

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Alfred University

Tales from a Patriarch: An Exploration of the Art and Business of Printmaking

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Prologue

I'm not exactly sure when it all started. It could have been a year ago when I made the talisman to bring back the industries. Although it was probably before that, more like three years ago, somewhere in mid-October when I went home for the first time after starting college. I was walking my dog (which doesn't happen all that often, but it was a nice fall day and he needed to go) and the streets just felt familiar. There is really no other way to describe the feeling I have when walking the six or seven blocks around my house. But it may have even been before that. It probably goes back to the Dead Hearts show in Buffalo (the one at the Mohawk Place) when the guitar player said, "We all hate living here, but we love being from here." For him *here* meant Buffalo, but for me, it meant Dunkirk. If I really think about it though, it probably all started well before that. Even before I was born. Before I was thought of. Before my parents were thought of. Maybe before their parents were thought of. It probably started at the beginning, because that's where things usually start.

Dunkirk, NY is a small city in Western New York (it's actually the western most city in New York) and it used to be a great city. My great-great-grandparents moved there from Poland. At least some of them did. I imagine it was for work, but I don't really know the specific reasons. Either way, they could have moved there for work, and that's the point really. No one moves to Dunkirk to work anymore, it's quite the opposite actually. My family has lived in Dunkirk for three or four or even five generations, depending on which part of my family you look at. All of my grandparents lived there and still do. All of my aunts and uncles and both of my parents did, and most of them still

do. My brothers and I were born there and all of us have left. We visit, and I live there when I'm not at school, but once I graduate I'll be gone too. We had to leave to find somewhere to use our education, our skills, our talents. And just like that; a great city in Western New York that once attracted a family will have turned off its lights, locked the door, and sent us away.

At first glance *Tales from a Patriarch* is simply a visual family history from the perspective of the men in my family, specifically my grandfathers, my dad, and myself. However, the decisions and the personal connections to a location that have led me to this point in art making reveal deeper issues that span beyond my family and beyond Dunkirk, New York. Through *Tales from a Patriarch* I am examining the economic state of small town America through the culture of Dunkirk, NY and the history of my family.

The Economic State of the Western Most City in New York

I am a storyteller, and I am a storyteller because of my family. In my family, there is a lot of teasing, and leg pulling, and dirty joke telling. My family likes to talk, and they are not shy about doing so. Growing up listening to stories about my parents and grandparents when they were younger I learned a lot about the way life used to be. Because of the nature of the storytellers in my family I am not exactly sure of the size of the fish in these stories, but as far as I know they are true to size. My Grandpa Ray talks about how much he made as a worker in the steel plant (which I guess was somewhere around twenty-five cents) and how it would take him a week to make what I make in an hour today at minimum wage. My dad brings up that my grandpa also talks about the cost

of various things like the mortgage on the house (which I saw a receipt for and it was unbelievably low), the price of the car, and how many groceries you could get for a couple bucks. Stories about my family inspired me to investigate how things used to be in Dunkirk.

I was told about the many places that my grandparents, parents, aunts or uncles worked at that no longer exist. One prominent business was Brooks Locomotive. When my Grandpa Bob was in the army someone was teasing him, questioning where he was from and how he'd never heard of Dunkirk NY. When they got out west they had to change from the train they were on to a more powerful one to get over The Rockies, and on the side of the locomotive was printed, *Dunkirk, NY*. The factory was closed down in 1962. Roblin Steel occupied the space after it was closed, as did many other companies such as Kraft, Red Wing, and Carriage House. Carriage House in Dunkirk, NY and Petri's Cookies in Silver Creek, NY were bought by ConAgra and closed down in the winter of 2012. The Carriage house plant in Fredonia, NY announced its closing in March 2014. The three shutdowns totaled somewhere around 600 jobs lost. There were plenty of other businesses as well. Central Avenue, which I have always known to be a bunch of boarded up buildings used to be full of stores. The pier that is used every Thursday in the summer for concerts and drinking used to see handfuls of ships for fishing and shipping. Koch's Brewery, which inspired the design of the show card, produced a handful of beers such as Koch's Golden Anniversary, Black Horse Ale, and Jubilee Porter. The brewery was bought by Genesee Brewing Company in 1984. Genesee continued to produce Golden Anniversary and Black Horse Ale for a while. My dad once told me he tried Genesee's Black Horse Ale and couldn't finish it, he had to switch to the

last case of the Koch's brewed ale, which by that time was probably skunked. Genesee stopped producing Black Horse Ale before I was born, and completely closed production of all Koch's Beer in 2009 when Golden Anniversary was taken off the market. I was seventeen and may or may not have purchased two of the last 40 oz bottles the store near my house sold.

