



Glenn G. Coats
Degrees of Acquaintance



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In Memory of Leisa Foran

Degrees of Acquaintance

The Grapevine

Voices carry. The husband is asking about two hundred fifty dollars, says he owes money to just about everybody. “I’m sorry babe,” the wife says. “Work won’t give me any more hours.” I hear their voices go up and down—not quite an argument. Feels like someone whispered a secret in my hair.

There’s a garbage can on its side. No one bothers to pick it up; carry it back to the house. Looks wrong like a horse down on a hillside. Cars are parked half on the drive, half off. Garage lights stay on all night long and it must cost them a fortune. Wife starts to prune the holly bushes then stops, leaves the bucket and gloves on the lawn. Someone should take that dog away from them. Never gets a walk, coat looks like wild brush. I’d offer to take him around the block but these days—I mind my own business.

rain on the inn
gossip settles
in the corners

Wild Onions

Wade is a head taller and twice as wide as I am. He can pick up anything, nothing is too heavy; he tosses me like a ball when we swim in the river.

The house sits where the forest begins. Wade teaches me how to find and pull sassafras saplings. We bring a bucket of them to his mom who boils them like tea. Laughs when I say it tastes like root beer.

His dad fixes cars. We pretend hubcaps are shields and antennas are swords. Once the battery Wade was carrying splashed acid on his shirt. It burned holes all over but never touched his skin.

Wade and his two sisters eat a whole loaf of bread for breakfast. His mom smiles each time she flips another slice of French toast. Says I need fattening up.

At night, I sleep on the top bunk. Windows are wide open. Wade's sisters flash by the doorway, laughing in the middle of the night, not wearing a stitch. No one says, "You girls get dressed now, we've got company." No one says anything. It doesn't really matter—not all that much.

fireflies
the blur of fingerprints
on a mason jar

Survival of the Fittest

Monday, Science Class. I introduce a new chapter. “Evolution is one of the most important discoveries,” I say. I tell them about deer mice, ones that live in the forest are dark, ones that live around sand hills are light. Their eyes are wide open, this is all new.

Tuesday. I explain that the formation of a new species takes a long time. Dawn asks, “Why didn’t dinosaurs with feathers ever learn how to fly?” We talk about Darwin, how he studied mockingbirds, how we have those birds here in the mountains.

Wednesday. Mr. Holman wants me to stop by his office, says it’s important. The principal is blinking hard and his face is turning red. “My phone is ringing off the goddamned hook,” he says. “These are simple folk who believe what the Bible tells them, Genesis 2:7 says God formed man of dust from the ground, and that is truth to them.” He tells me parents don’t want their children to hear about my theory of evolution. My throat is dry. “Go on to the next chapter,” he says. “You should have known better.”

beneath layers
of thick paint
a pattern of leaves

Lambs

The older sister sat near me in homeroom. She was quiet, always had her head in a book.

Willis River is a tributary of the James, sixty-two miles long, and flows through the heart of Virginia.

Younger sister was 14, a pitcher on the softball team, same height as her older sister, same dark eyes.

Willis is narrow, classified as a stream. Fishing is either from the bank or small boat. Creek supports small bass and bream which can be taken with a variety of baits.

Teacher spoke to us late Wednesday. “I have some sad news,” she said. “We lost two of our dear students today, two blessed members of our school family.”

After four days of hard rain, the Willis swelled into a raging river, brown as fresh-plowed field.

The girls were passengers in a car that lost control and ran into the river. Water washed the car downstream. Recovery team found the vehicle at 2 p.m. Teacher said the girls were gone by then. She never told us who was behind the wheel.

river mist
a melody somewhere
in the chords

words of a song
tighten
their grip

Wellsprings

The child wakes before the sounds of dogs running outside, long before bicycles squeak up and down driveways. She tiptoes down the hallway to where her grandmother is waiting on the couch. Mimi gathers the little girl up in her arms. The house is quiet as they turn pages in picture books, whisper about billy goats and trolls, and lock puzzle pieces together with soft clicks. Everyone is sleeping while they draw stick figures in a garden of giant flowers.

