A Childhood Better Forgotten

UWM Writing Project-Summer 2011

You can’t really smile until you shed some tears
“Awful Beautiful Life”
Darryl Worley

I am from cotton
From Eli Whitney and his cotton gin.
I am from Security.
Not the safety type,
but the actual street.

I am from clothes hung on the line,
and hours spent in laundry mats
with my mother.

I am from picking apples
until they appear in dreams
As Robert Frost describes in
His poem “After Apple Picking.”

I am from rotten apple fights
with siblings and neighbors.
I am from picking dandelions
until my fingers turned yellow
so that my father could make
Dandelion wine.

I am from large family
Reunions where we met
cousins we didn’t know existed.

I am from old names:
Eleanor, Lydia, Polly and Esther,
Dexter, Wiley, Wesley and
Milford.

I am from a close neighborhood
where we enjoyed neighborhood parties
that lasted all day and we saw
friend’s parents as we had
never seen them before.
Neighborhoods. What a peculiar concept. A group of people living together on the same block; their lives intermingled because of where they chose to live. The neighborhood I lived in had an empty lot. In this lot, the kids would congregate and play baseball in the summer and flag football in the fall. Children were various ages so baseball and football would be structured so that everyone could play. This field held great memories because my brother Andy and I spent countless hours during many summers enjoying recreational baseball with our neighborhood friends.

Our neighborhood was a dead end so there were not many cars and no sidewalks. We had the whole field to ourselves with no strangers interrupting our sport. I'm not sure if the bond we shared was because of our privacy or perhaps it was due to the dysfunctional lives all of us led but of which we were oblivious. Maybe we were just pretending to be from “normal” families and thought that all parents let their kids play outside from the break of dawn until dusk.

The family living diagonally from us was the Rhodes. They had three children. Dee Dee was the oldest, while Tim and Ted were her younger brothers. I will never forget the time when Mr. Rhodes came home and started beating his wife out on the porch. Dee Dee and I were sitting on our front steps and just went into my house and pretended nothing was happening. The next day, the neighborhood kids met at the empty lot and played their usual game of baseball. The Rhodes later divorced.

Then there was the neighborhood drunk who just happened to be my father. I remember playing with my friends outside when he came storming out of the house, drunk of course, after yet another fight with my mother. He mounted his motorcycle and rode out of the driveway and proceeded to fall right there in front of my friends and I. I was horrified with embarrassment. He brushed himself off, swearing, re-mounted his motorcycle, and drove away. The next day, the neighbor kids met at the empty lot, and played another game of baseball.

I believe deep down we knew what brought us all together and what made those games so exhilarating in our young childhood. Although most of us came from dysfunctional families, when we were playing games in that empty lot, everything was okay. Everyone knew what went on in their neighbor’s homes, but no one shared their confidences. It was just another game of baseball, until someone had to go home. Our fantasy was then shattered, and reality took over.

I am from good times and bad
And a childhood better forgotten
I am from a father who quit school at 14
And a mother of farming parents

I am from a family with six children
Of which I am the youngest
I am from Roger Whitney and Betty Burkman
I am Polly Esther Whitney with
The initials of PEW

_Thou hast wounded the spirit that loved thee_
And cherish'd thine image for years;
_Thou hast taught me at last to forget thee,_
_In secret, in silence, and tears._

Mrs. (David) Porter: _Thou hast wounded the Spirit._