Flex the Bellows Well

by Garrett Conover

for Dave's Accordion

She watched with girlish awe
as the carpenter seemed to fly
among rafter and joist,
all competence and flow.
Blond wood shavings hung
like feathers in graying hair.
At lunch he'd speak
to her, and sing, while
fingers danced the keys
of that magic breathing box
that spoke in jigs and reels.

No way of knowing then
that they would meet again
upon floors and stages.
Looped like beads on string,
bound by the common ground
of dance halls here and there.

When he tumbled
through thin air,
spun away youthful Montana days
as smoke jumper and ranch hand;
and all the later days returned
to New England
as master builder,
wizard with wood.
Landed
hard
in a sudden life spent sitting.
Where the ghosts of legs and feet
were free from knowing anything at all,
could not recall the beat.

But the dance went on.
Bellowed with life.
Spread fingers never gave up
button and key,
or forgot how to make
creased lungs
heave above the heart
that still spilled joy
across hardwood floors
to swirling skirts, and
rustle of articulate feet.

That girl now middle aged
has come to keep
the magic box that speaks.
Remembers well how it roared
when he soared free at last

of more than a decade wheelchair bound.
How it was passed and played
hand to hand as we danced
his memorial service into
proper celebration.

Still, her span of hand
is not so wide,
shoulders less powerful and broad.
And the sound stops just shy
of coiling a chill around her spine.
But her heart was strong,
could not let go until she knew
what he might have said all along:
"It's my gift to you,
do what you will. Trade for one
that fits your frame and ear.
Don't worry about me, the box can go.
I'll live in the rush of air
of the new one once removed."

So a perfect trade was made,
and Dave's accordion waits
on a shelf in a shop called
The Button Box.
Patient and sure
that someone just right
will come to make a match.
Let the bellows inhale fresh air
and pump new resonance from reeds
that will tell if the choice is true.

I hope whoever that may be
is possessed of a subtle ear
that will reach inside
to the undertones and whispers
old instruments may hold.
Maybe later they'll swear they heard
something like wind
or a voice in the air
that somehow sounded like words.
"You don't know me
I've been gone too long,
and you may not know my friend.
But I've no doubt
you'll hear of us soon
if the bellows shout your joy.
My keys are fine, and buttons firm,
and you may as well know from the start.
That of all those
with a hand in this dance
not one has written an end."

"Dave" was Dave Fuller of Canterbury Country Orchestra; he lived in Littleton, Massachusetts. The "girl" and "friend" is Alexandra Conover, accordionist, piano and autoharp player with Daylight in the Swamp. The Button Box is an accordion shop in Amherst, Massachusetts. The next owner of Dave's accordion is not yet known. - G. C.

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