Mimi remembers her music teacher who moved from classroom to classroom with her pitch pipe and autoharp. The tunes are coming back now like the whistle of a faraway train and she begins to sing. Not loud enough to wake the house, just enough to fill the space connecting them. *Hush-you-bye don't you cry, go to sleep little baby, when you wake you shall have all the pretty little horses.* The little girl is clapping hands then slapping her knees, one two one two, and looking up at her Mimi like a baby bird—wanting more.

on again off again
the tumble of leaves
in a limestone creek

a slender volume
pressed between others
the paper birch

Jackie Boy

He is drawn to gravel and dust, the rumble and rattle of passing trains, photos in discarded magazines, and hawks on wires. The boy perches on rocks that jut into the current, studies insects dropping from branches, and the flash and dart of silver sides.

The child grubs under moss and rotted wood for thin red worms, salamanders with yellow spots, and pounces on grasshoppers that land in brush. He threads creatures on small hooks, flicks them with his rod into the dark and light water.

When the sticks have burnt to coals, he heats water in rusted cans, poaches chub and small trout, sucks meat from bone that tastes of blood from a wound.

Strips in the heat of day, slips and slides down a clay bank into a deep pool where cattle come to cool and drink until dusk rings like a bell and the boy dresses and runs home. "Even after a bath," his mother will say, "my son still smells of river."

sun-bleached bone
the way darkness settles
into stone

Blueprints

Light is fading. Cars line the curb and the circle is quiet. I stand beside detectives who are watching over the house. The coroner is expected soon.

They tell me about their lives, part-time jobs, schools children attend, and rivers where they fish. “I always anchor under the bridge,” one of them says. “There are always fish in the shadows.” One passes me her card in case I ever need it. The detectives expect me to fill them in on my neighbor, some background for their reports.

“I didn’t know him,” I say. “No one did. He never worked in the yard, never took a walk around the block, never asked me a question. Nick kept to himself.”

I am not about to ask how long he was lying there or who will care for his cats. “It might ease your mind to know,” one of the detectives says, “He didn’t take his own life.”

ferry crossing—
from time to time
voices in the wind

Degrees of Acquaintance

If I walk into the barber shop and Shirley is on the phone, I know that she is talking to her mother who was my barber before her. Shirley will turn and say, "I had a feeling you'd be in today, my momma was just asking about you."

The television on the wall is playing country music videos. Shirley never watches the news because it is too sad. "Don't ask me about politics," she says. "I don't have a clue."

She understands me well enough to say, "You don't seem like yourself today. Is something wrong?" She asks about my son who is seeing a girl who is younger than he is. "Could you bring him in for a haircut? I'd like to see what he looks like."

I watch her in the mirror as she snips and talks at the same time. "You know a man told me yesterday that I was putting on a few pounds. Do you believe the nerve of some people?" I look around at the customers waiting in chairs. The place is so quiet that you can hear a pin drop.

nine days of rain
ground too soft
to walk on

Staples

Customers move in and out like waves. Old and new guitars hang on the walls—all acoustics. Electrics don't sell even with two colleges nearby. No high-end guitars. Most are made in Korea or China and bluegrass players want something homegrown. "Homegrown means more money," the man from Buffalo Creek tells them, and most of his instruments dangle and collect dust.

He rises from his work bench each time a buyer walks through the door. Stops in the middle of a bridge repair or neck adjustment to see if he can be of any help. Some come in with armfuls of guitars and fiddles, creased and cracked, light and dark like faces. "What can you give me for these?" they ask in a time when all the tobacco fields are gone, the auction houses and warehouses closed down. The man from Buffalo Creek gives them what he can, keeps on trying to fix broken things, waiting for it all to turn around, longing to hear hymns drift through a hollow, lullabies to still the night.

moonlight—
tick of pine needles
on the roof

Love in a Dry Season

Weeks of heat and humidity. No precipitation. Hills are brown and parched. It is hot while I toss and turn through the night, hot when I step out the door in the morning. No relief. My wife shakes her blouse so it billows like a sail but that doesn't help. She plays games with the baby on the basement floor where it remains cool like a cave.

