked often in my own life. And feeling her eyes upon me in the kitchen this afternoon, I understood something important (at least to me). Everything we do on this earth, everything we read, everything we think, all of it, leads us to our own song, for we are the maker of that song. In ancient Greek, the word for poetry (*poiesis*) is "a making." We are about our "business", whatever it may be, making the world, making our experience of it, into our own. Meanwhile, God smiles and has His way, and one day tucks us under His arms and says, "Now, what exactly were you thinking?" (And God always has a southeastern Oklahoma accent by the way. A Choctaw sort of God.)

I am a year-and-a-half away from the age at which Momma died. Caught myself thinking that a lot recently. I've wondered, as many of you have of yourselves, what kind of life I have been "making." I'm guessing that, overall, I've done fairly well. Not perfect, of course, but nevertheless I've seen what lies beneath the foolishness we traipse through daily. I've loved deeply, lost even more deeply, and am not afraid to lose more. I've written my words, sung my songs, painted, danced, fathered.

Those eyes, back to Momma's picture, reminded me today of how much time we waste in little endeavors. We squeak on and on about the New World Order, and rightly so, but neglect our own world order. We prattle of righteousness, but seldom do

the right thing, content to let the Machina Mundi twirl outside on our fence.

Which leads me to think about the oft-mentioned "Southern Movement," a phrase that, for me, is coterminous with the word "freedom." There is something about our beloved Dixie, despite its rusting wrecks in Northern Florida backyards, despite its obnoxious Yankee tourists (or worse, residents), despite its prostrate socioeconomic woes, and despite its kudzu, that makes her more alive, more beautiful, than anything else we can think of. Our Dixie is not the Dixie of Morris Dees and his hate-mongers. Our Dixie is not the Dixie of fat-faced Jesse Jackson, out for one more scam at the expense of the South. Our Dixie is not all the lies we have been told about her.

> *It was her voice that made*
> *The sky acutest at its vanishing.*

It is the voice of Dixie, calling from Blue Mountain, Mississippi, or the Indian Territory, or the Appalachians, that makes our sky "acutest at its vanishing". It is the love of a free people for a free land, the remembrance of a Patrick Henry or a George Washington, or the awareness of a place more home than "home" (and I was born on the Left Coast). Our Dixie is not the South of Hollywood. It is not *O Brother, Where Art Thou*? It is not Tennessee Williams (thank the Lord).

Our Dixie has eyes, just like my Momma's eyes that stare so importunately over my kitchen chair. The eyes of Dixie are the eyes through which those of us born into Southern families see the whole of Creation. We do not see the brown crowded tenements of Detroit, nor the slag heap of East LA. Born into our Southern families we see the promise of what could have been and what shall be. We see hot cornbread in a black skillet, and our Momma's hands quickly moving in the last of the day's light. We see a graveyard in the old Indian Territory, with our Confederate kin asleep in God's mercy at last.

Because we have this Southern sight, this insider's knowing about what makes those hills and seas and forests move and breathe; because we were born into freedom even though that freedom now melts like shortening on a hot stove; because we were born of God's Country, we see Dixie for what she is: a moonlit swimming hole, white beaches baking on an island off of Georgia, the far spires of the Smokies, and even a squirrel dancing on a wooden fence. And like the sea of which Stevens spoke, Dixie is no mask, but the place and the history of a place and the story of the people who lived there.

Dixie is the story of a Texan named Michael Kinney who moved to California and married a Scottish woman, Catherine MacDonald (of Donald MacDonald). Dixie is the story of their daughter, Sharlyn Lee Kinney, my Momma. And Dixie is the story of her son, who can no more forget the land of his family than his Momma's eyes.

Dixie is us.

The opinions, claims and assertions expressed in this article are those of the author and may not reflect the views of the Fire Eater!

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