Currently there are three major factories left in Dunkirk: Nestle-Purina, which produces the dog treats *Beggin' Strips*; INX---, which is an ink factory that produces offset lithography ink for commercial printing; and NRG, which is a coal fired power plant in the process of changing over to natural gas. Around the time Carriage House was downsizing and Petri's closed I began looking at the power plant as both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, I was remembering the clouds of black smoke that would be pumped out of the stacks when I was younger and how the factory is an eye sore on the horizon when viewing the sunset. On the other, I was recognizing that NRG was necessary in order to keep the place I call home afloat. This led to an oil painting, *Sea Monster*, in which the power plant is the main focus. It is illuminated from behind as if to suggest a saving grace, the light at the end of the tunnel, but its silhouette is dark and



ominous as if the savior comes with a price. A field of text overlays the entire image. At first glance it appears to be illegible letters jumbled together without meaning, but patience and some knowledge of the events occurring in my hometown while making this painting reveal newspaper headlines that read: "Petri's in Silver Creek to Close", "Carriage House to Downsize", "NRG Threatens to Close", "473 Jobs Lost", "No Optimism for this Area". Until NRG was approved to transfer from coal

Sea Monster (detail) 2013 oil on panel

to natural gas and keep the plant open, it seemed like the entire city of Dunkirk, NY was going under as a result of America transforming from an industrial to a service society.

Early Works Concerning Dying Industries

I continued thinking about my home in my artwork. I began to ask myself how I could help improve my hometown. I began my art career making work about tattoos. At the time, that seemed unimportant, but looking closer it was about the history and meaning of tattoos as well as the implications of getting or not getting a job in an already difficult economy as the result of having them. I wanted to do something that mattered. I read about Ai Weiwei's social practice pieces and began to think my work was not good enough because it did not improve the world. While I did not change my work from painting and printmaking to social practice, I adopted the power plant as the symbol of the economic state of my home in many of my other prints as a way to address the delicate balance between being connected to an area and looking for opportunity.

My etching "My Spirit Animal is a Pessimist" depicts a hermit crab on a beach covered in garbage crawling away from a pile of empty shells, as if it is leaving behind potential homes. The phrase "All Your Heroes Will Let You Down" spans the top half of



My Spirit Animal is a Pessimist
2013 etching and watercolor on
paper

the print, and on the horizon, looming, is the power plant. The hermit crab (that I determined was my spirit animal while talking with my glass professor) symbolizes myself, and while a hermit crab keeps to itself (as I often do), it also is able to pick up its home and move, or change homes (as I will most

likely have to do). The phrase at the top along with the power plant in the background show my frustrations with the state of the country and the difficulty of finding work that can sustain myself and eventually a family, as well as utilize my education and talents.

Where my work led me through the semesters really made me remember and think about what was said at the Dead Hearts concert when I was younger and what the guitar player said about loving being from the area, but hating living here. There isn't really anywhere else like Dunkirk for me. It is its own place, and I want to stay, but I know I can't. It's a love hate relationship, what I have with Western New York, and I know I'm not the only one who feels this way. And I'm sure what I'm feeling pertains to other communities as well, to other kids who have pride and ambition, but not enough opportunity.

After working for a couple semesters on work about the decay of my hometown, I needed a break from depressing subject matter. I was stuck on questioning if my art was worthwhile because it was not helping any one like Ai Weiwei's work. I am not sure what the exact tipping point was, but I came to the conclusion that I was making art for me, and if I enjoyed it someone else would probably enjoy it too. For a while that seemed like a good enough reason for me and allowed me to realize that my work could be fun, and did not need to be world changing. This was a perfect way to lead me off the topic of economic decline. I began thinking of what I could focus on that was fun and light hearted. I remembered the many stories I had heard from my grandpas and dad about their drinking days and how I laugh every time I hear them, and decided that was as good a topic as any.