Clouds begin to stack up on Sunday morning and by noon it looks dark outside. Thunder rumbles and rain falls hard all afternoon. Temperature drops. In the evening, we step out on the deck. Drain pipes drip in unison and puddles shine everywhere. The little girl takes a cup, brushes water from the glass table and fills it up. She pours it along the dog's back and down her ears. The dog doesn't mind. Then the baby scoops more water and sprinkles our feet. She gathers water until it is too dark and night settles in—cool and deep as a river.

in the flutter of a short life swallowtails

Closing Time

Towers of boxes sag in corners, books lean left and right. Warning notes are taped to broken tiles. There are no new materials, no white paper left on the shelf. Teachers make do with used workbooks, pages that have yellowed with time, a can of broken pencils.

I push two desks under a fluorescent light that flickers but still shines, and enter two more lessons in my notebook. Compose questions to follow up a story: *Who does Fay want to help when she finishes her classes? Do you like to work alone or do you enjoy the company of others?*

I wait for one student to climb the stairs. Charles will pull up a chair, rub his eyes, slowly begin to read, and never mention the shape of this room. Words on the page are all that matters.

summer dusk
the river holds me
for a while

Valentine's Day

My father says I should stay in the office. I am not to go outside for any reason. He hangs a sign on the door announcing that he will return in thirty minutes.

I find a box of paper clips in a desk drawer, connect one to another and make a long chain. When I stand on my father's chair, hold the chain up high, it touches the floor.

The adding machine is still turned on. I add the biggest numbers I can imagine, millions to millions, and all the answers are printed out for me on a strip of paper.

My father is still not back. I take out sheets of typing paper and draw monsters with big teeth and long hair. Their eyes pop out like frogs.

A red light is flashing on the answer phone. My father must have missed a call. I press a button and a voice comes on, "Thank you, sweetie, for the flowers. Just lovely."

It is not my mother's voice.

past harvest
patches of cotton
cling like snow

Creatures of Habit

My father opens his door company at eight and closes at four. “The man keeps bankers’ hours,” a builder grumbles.

After work, he stops at the hotel, needs some time to unwind. There are men at the bar, ones he knew when they were the age he is now. My father sees them around town, walking to the post office, stooping to pet someone’s dog, carrying groceries home. “I’ll never stop working,” he says. “Too much ambition.”

At home, Father puts ice in a glass, pours in whiskey, flips through the mail, reads the report on new construction. After dinner, he lies down on the couch, and sleeps for an hour. “Don’t bother him,” my mother says. “Daddy had a long day.”

At night, my father is in his robe, legs crossed, sitting in his favorite chair. The family room smells of cigarette smoke. His hand shakes when he lifts the glass. Above the sound of voices on the television, I hear the rattle of ice cubes.

the ebb and flow of it river dusk

Smoke and Ash

There is little to go by. No sheet music to study, no recordings of her voice. Only a piece of paper that was torn from a notebook. Light green, faded like a husk of corn. Most of the words are written in ink—a few added in pencil. Arrows point to an additional verse. A sketch of her right hand has a number on each fingertip. The numbers correlate to a right hand picking-pattern. The words “to light your way” and “no hurt” repeat throughout the stanzas. “Arpeggio” is scribbled at the bottom.

Forty years have passed since I heard Leisa sing the song. She is gone now. I cradle my guitar and try to remember the melody; it is like trying to hear again the flutter of wet wings or the sound of a wave as it breaks. I can't. No matter how long I stare at the page, I can't bring her back.

dusk—
scent of tomato vines
on skin

Window-Shopping

The agent apologizes again and again. Yes, he received my letter but never expected me to drive up from the states, not this time of year. He is sorry about his commitments, still plays in a hockey league, has a daughter flying in from Vancouver. Gives me keys and directions to the cottages. “Most are empty through winter,” he says. “I’ll call ahead to the occupied ones, let me know if you see something that suits your needs.”

