

I started trying to write this poem over 40 years ago as a child when the number of people gathering around our Thanksgiving table started to diminish. It wasn't till my father passed away this summer that I was finally able to complete it. I dedicate this poem to him and have included my favorite photograph of him.

A few notes on references in the poem:

Shut-the-Box is an old English game some elders may remember.

The ruby cardinal "no longer executioner" refers to a poem I wrote when I was 14 during winter in which the cardinal who used to come to our bird feeder looked like the hooded executioner against the snow.

"The soldier and his sons" in the photograph refers to the Wayne family ancestor, Major Henry Constantine Wayne, who famously brought camels to America for the United States Camel Corps as potential military pack animals.

THE TABLE

The golden glow of late autumn light
slants across the table set for celebration,
illuminating the particles dancing in the air.

The settings are as they always are,
waiting for the life of movement
to take its place

among the crackle of the fire
and the clack of Shut-the-Box
and the toasted smell of
warming dog by the hearth.

He was the first to leave the table,
wandering into winter's cold to complete
his journey - I felt so alone.

The hole left behind blacker than his
northern coat made for swimming
icy waters and saving lives.

I hope the ruby cardinal was his companion,
no longer executioner, but tender guide
gifting a jewel of bright beauty, a last sight
as his eyes shut upon the snow.

The table is a living, breathing thing -
witness to so many cycles.

How many have sat around it before?

How many hands have passed over these
forks and spoons and cut glasses?

How many stalks of celery enjoyed or forgotten
or borne with fortitude?

The table is a living, breathing thing -
witness to how many hearts warmed and broken?

It flexes and contracts.

As one year, there is one less place
set at the table - then two -

only to be followed by an expansion again -
of friend, of companion, of child.

The universe balancing itself
through passage.

Through this, we go on -

A fingerprint on a spoon,



an idea in the eye of the soldier and his sons
who gaze from the photograph
across the table
from one hundred years' distance,
an echo in the ear of the constant companion
dog returned home to the heart of Sirius,
a fond salute in our travels to a fellow traveller
who loved the American West and
the northern mountains and
the mid-Atlantic marshes,
and all the quiet moments that string us
together in a never-ending strand
as we sit
at the table,
wherever we may be,
our memories infused in the patina
warmed by the wedge of late autumn's
golden glowing light
as the particles of what remains
dance in the tender gladness that we have been.

JC Wayne

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