

Am asked if I might have a Christmas-time sort of poem that I could add to this issue. I don't write many occasional poems, mostly, I suppose, because I am too lazy to accept deadlines (note the first ominous syllable in the word). Still, here is one that began with a comic and potentially embarrassing situation fraught with punishment. It led to a more fulfilling consideration:

Wheelbarrows

I gave Carol a wheelbarrow for Christmas.
The wheel barrow has no lace on it.
No artwork. No decoration of any sort.
It should indict me of that common offense,

being one of those husbands who
in his coarse taking-for-granted-ness
has given his beloved wife and sacred partner
a machine of gross utility for Christmas.

And yet she accepted it! —



because, for her heart, I didn't give Carol
the wheelbarrow for Christmas.
I gave her the black and gray and grainy
photo of Carol when she was a toddler—

A child's almost helpless little fingers grasp
the wooden handle of a toy wheel barrow,
and you only know from her grasp what
the disembodied toy is, wheel out of the picture.

Her face focuses determined on what she is doing

though we cannot tell what that might be,
and not for the camera, as she might do today
and scowl. Her head is cold-weather scarved.

A promise of our souls rides in the ancient peasant
transport and the old photo we give ourselves
and our un-aged children from generations ahead
and our dis-aged children from generations past,

our Czechs and Irish and Swedes and English:
some rendering of their necessary old wanderings,
their close calls, escapes, desperate emigrations,
their share and ours of the good human plod.

The Folly Family



My Grandfather's Hamilton

"It's about 10:48 by my grandfather's
Watch, but we don't take him seriously

In matters of time." I said "him." When
A friend asks for the time, he and I
Look sharp. We offer a brisk answer,

"10:48," with a tactful, decorous, unhurried,
"About." The truth, undisguised as fact.
A passing stranger asks for the time,
And the two of us, myself at the helm
These many years past – for sure, only

By default – are politely circumspect.
"O, yes, I beg your pardon, but I have,
O, about twelve minutes to ten," spoken
In words, not numbers. Time is elegant,
Like this clear lake, a grace of language.

We speak slowly, we pace ourselves
In conversation angling toward poetry.
And to tell time accurately, or about,
I wind his watch, the rectangular
Hamilton, having looked at the heretical

Digital clock, wordless on the wall,
And I set the dial of a watch that runs
About a minute fast to keep me, but not –
Ever I suspect, my grandfather –
On my toes, translating the wall clock's

Rigid demands into the slow, miniature
Sweep of the delicate minute hand.
But it is only in summer, when Carol
And I move into my grandparent's old
Summer home, gathering with descendants,

That Pooh and I separate, not far apart,
And I get to listen as a grandson again,
For in summer our Hamilton stops on us
With significant regularity. I sit
At the dock in my idle rowboat and hear

"Whatever do you need a wristwatch for
In summertime? Anything pressing just now?
If I might make a small recommendation,

I suggest that you leave the watch in the cabin,
Take your boat out onto the lake and fish.

And remember to hold your mouth right.”
I am willing to compromise, always have been.
I keep the watch on my wrist, so as not
To mislay it, and to keep the conversation going.
Then I take the boat out onto the lake,

Tuck the fragile timepiece into my tackle box
Carefully, plunk a lure of some sort idly
Into the clear water, admire the poetry
Of the sky. Then I wobble my lips and
Scrunch my face. I try to hold my mouth right.



Like her eldest grandson, Babe was more poet than historian, more devoted to precision than to accuracy. Her thinking tended to go as follows:

Pie

On the road to Bemidji we pass the little
Restaurant in little Lake George.
“They have the best hamburgers there!”

My grandmother extols. Or,
“They have the best blueberry pie!”
Mostly we keep going. Errands.

But maybe we go into the restaurant
For the best hamburgers, and they are always
What she says they are, and she declares

“They have the best apple pie here!”
Which the apple pie would be, would
Have to be, unless the pie was, maybe, peach.

We adapt our appetites and our best hope
To Babe’s appetite, Babe’s sure knowledge –
Of pie, and hamburgers, the art of living.

Would we stoop to order the blueberry
Or the banana cream? Orthodoxy
Is just so trustworthy as its living conscience.

“They have the best banana cream!”
Could we order apple or blueberry?
Apostasy should be foreign to love.

Our only comparison is with Babe’s taste,
Our contrasts left in the pie case or in the past.
Babe is faith; the pie in the mouth, science.

Oh, we also know that she said “apple” only
Because she thought “apple” before she thought
“Banana cream,” or “blueberry,” or “peach.”

What matters is never the genus of pies.
What matters is just *that* pie, the apple—
Today, anyway. Maybe with ice cream.