The Stark Glass Jar

J. L. Hisel*

*Iowa State University

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This picture hangs on my office wall, between my wedding photo and the window. It’s of me and Natt, the summer we were ten.

During the school year, me and Natt were just neighbors, but in the summers we were constant companions. As soon as we could get out of the house each morning, me and Natt would meet down at the creek and work on our various projects. We constructed huts, forged trails, dug fire pits and explored the surrounding territory. In a campfire, we roasted apples and potatoes for eating. We swam in the creek and peed in the field.

Sometimes we would work for hours, very seriously, speaking only utilitarian phrases like “Hand me that stick” or “Where’s the hatchet?” Sometimes we’d stumble over each other with words, our excitement of bubbling ideas colliding, bumping heads.

The day this picture was taken, it rained all morning and into the afternoon. That didn’t stop me and Natt from going down to the creek. We spent the whole day out there getting wet and muddy. The rain stopped just as we grabbed our bikes to head up our dirt road towards home. The road had soaked up so much water it was mush, and our wheels got so clogged with mud that they were frozen. We walked the two miles to my house hoping someone would be home to go after our bikes with the pickup truck. Unfortunately, my oldest brother Donny was the only one around.

Donny was back from his first year of college, and, as I realized about a decade later, he was feeling pretty superior and self-important that
summer. College had changed him, for the better it turned out, but at that
time, he was still learning to balance his new self with the rest of the
world. Me and Donny’s ages had always seemed leagues apart, but his new
attitude made the gap between us larger still. That summer, he spoke to
me with thinly veiled disdain, when he spoke to me at all; he treated Natt
like an annoying dog perennially underfoot. If he had had even a clue to
our level of industry down at the creek that day, I like to think Donny
would have felt his service more worthy and noble. As it stood, he was
very indisposed to the task.

“It’s been raining all day,” Donny said as he stalked to the
pickup. “You shoulda come home before the road turned to mud. Why’d
you wait until now? I was trying to get some work done,” he mumbled as
he threw the truck in gear.

Donny’s “work” was photography, a new hobby he had picked up
from a college class. He lugged his camera around everywhere. It was his
new way of looking at the world, through the critical eye of a viewfinder.
He snapped pictures of everything and pored over the prints for hours. I
didn’t know then what he was looking for. Now I know that, like all of us,
he was just trying to make sense of things.

The camera hung on a strap around his neck as he disgustedly
drove us back to the creek that day.

While me and Natt struggled our bikes into the back of the
truck, Donny, sitting very unhelpfully in the cab, was distracted by
something off the road. A shallow pond had developed at one end of the
field next to us; all the rain that year had flooded the low land and created
a kind of marsh. Donny killed the engine and started over the fence; me
and Natt, our bikes finally secured, followed at a distance.

We caught up to Donny at the edge of the woods; he was toeing
a big glass jar with his boot tip. He was fascinated by the jar, for some stupid reason, and went on about its “simple beauty” and “stark elegance.” We thought he was bonkers. It was a piece of junk. You could find crap like that all over the woods. “Stark elegance?” What did that even mean?

Donny tried to tell us. It wasn’t fancy, he said. It was real; it was there. It wasn’t part of nature, but it was natural, he said. It was natural because it was so simple.

Me and Natt just stared at Donny, the incomprehension apparent in our faces. Donny quit trying to explain and, in a flash, grabbed up the jar and whirled around to me and Natt. He had a strange look in his eye. He backed us into the standing water and pushed the jar into my hands. Peering at us through his camera lens, he dropped into the woods and began to dictate.


While Donny snapped pictures, something changed between him and us. We didn’t dare stir. We barely dared to breathe. Donny focused his camera on us so tightly that it squeezed the air out of our lungs. It was like he had fallen in love with our image, if only for that moment. That was the change, and it held us there.

Over the top of the jar, I looked at Natt. He was staring obediently into the jar, his eyes wide and intense. I stared down at my own hands, gripping the sides of the jar, my fingernails white, lest I drop it. I looked up and saw the duskling sun, the marble water and the twinkling leaves of a perfect summer day. Rain, hiding in a leaf, slid off that green palm and dripped into the pond, causing a ripple that gently broke against Natt’s ankles.
With that drop of rain, I could see what Donny saw. I saw myself and Natt. We were perfect, like the sun and the water and the leaves. I could see it. I could feel it.

Standing there, still and posed, I felt the rubber of my boots and the denim of my shorts. I felt them intensely. I blinked. My lashes brushed together like the clicking shutter of a camera. A breeze came up. The trees stirred tap, tap, tapping their branches gently against my bare back. The air fluttered, sliding over my skin like cool gauze.

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply.

Emily Greazel

Relish

Photography