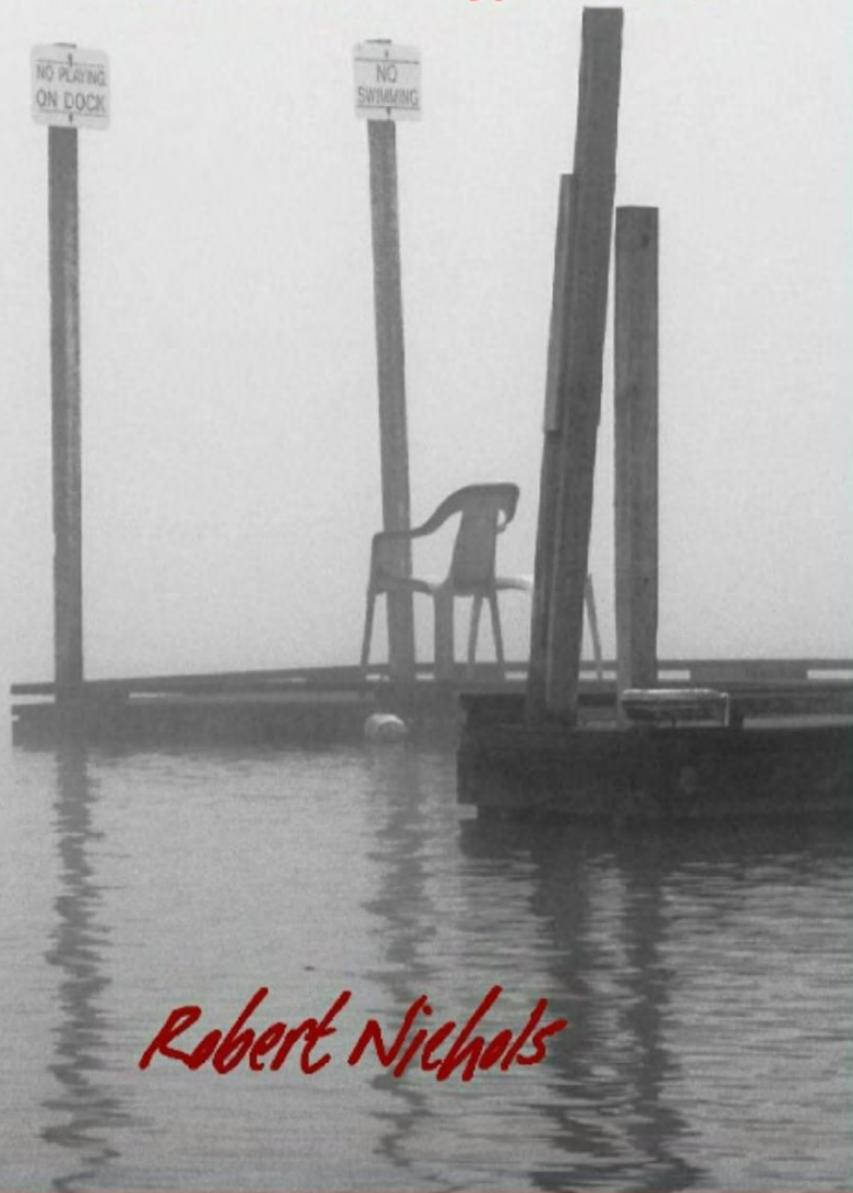


about Time:
Poems and Other Stories



Robert Nichols

WARNING:

**These words can have permanent effect
upon the reader.**

*Poetry is what happens when you read something
and it changes you inside.*

Carol Nichols
March 2015

The Footlocker Series



On my seventieth birthday, my wife Carol presented me with the best gift I could have ever received.

Over a period of months, she had undertaken the grueling task of excavating poems and essays and stories from my notebooks and yellow legal pads and grease-tinged napkins all stored in an old footlocker in the garage. Over fifty years of my scribbled beliefs and rambled passions, my devout exclamations of soul- and flesh-told instance, my art-blood observations of the world through which I pass—a trove of mad-sweet poems, ranting tirades, quirky philosophies; glimpses of bizarre beauty and mundane wonder—all transcribed from chaos to computer file.

