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Unspoken

We’re doing 70 on 95 south of Rocky Mount.

A solitary glow rises through the dusk: Café Risque,

folk art hanging flat against an orange sky.

Aging pickups lurk beneath the neon come-ons,

drawn by grunted rhythms of the night. The old asymmetry

drives the Café pulse: her trade on wasting charms against

the strut, the call and dwindle, hard cash, the always more

replacing those now spent. Rocky Mountain big horn sheep,

ewes at play on cliff walls, their dancing legs,

the watching rams. On the edge, where it’s risky,

where hope hovers like a cloud, their luck may run.

Greg McBride
Thin Ties

We visit when we want, or don’t, rummage in a dank boxcar, freight stacked high: chests and shelves full of mother-voices, first slow dances, first ocean’s wave. The train stands at our hometown station like the circus that comes and stays till the dramas still, the great tents fall. We enter the clouded dim of the boxcars through murky desire into a chilly detachment where shadows shelter the shame of junior high, absurdly thin ties, wrecked cars and loves, long-lived echoes not found with the fallen and the broken mixed on the straw-strewn floor beyond our will: the baby’s scent, the stride of a wartime friend. What is the shelf life of her prom-night smile? Her hint of dimple—I could write a book. And there’s a teammate and the slippered shoes, and the mat, its reeking sweat and blood. There’s no climate control, so no visit’s as vivid as the last, or fast, as colors fade, clean lines fracture, and life releases as slowly, once the air brakes blow, as steel wheels ache into motion, tie by tie. We don’t forget; there’s only the stagnant forgetting and the smooth-railed roadbed chasing west toward forgotten, till one day we stand finally stripped, waving goodbye in the withered roar of the parting train.
Author Notes

The 2008 recipient of the Boulevard Magazine Emerging Poet prize, Greg McBride’s poems, essays, and reviews appear in, or are forthcoming from, Bellevue Literary Review, Connecticut Review, Gettysburg Review, Hollins Critic, Poet Lore, Salmagundi, Southeast Review, Southern Indiana Review, and elsewhere. His poetry manuscript, “Back of the Envelope,” was runner-up for the 2008 Portlandia Prize, and his poem, “First Rites,” was a finalist for the 2007 Guy Owen Prize and will appear in the June 2008 issue of Southern Poetry Review. Three times nominated for a Pushcart Prize, he began writing after a 30-year legal career and now edits The Innisfree Poetry Journal, consults on transportation issues, and works as a freelance editor. The father of three and grandfather of five, he lives in Silver Spring, Maryland, with his wife Lois, also a writer.

About the Work

Perhaps because I came to creative writing relatively late—in my mid-50s—I find myself returning again and again to that near-lifetime of experiences that resulted in the series of selves I was who influence the way I now experience the world in its daily unfolding. Not that I haven’t written other kinds of poems, but the great majority are driven by or arise from memory. The question is always whether the resulting poem successfully transcends the narrative that gave it birth; if not, a story or essay might better suit the material. It does seem to me that poets write the poems they feel driven to write, those in which the poet has an emotional investment. That’s what I do; sometimes it works.

So I’m often mining memory. As the son of a career Army officer, I was moved about the U.S. and overseas constantly throughout my childhood—six months here, a year there, two years here, and so on; accordingly, life events for me are placed squarely within a chunk of remembered space. I think those associations of place have allowed me to keep alive events from my youngest years, though sometimes only in the faintest of memories.

Examples are the poems I’ve written about the adventure of crossing the Pacific on a troop ship late in 1947 with my mother and infant sister when I was about two and a half. We were joining my father, who was there as part of the post-war occupation force in Japan. That trip made such an impression that I have to believe some of what I remember actually happened. Even if it did not, by now the memories possess their own authenticity for me, as well as the power, sixty years later, to fire my imagination with a plenitude of sensations—the creak and groan of the ship, the goony birds and their calls, the endless skies, the deck shifting beneath our feet, the metallic quality of our cramped cabin, and so on. One poem, “The Occupation,” which appears online in the spring 2008 issue of Valparaiso Poetry Review, builds on a few remembered sensations as our ship docked in Yokohama. The bulk of this and the other poems is pure imagination, but imagination fired by tantalizing fragments of the remembered sensations of a two-and-a-half year old and, of course, the embellishments added unconsciously over the years in retelling the story to myself. To some never-to-be-determined extent, what I end up with are memories of memories.

