

Jun-2003

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Recommended Citation

Carter, Jane (2003). An American Patchwork. *Bridgewater Review*, 22(1), 22-23.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol22/iss1/12

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An American Patchwork

by Jane Carter



Photograph by David Wilson

August 24, 2002

My son and I were people who didn't entirely belong to any one place. We had attachments to various places we had lived, but we hadn't lived in any place long enough to have become fixed and incorporated into it. My son is a person with autism, who understands life best through pictures and through direct experiences.

So it was for these reasons that on one recent Memorial Day, we went to see a local parade in a small town where we had never lived, and in which we knew no one. My son could see the way a lovely little New England town welcomes the coming of summer.

We walked through the sunny, breezy side streets, past the big town cemetery, a combination of early New England austerity and Victorian opulence like those found in so many cities and towns in this part of the country. Other walkers preceded and followed us, all going to the town center to see the parade. Some people smiled and spoke. Most just walked along in the sunshine, the elderly at a slow pace, the youngest at a skipping run.

Everyone collected around the central town green. We could hear bright brass and thumping percussion from the high-school band, approaching just out of sight down the main road. The police had set up barriers in front of the roads leading into the central part of town, so the clear day was pleasantly free of the sound and sight of cars, with one exception. An antique Ford touring car, gorgeous with polished wooden side panels and shiny brass fittings, sat on a far side of the town green. Three elderly gentlemen stood to one side of the car, surveying it and commenting. Any one of them probably remembered a car not unlike the one they were admiring, from a time when they had been the age of the pigtailed little girl who climbed on the running board to look inside.

The parade, approaching from around a far curve in the main road, suddenly burst into view, led by a State Police car with flashing headlights. Anyone who has ever seen a Memorial Day parade in a small American town could probably close their eyes and describe what we saw: the three Selectpersons, the centerpiece of whom was a strikingly pretty woman who completely eclipsed her two ordinary-looking, sober-suited col-

leagues; the firemen, nodding and smiling at friends and neighbors; the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scouts, the Brownie Scouts, all in imperfect formation; the high-school band in their long-sleeved white shirts and dark trousers, eyes fixed on their instruments and on the backs of the marchers just ahead of them.

The crowd was smiling, applauding, and being generally appreciative. Any experienced paradesgoer would recognize them all. The little boy riding his father's shoulders and waving two small American flags, one in each hand, followed by the anxious mother. The elegant matron in twill slacks and silk shirt, wearing a straw hat, its crown wrapped with a scarf. The scattering of young boys riding bikes and skateboards alongside the parade, partly to join in and partly (maybe mostly!) to tease their friends who were marching.

Two puppies, one black and one white, suddenly spotted each other and strained at their leashes, yapping excitedly. The inevitable Tom Sawyer energetically climbed up a tree at one side of the common, finding one of the best seats available.

At the far edge of the crowd, in the back seat of a parked car, sat a very old man. He was leaning part way out of the open back door, straining to see all that went on. He coughed deeply and seemed to be in some pain.

When the marchers reached their positions on the common, a portly, behatted matron stepped forward to introduce the speakers. She first introduced a middle-aged Vietnam vet, perhaps chosen for his military service, but not for his speaking abilities. He was clearly uncomfortable, and began his speech with a joke or two. It just didn't work! The assembled group was not there to be entertained, even by a military veteran, their response made clear. His jokes fell flat, and he stumbled through some other remarks and sat down. The tolerant audience clapped politely, but without any enthusiasm. The speaker's self-consciousness had blunted the sense of ceremony that the little celebration demanded.

Banner (1999)
Catherine Carter.
Mixed media on
canvas. 36" x 36"