It nearly killed her, but she would not be dissuaded. The dust, the terrible time-yellowed paper, the mold—allergy worsened to asthma but she would not stop. And her eyes—my handwriting is so bad I can barely read it myself, and the old typed pages are so faded—I would find her up in the middle of the night, hunched over stacks of the stuff with a bright desk lamp and a magnifying glass...

“Why?” I would implore.

Carol is not a morbid type. She has been my joy throughout these decades. But her reply was calm and chilling and true. “I have to get this done before I die. When we are gone that trunk will be tossed into some landfill and all of your work will be lost forever. I can’t let that happen.”

She kept most of it from me until my birthday. I suspected she might have recovered twenty or thirty poems from the rubble.

In fact, she presented me with a three-ring notebook containing 445 poems.

... and counting, there are well over five hundred now, most of which I had no clear recollection. New to me was the product of my life’s work.

Such a gift. I am truly loved.

And *The Footlocker Series*? We decided the best way to preserve this work—these poems and essays and stories—and give them the only shot they may ever have at being read somewhere out in the world for which they were created, is to come up with a series of eBooks entrusted to cyberspace. (And possibly, a limited number of paperback copies for our off-line constituency.)

about Time: Poems and Other Stories is the first book in this series.

Enjoy.

Every last word was written for you.

Ancient Times

Earth is old.
Know the depths of stream-cut canyons
and the heights of wind-carved arches,
and, clearly, we are all yet children
playing upon the face of its ancient surface.

Serendipity

It could have been that
10,000 years ago
some glimmer-eyed ramble of a Celt-man
fell into the arms of a lass
of more heart than danger
and they made a baby destined to be
the seed child of times—
all sweeping and lusting and loving
down eons
to the birth of me.

And,
in some other net of being
by other generations
vectoring centuries toward this morning,
there came you,

solely, in all the Universe,
that we meet this day—
I, the visiting poet
you, the listener,

and,
by your encounter
with the glimmer-eyed ramble of my words,
and my encounter
with the honest nod of your perception,
the rustle-gift of your laughter,
the catch in the throat of your consciousness,
we might inspire each other.



Ancient Man in Ancient Wood /
Bristlecone Pine / Robert Nichols (2004)

Anasazi Children of the Cliff

Anasazi children,
playing tag
or hide-and-go-seek,
dashing down stone steps
to the edge of the precipice.
In the warm morning light
of desert sun,
the joy of their child-song voices
echoes off canyon walls,
scattering timeless laughter
through the ages.



Don't Speak to Me of Time

Don't speak to me of time
if you know little of rock and sand
and the tireless voice of the wind.



Young Times

Back a ways
we were all little kids, you know.
And some days,
honestly,
it was just the wonder of butterflies...
the taste of an after-school cookie.

Hey, Baby

He is two and a half.
She is three (an older woman).
He smiles (such charm),
and she giggles.
The blessed, fertile psyche of Earth
sings forever.



Mr. Smith

“So, Bobby Lee,” they asked me—maybe I was six, maybe I was seven, maybe I’m seventy and still might get my derriere in trouble for telling the truth, “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

And, without a blink, in unabashed earnestness I replied, “I wanna be a garbage man.”

Little wise guy, eh? Is that what you’re thinking? I’m sure the adults assembled to test my resolve back then thought of me as such: just another sawed-off little smart aleck.

But I’m not a wise guy. Never have been. Hopefully, never will be.

I really did want to be a garbage man when I was a little guy.

I’ll tell you about Mr. Smith.



My sister Nancy and I were in the plant business for one day back in the spring of 1948. I was going on four and she was going on five.

