

Greg Kuzma

The Precautions

Valentine's Day, 1992. Rain in the Midwest, the yard looked wet, leaves had blown back in from where Mark and I raked them and mowed them up. Work that never gets done, that needs to be done over and over, of the long journey, that cannot be accounted for, for which there is no finish line, no prize, no trophy at the end, and we are forever in training, eating breakfast in a rush, drinking coffee in a rush, and coming home to bed, to crash amidst images of dreams, parallel stories of some endless journey, and waking once again with more to do. More poems to read, more papers to assign, more poems to write, and now and then a holiday to organize our thoughts. Today is love's day, yesterday we were alone or lost between the syllables, and I was panicked in a moment in the car, and turned the tape on to connect myself to something I had known before, Hayden Carruth reading his poems, and stopped and brought some popcorn, said hello to Reed, the popcorn man, driving my car from station to station through the dark chaos of my day, to finish out the week of school in some accustomed pattern of coherence, like wearing the same shirt over and over, until I was sure of the way it felt, and wanted to go on doing that. And then it was Friday,

and the day of love, but worked all morning at the Sportsman Bar, reading book reports from class, trying to get a moment free entirely for myself, like taking the harness off the horse to let it run free once around the track, just for what it felt like, being both rider and horse, being the wind in the mane, and the rain that fell so lovely to the ground. But it was safe inside, and I tore through the manuscripts, marking and praising, giving what I needed back, giving to others what I needed, and did not get, giving and getting being confused in my mind, and if one did not get what one needed one might educate the world to what it was, and did the whole batch, all except one long paper which in class had slid across the table top and knocked my coffee over in a splash, whose front page was a big wash of coffee stain, and the paper hard from being wet, hard like the cover of a book. And I loved what I did. Loved the work, and Jeanne put her hand on my shoulder where I sat in the booth and bent in my labor, and rubbed my back for one ten thousandth of a second, just enough to let me know she liked seeing me, had come perhaps, even against her will, to enjoy all the space I took up, taking over a whole booth, and getting there by ten on Friday morning, to sit all day and work, while in and out the patrons came and went, sitting there so long I could hardly stand to walk down toward the bathroom three or four times during the afternoon, having had my fill of coffee, and then more, thirsty and looking for another gulp of energy. The papers were great. Oh, all the usual little confusions, which I would clear up

in class the next week, but liking what I read, and being glad that I had thought to ask. Was asking the same as loving? And making the students read their books of poems, knowing it was good for them, and loving how I could sit by and watch like a proud father, those first few hesitant steps into the unknown. And then it was four o'clock, and I was meeting Barb. We had our valentines out on the table at home, and Barb brought her vase of roses back from school where they had wowed the multitudes, and I had my bag of gifts to open. Was this what a Valentine's Day was supposed to be? Standing in the kitchen of the cold house, reading cards in our coats. Barb's was the funnier card. It shows two people on a couch, holding hands, and one is thinking, oh say it, say those three little words I love to hear you say — and then inside, they're standing at the open door, and the husband is saying "Let's Eat Out." As out the door they go. As out the door we went, off to Lincoln and Grisante's Restaurant, treating ourselves for what? — the third time this week, until it seems almost a duty to order, until even what makes it fun seems like an effort, of the same things over and over, of the same hunger opening like a rose inside us, and carrying it around as if it were our gift to the world, or what connected us. We put our name in at Grisante's, then walked across to the health food store, there to while away the time. It was full of amazing things, bins of interesting grains, beans of all kinds, mixtures of snack foods and dried fruits, pasta made of soy and garlic and cilantro, spaghetti made of artichokes, and over against the wall, in the fresh produce case, chard and mustard greens like the wealth of

nations, and lovely tortured looking beets with stems of leaves still partially attached, and fresh organic carrots looking small and introspective, dark in dark skins, but one of my students was peeling some in bowls at the check-out counter, emerging under her knife like essences, the purest orange, the brightest flash of steel, and hers the whitest hand. Barb found some great pasta with a label printed in German, and stood there like a kid puzzling it out, saying the words aloud, then wrote it all down to share with her students. I was so hungry I wanted to buy everything, and peered deeply into jars of salsa, trying to see what it was made of, and shook the packages of soup mix, and hefted the jars of fruit jam prepared without sugar, and marvelled at all the boxes of spaghetti made of different things, and finally bought some dark rye spaghetti, heavy and looking like the soil in my yard after a rain, and marvelled at the mind of man for all these satisfactions I had never known. I could sit all day in the Bar and drink coffee and nibble at my toast, being on a diet, or sneak my bags of M&Ms in, keeping my blood sugar up, and never yank a carrot from the earth, feeling the long tap root tug at the soil, or all the little hair roots it is nourished by. Or when I saw the big bunches of greens I lifted them, and felt the weight of the rain in them, and somewhere in me deep arose some deep and ancient hunger. It was getting expensive, this walking around waiting to be called at Grisante's, and every aisle I went down I found something else, something I had always wanted to try, or something we had once eaten but almost forgotten, like tabouli, which I always used to make when the kids were small, and punish them with it, telling them how the world did not always taste sweet to be good, and all these long years of forgetting,

