

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.