

Singing: A Requiem

by Gary Fincke

Mr. Bell was the elementary school music teacher. He had a raspy voice and used a small round tuner he blew into to get us searching for the correct pitch twice a week when he visited our room while our teacher Mrs. Sowers disappeared for forty minutes. We sang "Dixie" and "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "The Marine Corps Hymn" from the stapled book full of uplifting songs we stored in our desks between his visits. In September, Mr. Bell had told us we were all blessed to be born under a fortunate flag. For our first sixth-grade music exam in October, he'd listened to us sing, one by one, "The Star-Spangled Banner" from memory, placing us exactly under the flag for our performances.

There was more to it than moving our mouths, he'd explained, showing us the proper posture for singing the National Anthem, his back as straight as a soldier at attention. All of us learned to keep eye contact with a spot slightly above his head so we looked patriotic and proud, working our way through the a cappella praise for what he called "our home."

What I remember most clearly about Mr. Bell is that in January, for a PTA meeting, he chose eight sixth graders to sing "America the Beautiful" and "Beautiful Dreamer" for a room full of mothers and two fathers. By late summer, my singing voice would turn tentative and tenor, but on that January night I confidently carried those tunes in close harmony with Paula P, Nancy H, Jim D, Dave S, and three others, all of us soprano and alto. Mr. Bell introduced us by name, and we were a hit.

Upstairs, after we finished to applause and were allowed to leave so we wouldn't have to sit through the "business meeting," five of us watched the *Tennessee Ernie Ford Show* on the television that was kept on a cart in our classroom because Mrs. Sowers was also the principal. Tommy Sands, the newest "Elvis," was the guest. He sang "Teenage Crush." Jim, Dave, and I sang along, but Nancy and Paula stared open-

mouthed at Tommy Sands until the hit song ended in a chorus of girlish screams from the studio audience. "He looks so cool," Nancy said. Jim wished Mr. Bell would hand out a rock and roll song book instead of one filled with the second, third, and even fourth stanzas of those patriotic tunes, verses that we never sang.

After she came home from the February PTA meeting, my mother announced, "Mr. Bell has cancer," her tone making it sound as if Mr. Bell was as good as dead. She hung her coat in the guest closet before she added, "Isn't it something that he's always had such good posture, and here he has it in his spine?"

We finished sixth grade without any more music classes. Mrs. Sowers stayed in the room all day except for Friday afternoon art and taught us something she called "enrichment social studies." We learned all of the Presidents in order from Washington to Eisenhower; we learned the names and dates of our country's wars right up to Korean (1950-1953). To keep us busy, she had us memorize the states and their capitals, beginning with Albany, Atlanta, Annapolis, and Augusta. One Friday in May I stood in line with half of my classmates to receive my final polio shot. My mother hugged me and said, "Thank God" when I got home.

A few weeks after school ended, using a stack of fully filled-in S&H Green Stamp books, she gave me a record player for my birthday. When I was alone, I sang along to my new Elvis and Little Richard records. When anyone else was around, I sang every verse perfectly in my head. A month later, my voice began to crack.

Shortly after school began, just after I stopped singing out loud in seventh grade music class, moving my lips like the rock stars on the Saturday night Dick Clark Show, the Asian Flu cleared out nearly half the students in every class. "We don't have a quorum today," Mr. Wargo said in history one morning, but nobody knew what that meant.

A few million people around the world died from the Asian Flu, but everybody in my school returned within a few weeks, that health scare forgotten quickly because the big news, for most of October, was the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik. The world's first man-made satellite seemed to spread anxiety through the teachers and administrators of the school like a second, longer-lasting pandemic, one that couldn't be ended with a vaccine.

Jim and Dave and I didn't worry about Communism, but we were all fascinated when our former school building, well over half a century old, was declared hazardous. Its fire escapes were cited as unsafe, something we'd all known the year before, but now a corner of the roof had torn loose and fallen into the playground ten minutes after recess ended.

The next time the three of us played basketball there, stuffing balls through the eight-and-a-half-foot-high hoops we'd been happy to touch with our hands the year before, we looked up at the missing corner in awe. We talked about where we'd stood for buckeye fights during fourth and fifth grade, when it was cool to smack drilled horse chestnuts threaded through by a shoestring against each other until one of them split and fell to the ground. It looked as if those bricks would have fallen right about where those buckeye fights usually happened.

During January, everybody in the seventh grade took a "special test," and by March, thirty of us were assigned to advanced math and science, chosen to challenge Communism with our brains out of the nearly three hundred in the seventh grade. I never had another math or science class with any of the other members of that PTA octet.