Fields are covered with snow. No way to judge deep or shallow bays, weed-choked or open passages. I walk through dark rooms, see dishes left out to dry, smell moldy books and board games, notice family photographs; spot fishing poles sticking out from under beds. There are half-burned candles in the dim light. Cold settles in my neck and shoulders. I keep a notebook in my pocket, but there is nothing to write down, nothing I want to remember.

no human voices
only the beating of wings
across ice

Right of Way

Directions take me down a winding road, past stands of pine, open fields, small farmhouses with smoke curling from chimneys. I park on a lane as instructed, open the gate, then drive through a pasture, stop and open a second gate that leads down to a cottage.

The man who answers the door has dark circles around his eyes. I walk into a room filled with piles of clothing and newspapers. Air smells of burnt coffee. “No time to tidy up,” he says. “Sorry about the mess.”

Tells me that he just drove all the way to Miami to see an old flame. They had words and he got right back in his car and drove back—hadn’t slept in days. Wants to sell the cottage. It needs a lot of repairs. “Fishing is good,” he says. “The lake is thick with pike.”

I open the gate and drive slowly away. There are cows and a single horse standing under a tree, no sun, and the sky is the color of stone.

no place to call home shooting stars

Early

When I return from the store, my wife is waiting in the drive. “Hurry,” she says as I step out of the car, “One of the girls is in trouble.”

Snow crunches like stale bread as we move closer to the cow. She is lying alone in the pasture. “Poor girl has been getting up and down for an hour,” my wife says. “She’s not getting up any more.”

We can see the hooves. I steady her head; tell her what a fine gal she is as my wife pulls the legs. The calf won’t budge. Each of us takes a leg and we pull until the newborn flops on the snow.

My wife uses her finger to clean the calf’s nose and she starts to breathe. We carry her back to the barn, spread fresh straw, and watch as the mother cleans the newborn off. Outside the sound of cows as the herd moves closer to the barn.

winter’s silence
movement of shadows
under the ice

Greenhorns

It is still dark when I wake my wife; tell her I lost the truck keys in the snow. “They just flew out of my fingers,” I say.

We follow my tracks to the spot where the keys are hidden, shine flashlights and sift through the fresh powder. Nothing. “It’ll be spring before we find them,” my wife says. “Cows are hungry.”

The owner of the farm is in Florida. His new tractor, the one he purchased for parades, is in the barn. “You’re not,” my wife says. I slide the big doors open to let in the beginnings of daylight.

I sit on the seat, press the clutch down to the floorboard, push the key in and click it. The engine turns over.

The tractor is aiming out of the door. I ease back the clutch and begin to move forward. There is a steady *put-put-put* as I follow the lane up to the feeding station. Snowflakes brush my face. Nothing will melt today.

winter path
the way footprints
thaw and freeze

A Nest Under the Eaves

they grow together over time hemlocks

Twilight. The music of pots and pans, ring of knives and forks, shuffle of feet, the in and out of chairs. Most of the family gathers around the kitchen table—a few are still at work, one waitresses at a diner, another bottles milk at the dairy. The older girls talk about a boy on the bus who found trouble and enlisted in the army. Boys chatter about baseball tryouts, infield mix, the need to oil gloves.

To Dimitri and Anna who sit alone at the dining room table, their voices sound like birds all singing at once. They listen and sip their chowder. Dimitri crunches oyster crackers in his hands, sprinkles them like dust on his soup.

After the children clear away their places, Anna and Dimitri climb the steps up to their room. They undress, change into night clothes, then lie side by side where they talk in whispers about today and tomorrow. Their lights are off now. Voices ring around the house, hum like a fan as the grandparents slip into sleep.

from childhood until now tiger lilies

Answers

Cold penetrates wide floorboards, pine creaks when I cross a room. No heat in the pantry or out on the porch. Plastic rectangles that I nailed over the windows beat in and out like hearts. My wife rolls up towels, places them under doorways, wherever she feels a draft.

Tonight, the water troughs are frozen solid. I stab at them with a screwdriver and try to make holes wide enough for a cow's muzzle. My wife boils pots of water that I carry up to the fields and pour over the ice. "Cows will weaken if they have to eat snow," she says.

Tomorrow, I will push troughs together and move the cows into one pasture. Heat from an island of them might keep the water from freezing. "Time to call it quits," I hear my wife call. When I look back at the porch light—no one is there.

winter wind
pines shake off
the dead

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