

Letter to a Friend

You asked why I write. By Vess Quinlan

Dear Editor CJ:

I began attempting to compose thoughts into understandable sentences when confined with polio in 1951 at age 11. My world had been turned upside down and inside out by an enemy I could not see and did not understand. I had reluctantly returned home to Colorado from a ranch near Sharon Springs, Kansas, where Uncle Dell ran the steer operation and Uncle Wayne ran the cow calf operation for a businessman named John Cogswell from Goodland. The enemy virus was waiting for me.

My mother's father and all four of her brothers were cowboys. Dell and Wayne were older than she was and married, but childless. I spent every summer, from the time I was weaned, split between the uncles on whatever ranch they were working for. I was treated like a pint-sized potential top hand, maybe snubbed on a colt being broke to lead or mowing grass hay with a mule-drawn mower and raking it out of places along the creek too boggy for a tractor with a mule-drawn dump rake. In any case, I was expected to pay attention and be in the right place at the right time doing the right thing. Excuses were not good currency in this world. Compliments were rare since you were expected to do as you were told and do it right now.

On the way to deliver me home, we stopped at The Hub Western Store in La Junta, Colo., to get the Stetson hat and belt buckle I won for finishing third place in the under 12 barrel race in Sharon Springs riding my aunt Anna Lee Mill's (Wayne's wife) retired rodeo trick-riding horse. I finished third to two little girls and would like to claim it was because they were better mounted, but actually they were better riders. Watching those two little girls lay into those barrels at a dead run like they and the horses were one creature was inspiring.

In less than a week I went from potential top-hand status being tutored by my heroes to a crippled child. Damaged goods. A strange world of lowered expectations populated by counselors, doctors, educational experts, therapists, and a very concerned mother.

I refused to cooperate and made everyone miserable by insisting on a future where there were a lot of horses, cows, and people who knew how to handle them.

I just turned 80 years old and dragged a crippled leg through a life more or less like I imagined as a child. I acquired what writing skills I have by reading and listening, but I am not sure I could diagram a sentence or name all the parts of speech correctly.

I would do it all over again but would be kinder to and more understanding of the good woman I have been married to for 61 years. I would be more patient and kinder to our three children when they were small. Each of them have become, perhaps in spite of my shortcomings, capable, successful adults. I would emulate my middle son and be much gentler with the horses and stock.

When Scott Preston published my little chapbook of poems, "The Trouble With Dreams," he said, "There are three sections: growing-up poems, working poems, and old-man poems."

The reason for this letter is to send you a new poem we talked about yesterday that stands alone in a fourth section called confessional poems. It is called "First Love." ■



First Love

By Vess Quinlan

*Her name was Judy
Graceful, elegant,
With soft red hair
And beautiful brown eyes.
I was just sixteen
Spindly and awkward.
She was ten years older.
Everyone was surprised
When Judy took up with me
She was choosy, standoffish,
Not liking many men.*

*Tom the boss said,
"Go with Judy!
She will teach you things
You need to know
And will not hurt you.
If you hurt her,
I will hurt you."*

*It was a magic summer
We spent day after day
Deep in the woods
Skidding logs.
I loved her and I miss her.
Judy was a great mule!*