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Cover: From 'Portrait of an Unknown
Woman' 1527—Joos Van Cleve
The Uffizi Gallery, Florence

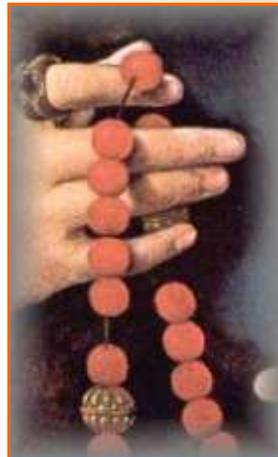
Origami Poems Project™

The Long Count
Norma Jenckes© 2014



The Long Count

Norma Jenckes



A Boxer's Advice to His Daughter

TAKE THE LONG COUNT

You are going to get knocked down.
Yes, you are, life will knock you down.
You just over swing — lose your balance
Trip yourself up—sure he's also pounding on you.
But you meet the canvas.
Don't jump to your feet to show that
You can—that it was all some bad mistake.
No, lay there, take the long count, stay still
Breathe, enjoy the little rest.
At eight begin to get up very slowly
Stand and shuffle a bit, let the Ref
Look you over, check you out.
Don't run towards the guy
Who is dying to finish you off.
You're finished with dying.

AT THE STARTING GATE

Yes, we were often in a bar or tavern
Or tap and I was with my dad.
He would offer to get some bread or milk
or meat for supper and bring me along
to allay any fears my mother had
that he would go astray.

What was astray to him?
Cards, poker, a bar with a card game
in the back room.

I would be part of the package
I loved being taken out
for a ride and then a quick run
into a dim cool place.

Usually I sat up at the bar,
drained a fizzy soda with a big cherry on top
while he would turn over 3 cards.
Then win or lose, we'd jump back into the car;
grab the needed groceries
from a neighborhood store.

One time it must have gone on beyond 3 cards
me sitting on somebody's lap...
Maybe I complained about his breath
or his smell or the way his beard scratched my neck.
My father took me up, stroked my hair,
Darling, -- he said--that man is close to
the finish line and he is stumbling a bit.
He wasn't always like that--
You should have seen him at the starting gate --

He was magnificent.

After we vacuum, change the sheets,
supper on fish chowder,
make pies and turnovers
rolled from left over dough and apples,
My Aunt Grace and I watch Friday night fights.
My father comes up from
Uncle Charlie's bar downstairs
where he played cards all evening.
We settle down with our milk and pie slices
like the boxer he was:
Glass jaw! Rubber legs!
Uppercuts, left jabs, winning combinations...
Keep your fists up!
all shouted out at the tiny screen of early TV.

ENJOY THE RIDE

Later we got into the old Desoto
with the choke that coughed.
I shivered, prayed and it caught.
My mother had warned me about driving home;
she thought he drove too fast
as we went down darkened Weeden Street
over the dip of the bridge,
I felt the car leave the ground
and started mouthing the Hail Marys,
rolling the hidden beads between my fingers
in my coat pocket.
He caught on and took one hand off the wheel
and put it around my shoulders.
"Don't go through life scared and mumbling,"
he laughed,
"Just sit back and enjoy the ride."
And I did.