

The Gatekeeper

At the spot where five points intersect,
(Earth, water, air, fire, and spirit)
Animals exchange cautionary tales
of humans who lost their way
in the forest of mirrors.
They watch as the young ones
gather and mill about,
waiting for something that doesn't quite occur,
And the gatekeeper crafts
tiny architecturally perfect chairs,
five inches tall, with tin cans, pliers and snippers,
talking to anyone who will listen
and concocting prayers to connect the world.

*The drum beats and the bell rings,
and time pulls at my arm.*

And the gatekeeper won't stop talking,
his 90-year-old fingers deftly plaiting prayers
in the form of narrow, braided metal strips,
and he has *so much* to remember.
He gives me the lemon soda chair,
when I promise to pray for him every day,
and he, in turn, folds me into
the prayer chain that connects the world.

We all do whatever we can
to make the connections
that will hold our reality together,
so that we can forget death long enough
to eat dinner, have children, and
sleep without nightmares.

*The drum beats and the bell rings,
and time pulls at my arm.*

The gatekeeper says,
"Maybe *you're* the one I've been seeking.
I need someone to take on this task
when I'm gone."
But I have my own dream to follow,
so I thank him and I keep on walking.

One block down the street,
a woman tries to buy the
yellow soda chair from me.
She says it's *folkart*.
I see her acquisitive eyes
calculate how to duplicate its unique style
on an assembly line, and backlight
its photograph in a mail-order catalog.
I carefully retrieve my gift and take it home.

Now the fragile limbs of the gatekeeper's chair
rest safely behind glass on the bottom shelf
of my china cabinet —
and no one ever remarks on
its strangeness, crowded as it is among
British porcelain mythological animals
and Mother's crystal
and open-mouthed New Mexican storytellers,
all different, but all clutching babies
and talking, talking.
No one ever admires the tiny chair's
elaborate filigreed edges,
its ornately curled legs or its sweeping armrests.
No one ever asks, how did he do it?
And no one ever notices that I glance at the chair
every time I enter the room.

Sometimes I wonder what I would have learned
if I had sat down on the bench
beside the gatekeeper
on that beautiful spring afternoon on Southside
where five points converge on
the storyteller fountain,
and where I traveled camouflaged
in broad-brimmed hat and shades.
Would I have absorbed the history of philosophy
as I learned how to solicit prayers:
with carefully chosen questions,
tiny gifts built from moving time and
extreme care for detail,
and the ability to transform objects
other people had discarded?
In what ways might my life have been changed
if I had been willing to slow down *just a little*?

*The drum beats and the bell rings,
and time pulls at my arm.*

And sometimes, if I'm very quiet,
I can feel the gatekeeper's prayer chain
flowing through me
as it makes its way around the world.