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Apprentices

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Apprentices

Bill Elgersma

Bill Young (he's dead now)
smoked a pipe
Drum tobacco.
Pouch opened
we sniffed, enticing aroma,
good enough to eat
and so we did
—long seemingly damp shreds
in a woman's purse-like pouch—
and promptly threw up.

Match defied gravity on inhalation
a sucking sound as flame reversed
puffs, then clouds
ejected from talented lips.
We watched
envious
too young at 7 and 8
to smoke a pipe
but certainly awed.

Victor ate cigarettes.
Polish immigrant
broken English
fingers nicotine-stained,
yellowed ground-down teeth
along with cracked burnt lips
evidence of the habit's longevity.

He rolled his own, we admired.
A rectangular pouch
tucked in a plaid shirt pocket
with papers for rolling attached.
Smoke-talking.
Saliva glued paper to bottom lip,
as the cigarette danced to the tune of his voice,
tobacco juice and broken English spilling out together.

Andy lost his pouches.
He too rolled his own
filtered too expensive.
Although fingers stained,
lips and teeth intact.

Drawing on the cigarette,
end glowing
exhaling without removing,
one eye squinted, protection from curling smoke.
As the paper cemented, he too spit.
An art form.
Tip of the tongue creeping between lips to go
“thpht.”
Tendrils sailed
but cigarette remained firmly affixed.

Curiosity and adventure--childhood's precursor to trouble—
procured
—stolen actually—
the makings of the next stage of life.

7 and 8
on the water tower
long abandoned when hydro plumbed the farm
fifteen feet above the ground
bent nails fixed broken boards to wooden legs
a shaky ladder to a shaky childhood
our refuge
our classroom.

Stale tobacco
wet papers
two matches
our youth about to go up in smoke.

(continued on following page)

Sucking in,
we scorched our lips,
mouths
throats
lungs.
We coughed.
coughed and gagged
And coughed and gagged and choked
and finally
puked.

Dispersing lunch spectacularly
15 feet up
spewed chunks of peanut butter sandwiches
sailed across the fire pit.

Fred first.

Not having inhaled as deeply
younger,
liking my food
reluctantly, inevitably,
I too bowed to the cigarette
gave it its due.
The inverted flame,
the squinting eye
the thpht of wayward shreds
all this would have to wait.

Dizzied from the influence
We fell among nettles and burdock.
Almost as green.

Weeds among the weeds.
We could not hold our smoke.