We lived out in a rural area of St. Louis County in a run-down Highway-66 motel call the Trav-L-Tel Tourist Court. It was a scatter of white brick duplex cottages on a flood plain of the Merimac River between U.S. 66, a swamp, and a verdant hillside. At the base of this hill ran a paved county road. Our cabin was at the rear of the complex next to the back drive. We would take nice walks out that road with our mom and dad. It was neat to throw rocks into the still-pool waters of the swamp. What a great place to be a kid. We had all kinds of reptiles and hooty birds to play with and no care at all that, to the notice of the world, we lived in a dump. My folks cared, though. Even as young as I was I could read it in their eyes. It was a bad time for housing back then when the baby boomers were really babies and the nation’s infrastructure was still recovering from WWII. Dad had a good job with the U.S. Government, Mom had a good job as a mom; we had a decent old car, plenty to eat, respectable clothes; we were clean and honest people. We just didn’t have any money to spare.

Maybe that’s why my sister and I decided to go into business.

Yes, out by the rail gate that crossed the back drive of the Trav-L-Tel Tourist Court, Nancy and I became a couple of little kid entrepreneurs that spring afternoon in 1948 before either of us had started school and our life-long successions of obligation. It was that magical time of a good long life when the simple marvel of existence was exhilarating. When, under the loving scrutiny and guidance of our mother, we still owned a portion of days blessed by discovery and energized by imagination.

We built a table out of an old board and some logs and then went about gathering a

wonderful array of lush green weeds to stock our roadside enterprise. The ground was wet and cooperative. I can still recall how good it felt to smoothly extract the dandelions and all manner of other spiny twisted specimens of hearty flora from the abundance of vegetation out where the encroachment of the compound abutted the biological petri dish of the swampland. Tactile times, they were back then. All-sense times, actually. Everything was so new. I think much of the discontent of midlife results from frustrated attempts at regaining a sense of full encounter with the richness and adventure of a brand new world—a world such as the one in which Nancy and I frolicked the day of weed harvest.

There was little traffic on the back road, but whenever the rare car would pass, she and I, in shrill and giggling shriek, would call out, “Plants for sale!” What fun.

This went on as a delightful game for such a wondrously long child-time, then a frightening thing happened.

A car stopped.

I can still see the red of the brake lights, hear the grind of gears and the whining transmission of the car as it backed up the road to our drive. The smiling lady in the passenger seat eagerly peered back over her shoulder in anticipation of buying our goods.

We were dinky kids full of the game of the day. But we weren’t fools. We knew all we had there was a splintered plank and a bunch of weeds.

In stark terror we fled to the high grasses and gnarl-stunted woods and hid until the interlopers into our world of play drove away.

After surveying both directions of the road, we tentatively returned to our table to recommence our business. Somewhat daunted by our near-brush with reality, with each passing car we now only whisper-shouted, “Plants for sale!”

Then we saw Mr. Smith coming up the road. High atop his wagon of slop he urged his magnificent team of white horses on in his thrice weekly run up to the Trav-L-Tel Tourist Court and its battery of battered garbage cans out by the rear gate.

In vague and spotty recollection of those long past days of my early childhood, I can recall no kinder person than Mr. Smith. Out of the swirl of amorphous sensation and scatter of image that tell those nascent times... the big black man in bib overalls swings down from his majestic perch upon the aromatic wagon and in burst of smile and laughing song of a greeting he shouts, “Hey there, Nancy Sue. Hey there, Bobby Lee.”

So many years and, still, I am awash in the warmth of that good man’s hello.

Just little children, you know. We thought mothers lasted forever in sweetness and play and fathers forever could make laughter and game of any sorrows that came along. We thought a home was the smell of good cooking, a warm bed and sleep blessed by a forehead kiss and “good night, sleep tight, don’t let the bed bugs bite,” a daddy coming home, a mommy always close, a song for most every occasion, a sister and a brother aglow in the light of mischief and hilarity. And we thought Mr. Smith to be the grandest friend with his big-hoofed horses and the honest joy and excitement of his arrival. We’d wait for him—sometimes waving, sometimes hiding and jumping out. It’s the way we thought the world was going to be. Oh, that all children could know such simple joys.

With gentle strong words he would back the team and turn the buckboard wagon around in the middle of the road, edge to the back gate and then pull the ratcheted lever arm and lock the brakes. It was a wonder to watch.