Which leads me to the two poems in this issue of Ségue: “Thin Ties” and “Unspoken.” The first is a poem about memories, the way we revisit them, the way they dim. There is a romance to
memory, much of it seen through rose-colored glasses. Even the horrors, with the passage of time, can soften somewhat, and our fear or regret can abate. With time, we can view failures and successes with some equanimity and place them within the larger context of all that lived experience now behind us. I for one am thankful for this process, as I’m prone to beating myself up for my boneheaded miscues for a very long time. For many of us, especially those of my generation and earlier, there is also romance in railroading. No doubt my use of the railroad as a trope for this poem arose from the fifteen years I served as an attorney with the Federal Railroad Administration, which occasioned riding the trains or trudging through rail yards with trackmen, carmen, brakemen, and engineers, all of whom delighted in passing on the lore and stories of railroading.

“Unspoken” arose from a memory of more recent vintage. Our older son lives with his family in Charleston, SC, nine to ten hours from our home in the Washington, DC, area. Lois and I happily make that trip two or three times a year to spend time with our grandchildren, Lynsey and Douglas, as well as their parents. Going and coming, the trip can be arduous, but we perk up as we near the stretch on I95 just south of Rocky Mount, North Carolina. Billboards begin to make announcements such as are rarely seen elsewhere on the interstate highway system: “Girls, Girls, Girls!” and “We Dare to Bare!” and “Topless, Topless, Topless!” Then comes a clearing to the east, and clinging to a gentle blacktopped slope, surrounded by a phalanx of pickups and SUVs, there’s a squat, windowless building topped by a large neon sign: “Café Risqué.” Sometimes a poem comes from nothing more than an image. This was one of those times. While Café Risqué seems to be a cultural marker of a particular part of today’s America, I remember similar redoubts in Southeast Asia in the 60’s. Probably as a result of the strait-laced, repressive home environment in which I grew up, such scenes have enormous emotional content for me, and that’s what I was responding to in writing this poem. For me, there’s a sadness, a kind of desperate tawdriness in that manufactured atmosphere, one that thrives by capitalizing on our needs and drives.

As for craft, there’s not a lot to say. I do not have a literary education, though I read widely, in part to compensate. These were both among my early poems, perhaps that’s why the term “folk art” found its way into “Unspoken.” I think of it as an example of folk, or naïve, art in which I wanted to capture the mood of passing an arresting scene at high speed and the associations, in the silence of the closed-window car, that scene might engender and the assumptions that might underlie the narrator’s perceptions. “Thin Ties” was also a piece of mood writing in which I sought to concretize the subject of memory itself by accessing an objective correlative, railroading, that arose from my own experience.

One thing I love about mining memory is that it can lead to unexpected results. Several years ago, I began doodling about my athletic career, a significant part of my life as a boy, hoping a poem might come of it. Many words later, however, I had a 5,000 word essay, “Wrestling through the Ages,” which appeared in The Gettysburg Review in 2003. I wrote it without doing any research, relying instead on forty-year old memories. What’s remarkable is how indelibly a peak experience can inscribe itself in memory.

And so to the question: Why poetry? I first note that I love to write prose, which strikes me as akin to a construction project: laying a foundation, hoisting joists, framing walls, etc. As a lawyer, I most enjoyed the challenge of constructing a written argument in such a way that it won both for the style of its presentation and the overall effect it achieved in the real world. I was one of those lawyers who take pride in the well-written brief or memorandum of opinion. For others, oral
argument was most rewarding. It seems me that it’s not until one grapples in writing with the nuances of how facts and theoretical arguments come together that one can have real confidence in the analysis underlying the positions being espoused. It’s the life of the craftsman whose material has intellectual heft.

Poetry, on the other hand, dwells in the land of sensation, of feeling. When my wife gave me my first book of poems, Mark Strand’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Blizzard of One*, I read it straight through, then immediately read it again. I was totally swept away, not that I could explain why to anyone. I felt compelled to read the poems over and over and to read them aloud to my wife. It was a feeling. I had the sense of new ways of seeing, that new worlds, or levels of being, were being disclosed and that, the way one peels an onion, they exist one within the other. This was not an intellectual response.

I wanted to do that. And I’m still trying.

**Greg McBride on the Web**

[www.homepage.mac.com/gregmcbride](http://www.homepage.mac.com/gregmcbride)

[www.valpo.edu/english/vpr/mcbrideoccupation.html](http://www.valpo.edu/english/vpr/mcbrideoccupation.html)

[www.valpo.edu/english/vpr/mcbridedead.html](http://www.valpo.edu/english/vpr/mcbridedead.html)

[adirondackreview.homestead.com/mcbride.html](http://adirondackreview.homestead.com/mcbride.html)

[www.american.edu/cas/lit/folio/2005winter_greg_mcbride.html](http://www.american.edu/cas/lit/folio/2005winter_greg_mcbride.html)