Visions of the Future / Ways of Looking – Analecta

Ways Of Looking
By Susan Russell-Replogle

(After Wallace Stevens—For My Father)

A man and his dream
Are one.
A man and his dream and a tape-measure
Are one.

She wasn’t really looking,
But after my father died
My mother found enough
Tape measures to give one
As memento to every grand-child—
Twenty-seven in all,
Tools scattered across the country
In houses, planes, boats, and
Automobiles, feeling silly
I’m sure, every time he set one down
And couldn’t find it again—
Something about loose ends,
Something about reeling it in—
Something about the wheel of momentum.

O thin man of Papakeeechee,
Why do you forage incessantly?
Do you not see how the tape-measure
Waits like a blackbird
In the handbag
Of the woman beside you?

It wasn’t about the day job,
Though he did it well,
it was about the measure of fire
In every core rotation—
To catch the sun, and stretch it
Past the shadows, the spring whirling, retracting
The metered ribbon
Of metal; this time, he retraced
A small part of the pantomime
And he used both hands, both
Beaten, weathered, well-used hands
Keeping the line tight, keeping the course on target
While he checked and re-checked dimensions,
All finesse, making parts fit,
All movement—like a river, all vision—
Like the eye of a blackbird.

I do not know which he preferred,
The precursory images
Or the precision of instruments,
The tape-measure in hand
Or just after.

Dormant on the window-ledge
In the garage, one waits
For what’s next, to mark the edge
Of many circles—in a sun-bright ring
Of sawdust on the floor, or another round
Of prop design, turbo-charged propulsion spin
Gold Wing, Piper-cub dream,
Cylinder prototype—Model-A,
Turret and timber architect—
The flowering of
Geometry when it was dawn all day
And tape-measures lay buried
In sock drawer and flight bag, under
The seat of his truck and in the dust
On top the furnace, silent as a mute bird
On the cross-beam of the sun-
Room in progress, back
Of the phone-drawer, behind
The bookcase, bottom of camera bag,
Compartment of shaving kit.

One rode over Tennessee
In a motorcycle pouch.
Once, at Wawasee,
A shard startled him,

In that he mistook
The sharpness of light
For a tape-measure.

But in four full tool-
Chests in three states, the cache
That kept him humming held out
Too many promises to be neatly packed,
Spilling over like the melange
Of courtship days, wild like a rising sea
Of blackbirds, always turning
Into something more—
Like a honeymoon kiss.
In that he mistook
The sharpness of light
For a tape-measure.

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Chests in three states, the cache
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