not even heeding my own words, but sucked my candy by the handful, keeping my blood sugar up in the rain and the Sportsman Bar. I who had a streamlined life, simplifying what I ate, to concentrate on words and write new poems, and not be bothered in the kitchen long hours, making something no one would eat, but was awakened, seeing a bean assortment for chili which looked complex, all colors and shapes of beans, and even had barley and red lentils, and bought that. Over at Grisante's we got our table, amidst the throngs of lovers all waiting to start their evenings, and I remarked how every party was a party for two, and looked to see how pretty the women had made themselves up, and how handsome the men, for this was love's day, of a whole long year of forgetting, or getting lost, or working for the sake of work, or driving my car in the dark from outpost to outpost, getting saved a little in the dark, or hearing Hayden's voice to guide me home to poetry again. All around us the lovers ate and drank, and now and then at a nearby table materialized a young man dressed in formal wear, and sang a verse or two of some pretty song. Halfway through our meal he came to our table, alone, and stood there, and took from his pocket a little round harmonica, and blew into it, which made a sound I had not heard since junior high school, when we were all forced to take music, and set the pitch for himself, and sang us a love song. Nothing else eventful happened. I did not make a speech, or profess my love, or give to Barb a diamond ring, as I had done two months before in this same place, just across the room in a corner booth, on a quiet night, when the waitresses flocked around to look at it. Love is expensive, gesture and symbol, proof and enactment, and patient too, for Barb who waited twenty years for her engagement ring, and we who are fat now, and fighting our

weight, who tire easily and fall asleep on the couch, and who are always eating out to save on time and energy, and always rushing to get through the day, only to crash at the end. And is there time for love, amidst a million distractions, and a million new ideas for poems, for projects at school, for problems that need to be solved, for movies at the cinema which we have not yet seen and so have not passed judgement on. What movie would we see tonight? Or would we go with our daughter to the bar and watch her boyfriend's band? Which we had never seen before, or heard. The Precautions, which Barb calls The Percussions, which might be a better name given how loud they are. I could not decide what I wanted to do, but slipping always into the easier thing, easier to go to a movie, and buy a ticket, and talk to the ticket girl as if she were a friend, and buy our popcorn and pop, and feel connected to the world, and then go in and render our opinion, all those millions spent, all those dozens of people involved, and two days later in trying to tell someone what movie we saw forget the title, forget the plot, only to recall I did not like it very much, but cannot say why, and not even take time out to advise my mother of which movies we did like, but sliding along deeper into forgetfulness, deeper into the headlong rush of our lives. What is there time for? And is there time for love? And who is this boyfriend, anyway? Or a bar I've never heard of in the Old market, where young people gather to drink and dance. And when was it we were last young? By some accident we went to the Bar. Chris drove, whose husband Dave Penley plays drums for the band. And Kirstin, Jackie's roommate, with gold hair. At the door they took our money for the cover charge, just as if we were anyone, or young still, and we went in and took our places at some tables in front of the stage. Everybody was drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. The juke box played

songs I had not heard before, and very loud, so that it was hard to hear. Members of the band stood around beside the stage and talked, and people I did not know moved around inside the room as if there were places to go, destinations, distances to conquer. Jackie told us that Evan was very nervous. Evan is the lead singer, Evan Rail. And I kept seeing him appearing and disappearing off in the shadows, the way I used to pace back and forth in my office before class, trying to get the right momentum to go in on, trying to shake off all the doubts, or remember my lines, or walk a little further in my body, hoping it would start to fit and feel natural, so I could be at home in it. Was nervous to have us here, Jackie's Mom and Dad, two music critics for the *New York Times*, or *Village Voice*, or *Rolling Stone*, and I who had written all those reviews of poetry during the eighties, and had hardly ever been pleased, what would I think of this, on a Saturday night in the rain. Around us the tables began to fill up. Strangers came out of the dark to talk to Jackie. People I had never seen knew our daughter. And one big guy with a good build kept brushing past my chair and nearly knocked me over two or three times. At last the music started. The band assembled itself on the stage, plugged in their instruments, or whatever it is they do, and started to play. It was very loud. There were no apologies, no introductions. There was no framing of intent, or other readings to refer to. Just a wave of music, or a wall, a rush, and then Evan's voice, fighting the tide. Barb sat beside me, but she seemed far away. The floor shook, and the table also. Tremors in the floor were tremors in my feet, tremors in my feet shook my bowels, and my ears were assaulted, and I could not think. Barb turned to me to speak, and spoke, but I could not hear a word. And I spoke to her, but I could not even hear what it was that I said, and did not know what I said. The wave grew in fury and assaulted the shore, followed by another wave. Atop it, buoyed up by it, swept

