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Poetry Potpourri

By Margie Snowden North

DEATH DOWN THE ROAD

*There's been a death, Mama said.
So she killed two chickens
and cleaned them and fried them
and opened a jar of peaches,
for food and Death always went together.*

*We put on our Sunday best,
Mama in her good gabardine skirt
with seamed hose
and black and white wing-tip pumps,
and we drove to the neighbors
where cars were parked haphazardly,
without order.*

*Other people with food and sympathy
were streaming in and out the door.
Stay out here and play, Mama said.*

*Men were gathered
on the porch and around the cars
and talked about crops and Truman
and how good a neighbor the Archers had been.
We stayed far back,
away from death.*

*The sunshine filtered down
through the elm leaves
making patterns on our quiet faces.
We sat stiffly in a swing
or walked to the hog-wire fence
and looked out across the small field
where we had played long ago,
and playing was the last thing on our minds.
Mrs. Archer was ancient, we agreed solemnly.
Probably 60.
Old age and Death went together.*

*At last we drove away,
back into sunshine and Life
and got into everyday clothes
that moved when you did
and it was time for chores
and no one minded a bit.*

*It was good to laugh again
and lean your face against Daisy
while you milked
and smell her cow-warmth
and feed a foaming pan of milk to the kittens
and forget for a while how close to Death
you were down at the neighbors today.*

Illustration by Paul Stone

■ ONE TIME IN ERICK

*When Tex Ritter came to town that time,
he talked to my little brother!*

*Oh, it was a good day.
We had heard ole Tex on the radio
and now here he was up on a flat-bed trailer
right down on Main Street
sittin' there holdin' that guitar
and singin' his heart out about boll-weevils
and rye whiskey.*

*The sweat was pourin' off all of us,
even ole Tex.*

*His hair was long in front and
combed straight back and
he had to keep flingin' it back out of his eyes,
cause when he really got into singin'
he forgot everybody
except the words and pickin'
that guitar.*

*Little Ransom was takin' it all in,
right up on the edge of that trailer,
starin right up into Tex's eyes,
wishin' he could get hold of that guitar.
And that's when Tex Ritter —
famous singer and personality that he was,
in all his awe-inspiring regality
and right in front of half the people in Erick —
talked to my little brother.*

*He said,
Move back just a little, sonny.*

■ APRIL 9, 1947

*We went to the cellar that night
in winds that almost blew us
to the ground.*

*We tugged the wooden door shut
and Mama lit the kerosene lamp
and set it in its own circle of light
on the dusty shelf.*

*Hushed, groggy,
we sat on the mildewy cot,
wary of spiders and centipedes,
listened to the shriek outside
and Papa's reassurance on the inside.
After a while he had us girls giggling, and
we almost forgot there was a storm.*

*Didn't know till later
that while we laughed,
sleepy, secure, safe,
a house up by Sweetwater was raised
off its foundation
and set down again,
a man near Grimes lost his life,
and worst of all
a town called Woodward
up there by the panhandle
(or somewhere)
was being flattened
and lives snuffed out
like candles
in a southwest wind.*

MAY 16, 1957

*Come and see the river
they were saying in town,
and in cars we flocked out there
five miles to the Northfork of Red River.
We stood on the Tittle Bridge
(dedicated with speeches and free barbecue
only six years before) and
watched dislodged trees and a rolling current
lapping at undergirdings and at the bridge floor itself.*

*We were not concerned.
The Tittle Bridge can take it, we said.
Bridges in times past had crumpled in such waters,
wooden bridges that sounded like washboards
rolling up behind as you drove over them.
The Tittle Bridge
was built to withstand headrises and flood currents,
so we stood on her strength
and watched the angry waters,
never dreaming the currents could be stronger
than concrete or steel.*

*Not one of us was prepared
for the incredible buckling,
the sound of twisting steel,
the screams and frenzied scurrying,
bodies being pitched like rag dolls
headlong into raging waters.
Panic came, disbelief, and a scream:
My children are gone!*

*Afterward there was the ceaseless searching
of numbed but caring friends
and standers-by and even the National Guard —
with one body found and one not —
until common sense at last dictated
the futility of it.
Even then there remained a father
who searched for weeks and months,
yet who returned home each time,
empty-handed.*

*The repaired Tittle Bridge
stands strong and firm today, unmarred.
But the hearts of a mom and dad
will bear marks forever,
caused by a flood one spring
when the bridge went
and took with it two young lives.*