

FEW WORDS

Jim Barton

The ceiling fan blades were circling
like vultures above the bowed heads
of the mourners who squirmed on the benches
at the words the young preacher had read.
A pall had fallen upon them,
for none could be called this man's friend;
he had lived all alone in his cabin
with his dogs and his cats 'til the end.
 "If any here wish to say something
 to honor this kindly old soul,
 then speak as the Spirit moves you—
 let the love of God make us feel whole."

The preacher had stood with his head bowed,
but now his eyes scanned the sparse crowd,
pleading with looks for someone to stand
and make their thoughts heard aloud.
At long last, a farmer rose slowly,
a tear running down his red cheek;
with trembling hands clasped at his waist,
he finally began to speak,

"Few there are among us
who knew old Hiram Stone;
now Hiram was a loner,
but he was never alone.

I'd wager to say I'm one of few
who saw him every day,
so I guess it's fittin' it should be me
who has the final say.

First time I ever seen him
was early one Autumn eve—
out in my apple orchard,
bent down upon his knees.

At first, I thought he was thievin'—
haulin' my apples back,
but I saw he had no basket
and carried no gunny sack.

I leaned against my pasture fence
and watched him slowly rise;
he shuffled over toward the barn,
and never met my eyes.

I eased around where I could watch
through the open door
as Hiram hobbled slowly in
and crossed that packed-dirt floor

to the stall where my old plow-horse
stood feeble, and waiting to die.
Then Hiram held his hand out,
and old Chester blinked his eye,

then gently took the present
Hiram offered for a treat.
If horses could smile, old Chester smiled
as he slowly began to eat.

Old Hiram walked every evening
when all his work was done,
and he always made a detour
as he aimed toward the setting sun.

He'd come and check on Chester,
though it was out of the way,
and Chester knew those footsteps—
he waited on them each day.

It was just a few windfallen apples,
but to the horse it was sweeter than wine;
it was just a small act of kindness
to a creature who had little time.

I'm sorry I never joined Hiram
on his walks toward the setting sun;
God has blessed us with many a gift,
and I'd say old Hiram was one."

On a hill in the shade near an orchard,
at the end of a winding dirt road,
lies a grave with a stone that speaks volumes
of a man who lived by the code
that kindness be shown to God's creatures,

whether people or horses or birds;
the headstone, with animals etched on its face,
reads, "Here was a man of few words."

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Contemporary Rhyme Vol. 3 No. 2 Spring 2006