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St. Jacobs

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St. Jacobs

Bill Elgersma

Shoeing on Thursdays
the handwritten sign in the window states.
Old strap hinges, the drop-on kind
that blacksmiths forge themselves
murmur a minor protest to the disturbance.

The interior is rainbows of black and white
where windows high above
admit sunlight—
black expanses between
gobble it up.

At the far end of the barn
a stooped figure is silhouetted
in a powderless fireworks.
The forge flares as he cranks
and when the steel glows
he places it on the anvil
to pound again—a horseshoe.

The cascade of sparks—
an ancient profession
with a 20th century look.
The boy comes close to watch,
—moth to a flame—

“Can I help ya, boy?”
“Kay if I watch?”
“Fine,” the grizzled smithy returns to his steel.

The better part of a day—
the old man croons to the horses
skittish, placid, spirited and personable.

“Get off, ma darlin’.”
“Whoa now, pet.”

He pounds a labor of love
to a vanishing trade.

The boy catches snatches,
not sure if they are his to be taken
mumblings of senility—an old man lost in his youth
as he plies his craft.

“Lad like yerself, a year ta lern, tops.”

He looks bright-eyed at the boy—
back down to the anvil.
Pound, press, pound a little more.

“Not many likeus left, ya know boy.
Jus’ a few real uns
Not a big city livin’
No real money or nothin, jus’ satisfaction.”

The old man motions around the shop,

“S’ mine an’s paid fer,
what more couldja want?
Lookin’ fer a steady ‘prenice,
whatja think?”

The then-boy now-man
still sees the picture.
A college choice over an honest living
the smell of the hot forge
the muted sound of the hammer
on radiant steel—

He sees the smith:
the forge—
to the anvil—
to the hoof—
back to the forge.
Finally, in perfection, the nails are driven in.
Out she goes.

Struggling with this vision
he takes the tongs
places the word in the forge
tempering the image.
Retrieving it he works to mold,
shape, form it to the context.

A little more heat,
increasing the twist
he searches for the nails
to complete the job.