

Chalk on the Walk  
by  
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I don't know why I looked down that early Monday morning and noticed the writing on the sidewalk. I might have been cleaning up after one of my dogs on our daily ritual of an early morning walk; or I might have been checking for what I call masons' marks -- the imprint of some long-dead concrete contractor who stamped his name and the date in the wet cement. I can tell you where all the surviving nineteenth-century sidewalk is in this town, where I live in one of its oldest neighborhoods. But that morning it was chalk: chalk in two colors -- pink and green -- clear enough even in that unsteady light, spelling out "LUV U." That's right, four letters, one thought.

I should explain that my neighborhood, called Vine after one of its most prominent streets, was the rich side of town in the nineteenth century, when the industries of Kalamazoo were in their first throes of spewing out products into the world. First there were stoves, hardware, carriages and wagons, then pills and guitars, with a college and then the university providing educational adornment and accompaniment to the money making. The streets of the Vine neighborhood were lined with the domestic product of that exportable production, although the streetscape now showed gaps and elisions, rather like a fine smile ravaged by time's random extractions. Now Kalamazoo no longer made much of anything -- its pill and guitar makers were among the last to go, factories sold off, shut up, moved south, anywhere but here in Michigan. Once grand houses were now divided into apartments to house the city's last remaining customers -- its college students, imported to drink deeply of the Pierian spring water bottled and sold at the university and Kalamazoo College. As a lover of irony, I should add that the second major item still manufactured here is a particularly potent beer, drunk all-too deeply by both locals and students alike.

The chalk house was one of those formerly grand places, now vivisected into a rabbit warren of small apartments. The chalk message was obviously intended for one of its residents, and judging from the angle, size and orientation of the message, he resided at the front right of the chalk house.

You might wonder how I knew the sex of the intended reader and guessed something about the message writer? It's quite simple, I am a retired English professor from the university bottleneck of knowledge, so I can draw on forty-years experience of post-adolescent penmanship, color scheme, and observation of young love. In literary terms, what we have here is Juliet casting her glance up to her Romeo, but instead of the mellifluousness of Shakespeare, she's left a text message.

"Ah," I sighed, "could there be a more fitting symbol of the decline of modern culture?"

But despite the literary poverty, I was intrigued by the story line. I imagined one of those young girls who descend in the Fall like migratory birds, dragging behind them mothers and fathers, bearing food and furniture, to houses like these, following in the wake of so many predecessors. I confess to looking forward to move-in time, when the old neighborhood throbs with the young once again, and the shopkeepers emerge from their summer-long funk with dollar signs in their eyes. It was a rhythm of life almost tidal in its regularity, with nine months of flood followed by the outmigration every Spring, as SUVs towing rented trailers pulled up once again to rented houses to remove and return what they had once -- with such effort -- delivered. After the graduation-party boisterousness of the students' last weeks, and the moving frenzy that followed, summer seemed placid and sleepy, with just a few tide pools of young life left to keep things interesting.

Romeo was probably one of those rumped, slightly paunchy young men, uniformly dressed in t-shirt and baseball cap with the bill reversed, (as if to indicate the general drift of college life) and flip-flops. These lives on the outside seem composed of beer drinking and watching sports with little thought or time devoted to study. Unlike the girls, these boys usually migrated without the help of parents, pulling up in any manner of over-the-hill and decrepit vehicle, often of the four-wheel-drive or pickup variety. Their return was always announced with a scattering of beer cans across the lawns of their rented quarters, and the odor of charred meat emanating from the grills they kept on their porches. Accompanying it all was loud rock, or grunge, or some other cacophony liberally spilling out and enveloping the area all around. How happy their parents must be when they once again four-wheeled back to school!

Yet these chalked messages seemed to reveal to me hidden depths in these young men. Was this Romeo capable of summoning and sustaining the

passions his Juliette scrawled in pink and green outside his bedroom window? Where did he scrawl his emotions -- did he write her poetry? deliver orations full of verve and passion? Declare his feelings in the ringing iambs of Shakespeare? Or did he grope her in the backseat of his Jeep Wrangler, which he purchased and maintained partly for the entertaining of young women of more-or-less willing natures? Can I remember what I did at that age?

Whether I liked it or not, the tempests of love and desire had passed to this new generation. Who knows, perhaps scores of Shakespeares were even now perfecting text messaging as a vehicle for the emotions of love and self sacrifice. Perhaps this sidewalk chalking was a subset of a vast electronic wave of a sublime textual language of love, set out in staccato form and irregular rhyme scheme. Was there not a timeless swell of longing and loneliness, expressed in the poetry of young men and women of whatever age, falling in love and passion with each other? What difference did it make if the words it assumed were those of Rossetti or scrawled on some side walk, or electronic screen? Did I really believe in the "eternity" of Shakespeare's language of love, that in geologic time it was really more significant than the instant message that darted across a screen and then disappeared utterly?

We were in full football season when the change came. It wasn't any of the usual things -- not the games with their tailgate preludes and intoxicated postludes, capped by dull athletic contests and bad fan behavior. Nor was it the welcome leaf flame of the maple trees, or gathering leaf piles I corralled with my leaf blower. No, it was written with chalk on the walk: "DULUVME" -- I mentally added the absent question mark to the anguished pink and green question as I looked from the message to the upstairs window where I presumed Romeo lived. The all-in-caps shriek of pain caused me to wince and look away for a moment, as if I had caught a glimpse of something improper.