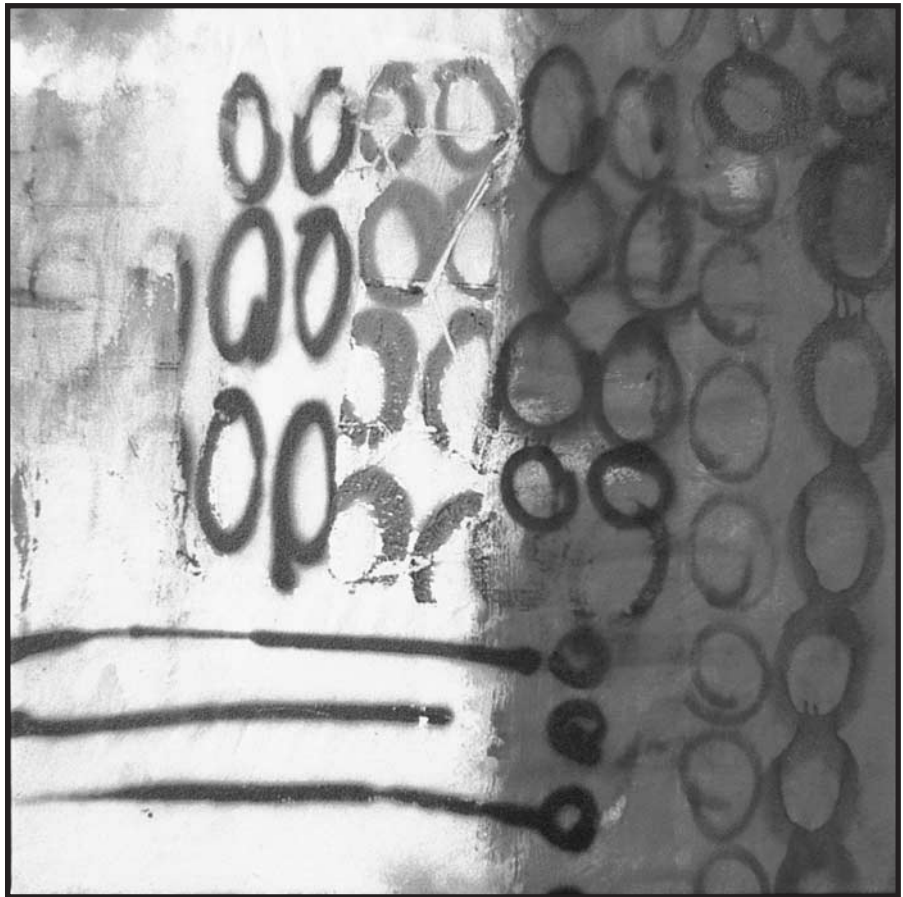
The mistress of ceremonies next introduced a junior high school student who would read Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address*. As the young man began to read, with intensity, something extraordinary happened. The audience listened, and then side conversations stopped. Everyone became totally focused on the reader at the podium. The first speaker had not had the needed sense of seriousness and ceremony. By sharp contrast, Abraham Lincoln had an unparalleled sense of ceremony, and an unsurpassed ability to create thoughts and words with an eternal quality to them. The earnest young student was letting Lincoln speak again, and giving the event an aura of immortality.

The holiday itself began during Lincoln's time, out of an intention to memorialize young lives sacrificed in a time of national torment. For a few minutes on that town green, I had a tangible feeling of having entered a time machine and of being shown the great meaning of recurring holidays like Memorial Day.

Lincoln spoke for his time and for all time, and the people on that town green recognized it. Their applause was loud and prolonged and that applause was for President Lincoln.

The high school band closed the program with the playing of "Taps." I had dreaded this particular memorial music because it is tied in my mind with deeply painful personal loss. This band played the music arranged, not for solo trumpet, but for full band, emphasizing the woodwinds, of all choices! The effect was baffling in its stark difference from the expected sound. As they played, I began to hear in the back of my mind the sound of "Taps" played through a frozen winter cemetery where my cousin, an Air Force major, was being buried with full military honors. One trumpeter played the melody through, answered by a second trumpeter, unseen over a hill in the background. Every single note was played with true and beautiful accuracy.

But this little band, though young and inexpert, was playing with energy. Suddenly, as they played the



music, something on the fringes of the crowd caught my attention. The old man who had been sitting in the parked car was painfully pulling himself out of the back seat to stand uncertainly at attention on the grass. It was a great effort for him to stand straight, without leaning against the car, but he succeeded. He stood upright, at military attention, until the music ended. He had heard the meaning of the music as only an old soldier could have.

That old veteran's determined tribute and Abraham Lincoln's timeless words had fused together the patchwork images of the little town's Memorial Day celebration, giving it a dignity and value that I can never forget.

—Jane Carter is a Visiting Lecturer in the
Department of English