along by it, kept afloat by it, Evan's voice rode the wave, argued with it, tried to lead it, tried to follow where it led. He seemed both victim of the wave and master, both the wave's inception and the shore on which it broke. Ahead of it he seemed to shape it, beneath it it rode over him and nearly drowned him out, nearly crushed him as it seemed it would crush everyone. I had never heard such loud music. Heard is not the word. I did not hear it. I experienced it. But it was not even that. It fought me for my consciousness. It seemed to want to occupy my place at the table, or drive me from the room. It seemed to want to take over my body, take over my mind, replace my endless mutterings with its own mad impulse. So this is what my students do, I thought, after dark, after I have poked and stirred them for an hour with poetry. Taking refuge from their cares in the midst of the storm, just at the edge of the eye of the hurricane where the winds are most strong, where the swirling is most powerful. And saw a student from a class of mine sitting very calm where the wave broke. The song ended, and another song began. Another, large and shapeless, monstrous yet not malignant, an endless eruption of notes and cries, and the same heroic riding of the wave, Evan alone in the middle of the stage, leaning somewhat crumpled against the microphone. Later, driving home, I thought of the special quality of this music, how it mirrors perfectly the world that the young see, the chaos all around them, the immensity, the power greater than themselves, and their own small way within it, through the midst of it, or riding the wave itself, which might shatter them and all their hopes, fearful — for who would not be in the midst of such violence? — yet bold too, standing up to it, letting it wash over them, hoping perhaps to steal some power from it or perhaps its secret, as Evan stood, seeming to find his voice in the voice of the onslaught. It was hard to take! And I remembered my summers with Barb's family at the shore in Delaware,

how obsessed I became with the sea, and body surfing, feeling the immense power of it, and being buffeted about, or twisted, nearly broken, on a bad run, but then to rise above it just a little bit and coast in all the way to shore on the wave's crest. I was forty and discovering the sea. And walk back, stagger back to the house, my bathing suit full of sand, my hair full of sand, as if driven into my skin by the force, and stand there in the shower, in the hot water, sipping a cold beer, feeling fully alive. It was a night like that. The sea had grown an arm and come inland two thousand miles. The sea had found a metaphor in the music of the band called the Precautions, and a lone brave surfer to ride the crest of the waves named Evan Rail, or bearing sometimes my own name, as somehow in the midst of all that fury I emerged a bit and rode the music in. The songs I did not know. Nor did it matter what the words were. It was just the human voice, now at odds with the music, now together with it, arguing with it, dancing, singing. Now and then a phrase came through the noise, and my mind clung to that phrase and grabbed it like a piece of cork or a ring buoy, and hugged it to myself and rode with it in towards the shore that did not quite ever arrive. And then we were dancing. Jackie first, and Chris, both wearing red for Valentine's Day, and Kirstin in red, and the men with mustaches who had hunched around our tables, standing and shaking. And even myself, caught in the current and swept up, forgetting my awkwardness and any objections. Three or four times we were out on the floor, like venturing out into the surf at Rehobeth Beach, clutching our frail little rafts, or standing frail and naked in our bodies. Out on the floor the fury infected the dancers. Shoulder and ankle, wrist and neck, muscle and bone shook and snapped and popped. And once Kirstin drew near me in the onslaught, and brushed my shoulder, then spun off at a dizzy pace like some loose electron. And here was the

fat girl I had seen sitting for so long, fluid and loose in the music, almost unrecognizable. And our son, come late to the Bar, out on the floor with his sister, wrestling with the monster of the sea. It was wonderful to see them there, the two of them, holding each other up and yet not touching, moving almost in unison, victims and masters at once, I could not tell which they were, as on and on the band played. Evan was in fine voice. We remarked later, Barb and I, how truly lovely his voice is, standing painting woodwork the next day, talking about the band. They call themselves the Precautions. What the name means is another mystery. They're back at Oscar's next week end, both Friday and Saturday nights, for a return engagement. Maybe we will see you there.