

# Where Are You, Frank Gillette?

by Kevin C. McHugh

There are no ruby slippers  
to take me home.  
Only a playground memory.  
I have the teacher's lunchtime watch—  
the shepherd by the school's back door,  
safe from the midday sun  
in the elementary shade.

I scan the blacktop play,  
mindful of possibilities  
that children do not see,  
on guard against the bloodied knees,  
the dodge ball scrapes,  
or the curt and callow cry of  
"That's not fair!"—  
at elemental injustices  
that rub their innocence  
until it blisters red and raw.  
They want their just desserts,  
having not yet learned  
that this playing field  
is as uneven as the next.

I celebrate their incredulity  
as I remember them lost  
in all-absorbing play.  
Their singularities have blurred  
like their voices  
into a slurry of long ago.  
Only he stands out:  
by birthdays still a grinning boy,  
chubby and blue-eyed beneath  
a tempest of tousled red hair.  
You are your own little man,  
held back and middle-aged at twelve,  
detached from them  
and their children's games.

So by default you seek me out  
and we talk—  
about what I cannot recall,  
but all at once you see  
past the playground:

to the baseball field beyond  
 where the shirtless custodian,  
 sits atop a battered tractor,  
 slicing swathes of sweet, dark spring  
 across the rising green.  
 “Man,” you say aloud for me to hear,  
 “that’s’ the life.  
 Riding a tractor in the sun,  
 no shirt on, smoking a cigarette . . . ,”  
 and your voice trails off in a smile  
 and in a new light—while I nod  
 in complete, complicit accord.

From where we stand together  
 you, in your naïve wisdom,  
 do not foresee the confines  
 of the wider and welcoming verge.  
 Perhaps that is the secret of your grin  
 as we peer across to where familiar grass  
 does, indeed, grow greener.

Frank, I hope you made it  
 to that succeeding diamond  
 where wiser men like you  
 transform the baser metals into gold.  
 For me there will always be a heaven  
 if somewhere I can picture you,  
 happy and fat and seated  
 on that old John Deere, smoking,  
 and laughing your ass off—  
 driving shirtless into the sun.