Mr. Bell, my mother heard, had returned to teaching. "A miracle," she said, but by May the talk of miracles had dissolved because Mr. Bell had suddenly "retired." Jim, Dave, and I had stopped going to the grade school playground. We had all played junior high basketball with hoops sporting nets that were set exactly at ten feet. We practiced jump shots and free throws only on regulation baskets that older neighbor boys' fathers had put up on nearby streets.

Mr. Bell died before eighth grade began. Nancy moved to Michigan. The chosen thirty of us took algebra and physical science. Jim and three boys from another neighborhood school sang as The Coachmen in the school talent show. Wearing matching chinos and shirts, they took first place, and girls crowded around them in the hall. In Cuba, Fidel Castro was winning an undeclared war our physical science teacher worried about. "He's with the Communists, just you wait and see," he said. "He'll be right next door."

I listened to the radio from noon to six on New Year's Day to hear the Top 100 songs of 1958. I sang "For Your Precious Love" and "Little Star" in my head where I still

sounded exactly like Jerry Butler and the lead singer of The Elegants. Tommy Sands wasn't mentioned. When school began again the following day, I walked out of the locker room after basketball practice with Jim and Dave, making fun of the whiz-kids in my science classes, especially the boys who, with one exception, didn't even try out for basketball, boys who probably couldn't even touch the rim of the baskets at our old school playground. But after basketball season ended, I hardly talked to either of them.

Of the five of us who had watched Tommy Sands together, only Dave and Jim were at our 60th class reunion. Nancy and Paula had been dead for decades. Dave approached me shortly after my wife and I arrived. "I finally saw somebody I recognized," he said. I knew what he meant. I'd been secretly trying to make out the nametags of classmates, even ones with whom I'd been friends and had recognized at our 50th from across the room.

I picked out Jim as well, though he looked shrunken and told me, after a minute of catch-up, that he had to sit because he was weakened by a recurrence of cancer. "I'm starting chemo first thing tomorrow morning," he said. "I think all of it started because I had a landscaping business after I retired from teaching. RoundUp, you know, or something else I used."

The day after the reunion, I drove to my old grade school. The building, now well over a century old, had been converted to offices while I was still in high school. What went on in those offices had had time to change and then change again and then, even gone unoccupied. A few appeared to have been closed for years, but about half were still in use. There were ancient photographs of class pictures on several walls, and I was disappointed that none from any of the five years that I attended to be deemed old enough to be displayed. A radio was playing "classic rock," the songs so familiar that I knew all the words as I mentally sang along. Every one of those classics was recorded since I'd graduated from high school.

What seemed miraculous was that the asphalt playground, more than sixty-five years since I'd walked on it, was the same surface, one that was confirmed by the faint outlines of a dodgeball circle, kickball bases, basketball free throw line, and even the

hopscotch diagram near the fire escape on what passed for the “Girls’ side” of the building where the bricks did not fall.

Eventually, Dave sent me a photograph of our sixth-grade octet singing, mouths open, heads up, the boys in coat and tie, the girls in dresses. All of the audience that’s included is seen from the back, no one distinguishable, not even my mother, but the photo reminded me who the other three singers had been—Ann H, Diane M, and Cam Y. Ann had been unable to attend the reunion; I have no idea what had happened to Diane and Cam since we’d graduated.

What surprised me most was that Dave, whose mother had kept the program, said it showed that, despite our attending a public school, we had sung the hymn “Beautiful Savior,” not “Beautiful Dreamer” as I had imagined. “Different times” is the expression that came to mind, a phrase that covered an enormous spectrum that ranged, in that school, from daily readings from the Bible by our teachers to routine corporal punishment to having all-white classmates created, I discovered years later, by red-lining. The Coachmen, I remember now, switched from doo-wop to folk music, harmonizing through “Greenfields” in the following year’s talent show, but none of the members of our PTA octet sang in the high school choir.

According to the reunion program, only four of the thirty students selected for advanced science and math to fight Communism had pursued careers in a related field. None of the six octet members reporting had done any organized singing as adults. Less than seven months after that 60th reunion, despite the chemo and advanced medical science, Jim has died.



Gary Fincke has published five nonfiction books including *The Darkness Call* (Pleades Press) which won the Robert C. Jones Prize for short prose. Individual essays have been reprinted in *The Pushcart Prize XXV* and *Best American Essays 2020*. *After Arson: New and Selected Essays* will be published in October by Madville Publishing.