

The Curator Says...Ken Autrey has a fine eye and ear for the written word. He draws his readers in as he finds personal significance in the small details of everyday life. His work is a good example of how personal writing can reveal universal truths.

Pappaw's Razor

Ken Autrey

When I was a kid, my Louisiana grandparents owned a country store. I have only the dimmest recollection of being there. It was not very lucrative but provided Pappaw something to do when he was too old to work the oil fields or tend the cornfields. One day, rummaging among detritus in the store's back room, I discovered a rusty straight razor. Back home, I had seen Mr. Higgins shave men in the barbershop with such an implement, but I had never held one. I knew it was dangerous, so I palmed it gingerly, pleased with the way the blade eased open and then snapped neatly back into its furrow.

I imagined Pappaw's sinuous hand holding the yellow handle as he performed his morning ablutions. Assuming he had cast it aside—perhaps in favor of a newer Gillette—I slipped it into my pocket to keep.

A year or so later, my grandfather was hospitalized with tuberculosis. He was 62. Too young to enter the Shreveport hospital with Dad, I stayed outside with Mom peering up at the imposing brick building. In a while, Mom pointed up several floors to a window where a faint white-garbed figure waved down at us. Always a slight man with wiry muscles, now Pappaw seemed insubstantial, as thin as a razor, a gossamer angel on high. That was my last glimpse of him, and he died within a year.

Now I struggle to recall the few encounters I had with him prior to that. Mostly, I have to rely on a few photos to bring him back to life. One shows Pappaw seated on an overstuffed chair with my sister Janice and me on his lap. He is reading to us, and I've strained my eyes trying in vain to see the title of the book. It must be Christmastime because over the chair a string tacked to the wall curves down, with the year's cards hung on it, the way my parents always used to display them. My earliest photo of Pappaw shows him, age 20 or so, seated beneath a tree. On the back, someone printed, "Byron Autrey at the base of the Rockies." Dad told me Pappaw once had the urge to move to California to see what opportunities that state held but couldn't persuade Mammaw to leave Louisiana. I'd love to know the story behind that photo. Was it taken during his one and only trip to the west coast?

For years, I hid the straight razor in a drawer, occasionally pulling it out to ensure that its swivel still worked and to run my index finger across the treacherously sharp blade. Now it has disappeared. Maybe it's tucked into some battered cardboard box in a forgotten corner of the attic. If I come across it again, I'll be nearly as pleased as I was 55 years ago in the back room of that country store. I own only one other item that belonged to Pappaw: a

well-worn jack plane, a reminder that he loved working with wood. What does it mean that the razor and plane were both used for shaving?

After I'm no longer around and my daughters or grandkids are sifting through my belongings, one of them may come across the straight razor and puzzle over its origins, knowing that I, who sported a beard most of my adult life, was unlikely to have used such an antique.

I should search for that family artifact. If I can unearth it I'll show it to all the family youngsters, who have probably never seen such a thing. Based on observation, if not personal experience, I could show them how the blade was gripped by thumb and forefinger, the handle supported delicately between ring and little finger. I could describe how a barber used a slab of flexible leather to strop his razor before each use. Just as there was an art to shaving with this wicked-looking tool, there was an art to the firm stropping as Mr. Higgins practiced it. The rhythmic patter of metal on leather accompanies the remembered scent of talcum powder and hair oil to transport me back to that male domain.

I've never had a shave with a straight razor. But when I decide I'm ready to dispense with my white beard, I think I'll seek out a barbershop where the old skill lives on and have the job done right by an old master.

Ken Autrey Says... I taught English at Francis Marion University in South Carolina from 1989 to 2011. Following retirement, my wife Janne Debes and I moved to Auburn, AL, my hometown. Previously, I served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ghana, a middle school teacher in upstate New York, and a writing instructor at Tougaloo College in Mississippi. In 1996-97 I was a visiting professor at Hiroshima University in Japan. In 2012, I conducted a summer writing workshops in Guangzhou, China. I have been active in the OLLI program since retiring to Auburn in 2011. My poems and essays have appeared in various periodicals, and anthologies. My poetry chapbook, *Pilgrims*, was published in 2010 by Main Street Rag, and in 2013, Longleaf Press published my chapbook, *Rope Lesson*. Janne and I have two daughters (Nell and Tess) and six grandchildren.