But it was serious business the day of the plants there behind the cabin where the drive met the world of the back road. We eagerly waited in mute exhilaration until the massive maneuver of horse and wagon and heaping load of garbage was completed and our friend had climbed down and come about the front of the team, touching their muzzles and mumbling calm as he passed, and approached our little table with eyes splendidly wide in appreciation.

Then...

“Plants for sale!”

We just about knocked the big man over. With a roar of laughter he recovered from the impact of our shout and, kneeling on one knee to get a better look, he said, "Well now, what do we have here?"

"It's plants," we told him, a bit sheepishly I'm sure, but with a confidence only shared between the best of friends, we knew he would faultlessly play our game.

"And they're for sale," said Nancy, the better business person of the two of us.

I swear, all these years be gone, the aura of his smile is new upon me this day.

"Fine lookin' plants, too. I think I just might buy me some."

Such a strange concept swept across my young mind. *Buy?* I mean, I understood gathering a crop, displaying it upon a busted up old wooden plank, advertising our product to passers-by; but, the idea of actually selling a fantasy, that was something.

He crammed a giant fist into one of the small pockets of his overalls and withdrew a handful of pennies and to each of our outreached palms he delivered equal coin. Then pausing as if to ponder the gravity of the decision, he added a wealth of more coin and said in a grand sweeping pronouncement, "They're such nice plants, I'll buy them all."

Oh, Nancy and I, how our hearts soared.

A couple more pennies each and he added, "And the board, too."

You know how little kids' eyes will light up when they are delighted. Well, it's not just some physiological effect of dilated iris and increased blood flow. The eyes of a delighted child actually illuminate the world they see. I just realize that now as I am, for a fleeting moment, four years old and looking up at the great girth and grace and night-black countenance of Mr. Smith smiling down upon me standing here with so many coins in my small hand it takes both hands to hold them—maybe eleven or twelve cents at least—and I see a bit of the sweet myth of Heaven. The man glows in good will, the horses are swan-feather white, the wagon, with its flies and fragrance, is a grand coach.

He tends to the garbage cans and then, ever so carefully he places the board and its cargo of weeds beside him on the seat and with a grin and a wave, he frees the brake, urges the huge horses to motion and slowly he and the wagon and the day move magically away.

Call me a wise guy, if you will. But I'd still like to be the garbage man, Mr. Smith.

Then: My Father

I would listen to his shoes.
They made more noise than mine.
I would make all the noise I could
but still his steps were louder.

When he burped
the whole room would clatter.

My God, was I small.



In Giant Bermuda-onion Times

In giant Bermuda-onion times,
and bulbous beefsteak-tomato times,
and sweet-corn fresh and wondrous times,
sister and brother one good summer—
on afternoons near 4:30
we would stand at our little
wagon-rolled vegetable cart
(piled with father's garden plenty)
and wait for sweat-soaked customers
departing work
(as St. Louis summer clouds gathered,
grey-green and dark—foreboding storms;
or hazes of humidity simply sighed
the air thick with smothering vapors).

-what's you kids got there to sell?

-tomatoes, corn, onions.

-them onions hot?

-no.

-go on, boy, all them onions is hot.

-no, I'll eat one, you'll see.

Fool-child,
on a sticky summer afternoon
apple-eating a tennis-ball onion,
a crowd gathering around to catch
that best moment of his eleven-dollar-and
forty-two-cent summer.

-look at that kid eat that onion

-I'm gonna buy me some of them onions.

Fool-boy,
with mouth so hot
and tear-face hidden
by a sweat face—
children of the Earth we were.

-hey, Kid, what's you going to do with all that money?

Crisp-fried Bacon

Outside is winter's gloom-chilled morning.
Inside—a warm-stove kitchen.
It is a child's fresh day.

The taste and crunch of this bacon.
I am five years old.
I am forty-five years old.
I am...

Sweet-sad time aches
within me this winter's day—
time and the ghosts of breakfasts past.