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Three Poems

by Ann Taylor

Cursive

At school, above the blackboards, a Big Palmer A,
beside her smaller sister, little a.
Big B, little b, and on, standing up tall
to their correct dashed lines all around the room.
The only right way to write, said Sister Catherine.

And then, Christ's color portrait, his sacred heart
ablaze, blessing us, and Mary's statue,
smaller than we were, dressed in heaven's hues,
hands pressed in prayer, overseeing desks, chairs
in nailed-down rows. Safe confines where I grew.

Unconfined, my script is now Palmer's downfall,
my chair on rollers, a wobbly swivel to wherever
my spirits are inclined, I'm much less certain,
but still trying to move smooth, to make connections
. . . still running after something.

Laugh Track

Clueless Raymond insults his mother.
She glares speechless back, lower lip aquiver.
Into the silence, a gaggle of laughs –
the stand-off not homicide, but humor.

The audience chokes, amused
by TV friends, kids saved by the bell,
big bang jokes, a soup Nazi –
too reliably breaks into group giggles.

In the '50's, Charley Douglass captured
laughs, claps, and snickers in his "laff box,"
inserted these push-button happy companions
into the dead air of comedy.

Taping long ago before a live audience,
Milton Berle's joke failed to stir planned hilarity,
so he "sweetened" it later with boxed delight.
"I *told* you it was funny," he concluded.

Canned humor sounds fake, even spooky,
especially when laughers long gone
can be programmed to burst with tinny glee
at today's quips, way-off-color jokes.

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Editor's Note

Guidelines

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But for the 3 AM insomniac,
alone in the unsweetened dark,
they can seem a comfort, even friends,
so cheerful *somewhere* on the sunny side.

Out of Place

(for David)

In the middle of Park Square's gridlocked crossroads,
parked police cruisers, lurid neon, sat Boston's
Hillbilly Ranch, its own country, surrounded
by a fence better for snagging tumbleweed
than fast-food plastic cups.

Inside, a roadhouse feel – those red-checked tablecloths,
overturned ashtrays, sloppy steins of anonymous beer.
Nightly, there was the six-foot serpentine dancer
that David named *Slim*, gliding in his own Dervish trance,
eyes lidded, always alone among other dancers –
no matter the melody, no matter the banjo's plunkety pace.

And Corinna, the set-up act, with her bleached locks,
ten-gallon hat, fringed vest and carved white boots,
who clung to the microphone and whined
the H-E-DOUBLE-L of her D-I-V-O-R-C-E.
One night, they carried her away in a city ambulance
rolled up to the back door.

We weren't just right for the place either,
the three of us, graduate lit. students,
sharing toasts with thirsty sailors, lecherous soldiers,
and long-distance truckers. With his roots
deep in Pennsylvania country, his plaid shirts, string ties,
scruffed boots, David was the most Hillbilly.

Zeppelin and Club Playboys pulsed just outside,
while he taught us to hear Appalachia, the high lonesome
sound of Bluegrass.

Ev Lilly, with his mandolin and his go-to-church suit,
his brother Bea, guitarist, almost the suit itself,
and banjo-picker Don Stover, night after night, called
north those songs of coal-miner's lungs, fox hunts,
tragic deaths, highways to heaven.

David convinced me to buy a banjo from Don,
then to take lessons from him, but of course
I never got beyond a dried-up *Cripple Creek*.

The Hillbilly's gone now, erased by the upscale Square,
and so too Ev, Bea, Don . . . and David himself,
our age, down that sorrowful highway years ago –
the sentiment right, as always . . . the time, the place
all wrong.

Ann Taylor is a professor of English at Salem State University in Salem, MA, where she teaches both literature and writing courses. She has written two books on college composition, academic and free-lance essays, and a collection of personal essays, *Watching Birds: Reflections on the Wing* (Ragged Mountain/McGraw Hill). Her first poetry book, *The River Within*, won first prize in the 2011 Cathlamet Poetry competition at Ravenna Press. Her recent collection, *Bound Each to Each*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2013.

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