

My Father, Son of a Printer

by Sharon Cusick

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My father saved words. At first there being few readers at home to impress, he lifted poems from the printer's bench into his memory. A small boy of aged parents and adult brothers, he grew, deftly drew reusable upper- and lowercase symbols from his father's, his brother's wooden frames of metal type. Born to it, he fingered each section of the familial drawers, composing mirror images of his findings, his questions.

Puzzling each context and sense, reconsidering each word, he restored the cleaned metal pieces, sorting them into their spaces. When he began to compose his own meanings in that required, necessarily reflective order, it was right-to left, backwards. And all the while, he was foraging book pages left-to-right, categorizing authors alphabetically, as well, and extending his shelves.

I grew up to the sounds of a series of my father's typewriters, to the dings of right margin bells alerting me to rough leftward tugs of carriage levers that started new lines of his words. His fingers moved continually up and down, as he swiftly tapped individual keys, thus swinging corresponding hammers up to press characters against the inked ribbon, which all the while seemed to me so slowly reeling one way, but proceeding quickly

another, relative to the paper. Up and down, up and down, faster than my eyes could follow to the right. Click, click, click, ding... Reel. Shift left.

I loved my father's literary ways more than I then knew-- his seemingly unlimited resources and resourcefulness, his library walls-- the British writers on my left, as I scanned the titles, the American writers on my right. I advanced in assembling my own sentences, suffering my father's long responses to simple questions. Sometimes I dreaded my need to inquire. But I loved lounging after school, listening to his recordings of words-- Kipling's *forty thousand million Boots...movin' up and down again*, or Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi":

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again. But set down
This set down*

Mornings he left so early that it was still night to me. Years of sheets of words that he'd edited thundered through presses, tumbled into streets and were distributed at busy corners; were folded and tossed by hands of young carriers, bicycling at dawn; were read simultaneously in untold city houses much like mine, or in distant subways, or highrising offices, or prairie kitchens. Were recycled.

At the last, he still wrote, but electronically, keying his words by the fluorescence of cathode ray tubes-- "CRTs," he called them. Codes for an

emerging self-made “spellcheck” and itemized examples of epistolary style slipped to the floor. Extended continuous-form, perforated printer paper, longitudinally-punched along the edges, spilled from his office into a hallway, and, pushed along by the momentum, zigzagged into the future. Their accordion folds fall yet softly into place...

When I moved away, 60 years ago now, articulate, reliable, typed letters followed me. Long ones. Caring.

For all the years of my early life, by his own hand and in ink, before he walked to the bus in the dark, and while I was still sleeping, my father hand-wrote messages for my mother. A fresh one always remained on the kitchen table with breakfast, his pen still beside it: “4 a.m. Dear Marion, Just leaving. Weather sharp. 37°.....” I imagine now, sometimes, so many of his square notes-- or fragments, accumulated and still accumulating; fluttering and alive in that far kitchen; piling up somewhere immediately familiar to me and real in my dreams; each scrap ever newly-scripted with his simple ending then: “...I love you.”

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again. But set down
This set down*

This. Now.