What had happened? I imagined a party such as those I observed every weekend during the school year with dozens of young men and women revolving and recombining in knots of conversation, beer drinking, and occasional pot smoking. Had R & J been separated in one of these swirls and whirls, he on one side of the room chatting with some other girls, while his Juliette looked on in dismay, cornered by some pimply bore with bad breath. Did she accost him later, berating him for his fascination with Andrea's cleavage, that stuck-up bitch, who flaunted her body and money trying to steal other peoples' boyfriends. Or had Romeo lashed out at the attentions of his frat brother, Nick, whose blonde curls and insouciant grace with women had roped in Juliette for a moment, a kiss, or something more?

Thereafter the passions mounted and the messages lengthened, albeit in the curious telegraphy of the text message. “U sd U luvd strng + U lied” In my translation, this is loosely: “You said you loved strong women and you lied.” This looked to me like the point of recrimination, that moment in a breakup when anger and resentment take over. Juliette no doubt pulled hard on the tether that bound her to Romeo -- that indiscretion with a friend, or perhaps a weekend trip alone in defiance of his wishes. All couples believe they are inventing love for the very first time and that there’s no past, no tradition, or expectation about behavior. I remembered my marriage in its early days, both of us besotted with the Beat culture of 1950s San Francisco, followed by that bohemian year in Paris as Fulbrighters. But once we’d settled down in a tenure-track job, in a strait-laced midwestern city, we’d become very much like our parents in our expectations of each other. Even as I nursed her through her last illness, as cancer ravaged her body and dementia her mind, I remembered how my mother had helped my father die. I performed the rituals very much as she had, honoring the deepest promise we make to our loved ones: that we will not let them die alone.

“GOOD BYE” I stood for some time over this chalk scrawl, which followed the last by a week or two. It was near winter by then; that time in November of phony Fall, before the Blitzkrieg of snow and cold descends from the northwest. Juliette had picked her time well; no doubt in a few weeks the sidewalk would be obscured by snow and ice, rendered unavailable for human communication in nature’s show of seasonal strength.

I wondered at the words, our shorthand for leave-taking, so unlike the expressions of other languages I knew. Many of those seemed to hold out hope of other meetings; *au revoir*, *auf Wiedersehen*, *tot ziens*, all seemed less definite, less final. What did Good Bye mean after all? Was it one of those remnants from Old English that stubbornly resisted the onslaught of Romance languages like a boulder in the stream, enduring to the point of meaninglessness? For Juliette it was clear that she had reached the level of acceptance of the pastness of her relationship with Romeo.

The wall that separates us from the past had always preoccupied me. How in memory my wife’s face seemed so near, so near that even now I awoke in the morning expecting her warmth to be there beside me, and to open my eyes to the sight of her as the first image of my day. But of course all that was lost far beyond recovery no matter what tricks my memory played on me. Do we ever fully accept our losses in time’s inexorable locking us off from the past?

It was a hard winter that year with a good deal of snow and temperatures cold enough to drive me inside and away from the long walks my dogs and I were accustomed to in other seasons. And the sidewalks were obscured by snow and ice, which no one in our struggling neighborhood bothered to clear before the Spring thaw. Many of my friends go south for winter, festooning the coastal towns of Florida, Alabama, and Texas with their Western Michigan and Michigan State t-shirts, while I choose the hats, boots and scarves of the cold season, enjoying the huddled waiting and watching of the dark time.

It was a Saturday in early April and I was at the laundromat bringing out the warm weather wardrobe for a quick preparatory wash. Our neighborhood wash house is nothing much to look at; it is run by a Korean family who speak little English, but they're friendly enough. Their youngest boy, Kim, is twelve and is the family translator. I can depend on him to help me transfer heavy loads of laundry from washer to dryer. He accepts gifts of chocolate bars in return. It's strange why I come here, for I have a perfectly serviceable pair of laundry appliances at home, standing ready just as my wife left them the day she died. I guess it's the communal aspect, the knowledge that for millennia, human beings have gathered along flowing water to beat, batter, and rinse their clothing together. And most fittingly, it was there I spotted Juliette.

Of course I didn't know it was her at first -- she was just another twenty-something college student wearing the usual t-shirt and jeans with her blonde hair falling down to her shoulders in no particular order. She had the purposeful look of someone whose laundry is pure chore, to be performed as quickly as possible to permit a return to more interesting past-times. I glanced at her just as she was transferring her colored clothes from the plastic basket to the washing machine tub, and right there on top was a pair of jeans with pink and green chalk on the knees.

So this was Juliette.

I smiled to myself as I went about my own business, averting my eyes as one does to pretend that public spaces are really not "public" -- that we are really just alone together as we careen through life. But there at the dryers was a woman capable of great passion and pain, who had given me hope that even if I were no longer young, there were others who had taken over and continued the enormous risk-taking that is falling in love.

Coda: Jump-rope Chant:

Chalk on the walk, chalk on the walk,  
funny way to talk with chalk on the walk.  
All those colors got to tell others,  
the love I feel to make it all real.

Chalk on the walk, chalk on the walk,  
girls gyrating, while narrating  
hopes and dreams,  
while the jump rope screams.

Chalk on the walk, chalk on the walk,  
Jump on the right foot,  
then on the left,  
bow down, turn around,  
do a pirouette.

Life is romancing, while we're all chancing,  
life and limb,  
it's why we're all in,  
like chalk on the walk,  
that chalk on the walk.