

Martha Deed

Asking Questions

1

He is asking questions

Do we have Presidents in Dad's family?

then

Did we have slaves?

He is seven
still plays knights in gleaming armor
re-enacts the Crusades
on the wrong side
his mother says

What do we make of DNA that crosses seas
back and forth
inscrutable until we can untangle it?

It's a grandma question
also a cousin question
because "grandma" is not linked by blood
as "grandma," but rather is linked
by cousinhood

and how is a seven year-old or anyone else
supposed to understand how that could happen?

It took grandpa's 80th birthday to untangle
strands of chromosomes twisting two families
into one

grandma thought she'd married into a family
of Swiss farmers who emigrated to WNY
a hundred years ago – which on second thought –
was strange because each time she'd
stayed in Switzerland she'd found the people
cold as the all-white meal she'd suffered through
in Zermatt when she pinched the baby's toe
to make her cry so they could be exiled
to eat alone, not staring into the blank
faces of the other diners who scowled at babies
and this Swiss husband was warm though
serious as the Swiss electrician who came
at 6 AM to inspect the stove to confirm
its compliance with local codes

But on second thought (again)
there were signs that First Thanksgiving
when taken to meet his family

sister handed younger brother
a bowl of nuts to pass
and he ate them all

a male sat reading in the only easy chair
his pant leg rose, his bare shin gleamed
while the women told stories everyone
had heard before of boring dead relatives

the adult children fled before cleanup time

no one listened

no one expressed the slightest interest in the guest

2

The second family visit he took her to the cemetery
filled with Swiss ancestors – those farmers
whose cows he'd herded down the road to the barn
before the land was sold to a Dodge dealership

This one

he says pointing to a well-kept stone with a clay pot
filled with wildflowers beside it

*This one came from some place in New England
I don't know how they met*

*My grandmother who was hit by a train and died
because the railroad crossing guard fell asleep
did not lower the gate
my grandfather, too.
I was seven.
I cried.*

One New Englander to trace before his 80th birthday
long-married by then and assuming no more secrets
were to be found

They are cousins
The five stepchildren are cousins
even those who reject her are cousins

The seven year-old asking questions
is her cousin

There are Presidents in his father's line
and his – and although most of his ancestors
were –TG – too poor to own another person
because morality may have had little to do with it –
a 17th Century grandson of the Mayflower
kept a single man in bondage until that man freed himself

by marrying an Indian – his name was Hampshire

and a hundred years later
when we all should have learned
another cousin writes

*Involuntary servitude in those days had not been abolished
in Massachusetts, and he owned one slave by the name of
Hampshire, probably "a military necessity."**

Oh, really?
A white-wash for sure
Did every soldier who went to war
cage a human back home to feed the cows?

The boy has been waiting for an answer
and now his mother
emigrant from Africa
indigenous
no Anglo roots
speaks

My family had slaves

*Ebenezer Alden. Memorial of the Descendants of Hon. John Alden. 1867. p 14.

The Wastebasket

Why is this wastebasket no longer round
even though the geese are still flying North
or South over Town Cove's sand flats
at low tide in Orleans on Cape Cod?

Did childhood memories
of birds and dunes and sand sharks
swimming beneath the cloth-covered
folding canoe cross his mind as he
took a tumble into infirmity?

And further – consider the clouds
the blues and pinks near sunset
the Sanderlings and peeps
scampering, digging insects
horseshoe crab eggs, worms
and algae from the drying sand
before the tide comes back in

Is this the sky
tumbling down upon you
or, more likely,
you
waiting for morning's renewal?

Sneakers

If you remember the day you tossed your red sneakers into the washing machine because of the mud when they were still too new for stains and your father's underwear turned pink and he refused to wear any of it ever again and they tried to take the replacement cost out of your 5 cents a week allowance and you would have been a grandmother before that debt was satisfied, then you can comprehend the absurdity of the current state we live in where all truth is alternate and court trials have become occasions for political speech in the hallway just outside the range of the judge to hear, although you know he will hear about it later, but the present is the only tense that counts, then you will know that these days are tailor-made for the likes of the late James Tate for whom the world was a source of unending surrealistic poetry.