

The City And The Village

(Dedicated to my friend Roy Friedman, who left us before his time. A playwright, a family man, and a friend, who had yet to offer his best.)

My grandmother told me that I was born many years ago,
Somewhere in the rural world of Tulsa County, New Whitman.
My mother had died when I was one, father having left her earlier.

Tulsa is sculptured with vast, irregularly undulating green fields,
Draped with stable but mercurial, thin, open blue skies.
In the mornings I opened my eyes to unfiltered, bold, golden sunshine;
At nights I closed them moved by inky black skies, dotted
By a flux of shapeless, glowing but flickering light points called stars.

Childhood streamed with shimmering ease;
Everything was connected, everything was afire.
There was no beginning and there was no end.
Playing on the seashore of time, every moment was precious –
Yet every moment was dispensable.

There was an inner time, more relevant than the outer time.
There was an inner freedom, stronger than the outer one.
Youth curved down by its own fullness,
And eternity seemed within grasp.
Every moment was possessed, but every moment was a mystery.

But one day the shimmering galleon of youth was pierced by a hidden rock.
The punctured hull started pulling the ship down.
Tulsa was running out of good paying jobs,
The specter of starvation loomed large on the skies
And the dreams of youth leaked through the hole of economy.

The lack of bread forced me to leave Tulsa
And find refuge in the gargantuan metropolis of Nolan,
Some two hundred seventy miles southwest of Tulsa.
I entered a new stage of life, where survival was more than a peace of mind–
It was a confrontation with the elements of life.

I was lucky to find a job in a small factory on the outskirts of the city,
Called Bright Lights, where I had to assemble lighting fixtures,
Which were used on the tables and ceilings of homes –
Low-end products used by financially challenged, new immigrants, and students.
The work was fast-moving, coordinated, and exhilarating.

On the sixth floor of a tenement, I landed up a walk-up efficiency,
Equipped with a kitchenette, bath, and closet.
It was smaller than my Tulsa place but had personality and style.
Through its window it let in Nolan's exuberance, color, and vigor.
Living in it felt like being on an island in a sea of activity and excitement.

At five in the morning, reminiscent of my rural existence,
I woke up to start the long day to my work.
From my room to the public bus, I walked three miles.
The bus took an hour before I climbed it down
For one mile walk to my factory.

Nolan knocked me off the ground when I arrived from Tulsa.
Looking by the unfettered eyes of a villager,
The city was a gigantic enterprise of man.
Here was a world with a different foundation than I had known it.
A vision more complex than I thought was good for man.

The evening is city's time,
When the commercial jostling and greediness of the day
Transforms to sleek sophistication of glamour and whispers.
There is a lightness in the feet and a twinkle in the eyes
In anticipation of what might happen.

City packages it thrills in brilliant allure,
Ignoring man's inner conflicts, titillating his senses,
Glorifying the moment, celebrating the instincts.
It delivers its wares instantaneously,
Short-circuiting the thought process.

Every city signals unspokenly that it is a gift box
Full of exciting candies for delectation.
The sexual candy is the biggest candy it has to offer

And it is wrapped in a thousand different ways. More powerful than the product itself,
Is the titillation at the prospect of acquiring it.

Nolan offered a scintillating array of intellectual and cultural media:
Museums, theaters, seminars, movies, bookshops, talks, etc.
It seemed a feast for the mind, an expanse for the spirit.
For the gastronomes the city equally offered a far reaching horizon.
Body and mind had both a lot to gain from it.

After the bumbling and trembling of the new arriver,
I settled to the city's fast beat, the euphoria, and the possibilities.
Often returning to my little island late at night,
Giddy with excitement and filled with a sort of fulfillment -
Looking forward to its bigger and more colorful doses.

Some nine years have passed since my forced exodus from Tulsa,
Nolan has grown on me with its complex trappings,
And I now feel satiated with the city life and the invisible
Seeds of change in me have turned into discernable sprouts, announcing
I could not continue in the city, I must move on.

The excitement of the city, I began to discover,
Did not add up to happiness - it only lead to wanting more excitement.
It began becoming clear to me that I could not build the edifice
Of happiness with excitement alone, some deeper connections
With life were required for its construction.

Nolan did not create permanent friendships,
As people were always running with an invisible gun on their heads.
Neither could I attach myself to a woman who had time to know who I am.
The earlier years of excitement now echoed with hidden loneliness -
A child's emptiness after a day at a carnival.

A drug can not give a permanent solace to the searching mind,
Just as excitement and entertainment can not satisfy our deeper inner urges.
Environment for mind must be open, free, and un-distracting,
To allow a fine plant to breathe, which also needs its own space and nourishment.
Neon lights, blazing colors, chemical triggers can not touch the soul.

In a city no one is happy,
Each pads his unhappiness in his own way.
To the mentally ill, add the alcoholics, drug addicts, and insomniacs –
The city stands quite a bit on its legs due to a spectrum of medications.
It represents some sort of defiance of nature – and pays for it.

Man's ability to take care of himself is impaired in a city.
You absorb the city but the city never absorbs you.
A city does not give but it sells.
Even with its panache and energy, enticement and entertainment,
There lurks beneath the city a quiet, steely, stubborn loneliness.

You wonder at first why it should be so,
Where is the crack in the glitter?
God created the village in a flash of thought,
To give man environment to be absorbed in,
But man created the city to absorb it.

In a city you feel moved by a gunpoint,
Forcing you to be focused on the task ahead,
Not on the voyage of life.
Everything moves with its own rhythm,
Preventing the symphony of life to take place.

You look at the city children
And see how commerce has robbed them of playgrounds.
They play and frolic at cul-de-sacs
And on concrete patches called parks.
You wonder how they will grow up.

In the buses and subways people avoid each other's eyes,
Not because of shyness but diffidence to communicate,
Set in by long solitariness and trepidation of the other man.
In apartment buildings people socialize in elevators, hallways, and laundry –
Never revealing themselves, never truly becoming friends.

I have packed my belongings
And decided to return to my roots in Tulsa,
To live a freer life, closer to God, closer to man.

For man his life is to discover his soul and live with it –
For that he does not need to build skyscrapers.

I want to feel the unsmooth, soft earth below my feet,
See the uncluttered horizon in full width,
Be an element of my community,
Know my neighbors' first names,
And visit my grandparents' graves.