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An Unsung Hero of the Tanner--Jeffrey Subramanian

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Cover Page Footnote

Thanks to Jeffrey for his permission to write this spotlight, as well as for his example and friendship.

An Unsung Hero of the Tanner— Jeffrey Subramanian

By Kempton Cox

“A few decades ago, we were in the age of the natural man. And it was bad. But now we are in the age of the *unnatural man*.” Jeff tells me this over his burrito ahogado about three hours into our lunch appointment. Jeff eats to live, and I live to eat, so sometimes we go out to lunch; if it’s his pick, it’s always international.

Jeffrey Subramanian is one of the people who keep our Tanner Building grounds beautiful, and you should get to know him. He’s tall—well over six feet—and has the sort of sinewy thinness that you wouldn’t want to get into a fight with. Luckily, a fight is no threat, because Jeff is a very peaceful man. In part, he will tell you, that peace comes from being outdoors. A lot. “Runners think they’re [outside] to exercise. No—They’re here to be redeemed.”

Jeff believes that the “temples of nature” are purifying, which is why he walks everywhere regardless of the weather (and despite owning a car). It also explains why one of his favorite jobs is the one he has right now, working with the grounds crew to beautify the Tanner.

I first met Jeff in January of 2014, and over the last three years, he has never ceased to amaze me. He mows in the heat, happily. He shovels snow at 4:00 am, even more happily. He plays

the cello and is especially partial to Bach. (He once corrected me: “I’m not a renaissance man; I’m a baroque man.”) He can quote Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Grecian tragedies. He also writes his own poetry, and though he now avoids it on grounds of conscience, he can free-style rap—a skill he picked up in California.



Nobody speaks like Jeff because nobody thinks like Jeff. Our conversations have always been dotted with both quirky humor and insightful wisdom—both from his end. I’ve jotted down some lines over the years, nearly always out of context:

"Why do American schools teach Latin roots? English is far more Germanic than Latinate. Did you know that out of the most frequent 100 English words, 98 are Germanic? 98!"

"Poetry is a temple; prose is a government building."

"I think you've got to be born in Mississippi to like it."

"The poor and the rich are both motivated by money. The middle class is not driven by the desire for money. Why do you think the business school is full of kids from wealthy families and kids from impoverished nations?"

"I'm very picky about my Fauré Requiem Mass."

"Justice and judgment!"

But by far Jeff's favorite activity is writing poetry. And when he combines that with his favorite place—outdoors—the results are profound. His work on the grounds crew gives him plenty of opportunity. Here's one he sent me in late November:

Snow Removal

The solitude of morning in the snow –
So dark, like vespers registering gloom,
Like whispering children in a quiet room –
Four hours of salt that seemed so long ago.
The trees all lighted in the Christian air,
Standing in celebration of His birth –
No one astir – silence listens to the earth –
And every shake and shovel-full a prayer.
What matters after this? What urgent care
Could possibly annoy? All is a night
Decked out in snow, and slow, and soft, and calm –
The laborers, unaware of inner cheer,
Sleepwalking through their job and through their life –
The sound of work, an auditory psalm.

Jeff has sent me dozens of poems over the course of our friendship, mostly at my request. He has written poems about gumbo, Gethsemane, Hindu divinity, indigestion, and one in which he sincerely apologizes to God for mowing over the ants. (Such formicacide, he laments, is part of his job.)

Jeff has found the perfect balance in his life, this life of writing and caring for nature. In fact, he excitedly declared to me one day that he had discovered his career plan. "I will move to small-town California to be near my grandmother. There, I can farm and work on my life's opus: a collection of sonnets."

His smile was undefeatable.