Drinking Stories, Childhood Memories, and My Attempt at Making a Difference

Tales From A Patriarch is composed of eight hand carved woodblock and eight screen prints. Each woodblock is paired with a screen print to form a diptych that tells one of the stories. Accompanying the prints on a five by seven card displayed under the screen print is a brief summary of the story. The imagery that makes up the woodblock prints is inspired by the graphic prints by Tom Huck, Martin Mazzora, Mike Huston, Dennis McNett, Greg Nanney, and Joseph Velasquez. Each features an object, which is literally and figuratively, the center of the story and a boarder that provides additional details. The style of the screen prints is reminiscent of traditional American tattoo work inspired by the work of Norman “Sailor Jerry” Collins and Duke Riley. The designs are composed of an object that is part of the story and a banner that contains a short line of text, or one-liner, that relates back to my grandpas’ and dad’s humorous personalities.

The series begins with a glass of beer with two raw eggs floating in it. In the background there is a cash register, a banner (probably from a softball team) that reads “Dunkirk”, a slew of liquor bottles, a rack of chips, and a box of beef sticks. In the corners of the print the four logos for four different clubs back home create a boarder for the beer. The print, “Grandpa Bob Loses at Sevens”, tells of my Grandpa Bob playing a drinking game with his friends. Following this is a man holding a pair off bocce balls near his crotch. He is surrounded by a handful of Jarts, lawn darts that are now illegal (and sitting in a box in my garage). This print is inspired by a picture of my Grandpa Ray that is somewhere in my grandma’s house. The title of the woodblock is “These are my Dancing Pants...” and the title of the screen print is “...They Have a lot of Ball Room”,

which I have heard my Grandpa Ray say at least once. These prints summarize my Grandpas' drinking days and conclude with the third print, "Grandpa Bob Orders Black Coffee", which depicts a cup of coffee sitting on a table set for a wedding reception. The coffee is black because my Grandma Betty made my Grandpa Bob order black coffee with her so she would not be the only *weird* one ordering black coffee. He told me after that day he never drank his coffee any other way.

The series continues through my dad's drinking days and my childhood with the fourth print, "A Party at The Pines", of a solo cup. My dad and his friends were at a place they called *The Pines*, which was near a softball stadium, for a Fourth of July party. His one friend manning the keg told everyone, "Drink up because I'm not stopping till the keg is gone". They finished the keg of beer much quicker than a keg of beer should be finished and shocked the bar tender when they went to pick up the next one.

The events in the first four prints happened before I was born, and the second four after. The fifth print, "The Day I Almost Drained Lake Erie", deals with my early experiences of being teased; one of many I could have chose. I was out fishing with my dad and uncle when I got snagged on what was probably a tree. I tried to free my line, but they told me to stop because I might have a plug. They cut the line and told me my Grandpa Ray pulled a plug once and drained the lake. I didn't believe them, but when I asked my grandpa he told me he pulled the plug. I was shocked. I could have drained the lake and gotten in a lot of trouble. My mom filled me in on their joke that night. I was relieved and probably annoyed.

She passed away when I was thirteen, and the most vivid memory I have of her is the two of us eating ice cream and driving through Point Gratiot. We both had chocolate

peanut butter, and they were the papa bear size from the Big Dipper, so, naturally, my hands were covered in ice cream. I have plenty of other memories of my mom, but for some reason I can still feel like I am driving with her eating that ice cream cone. The sixth woodblock “Do Not Be Afraid...” and screen print “...I Am With You” is the chocolate peanut butter ice cream cone. The boarder is made of sunflowers, which were her favorite flower.

The final section occurs after I have begun college. My dad and uncle are fishing at night with no lights on. My uncle generally has multiple hooks in the water and the boat is usually a mess. The waves were rougher than they should have been for fishing, but they were out on the lake anyway. A coast guard boat approached them, and while they couldn’t kick my dad and uncle off the lake, they gave them fair warning that they were probably going to die. They knew that, but the fish were biting! The seventh print, “Ray II and Eugene Brave Lake Erie’s Waves”, depicts a man in a messy boat dangling a yellow perch (which is the fish we always search for) on a line.

The series ends with “The Seagulls Come to Feast”, which begins my drinking days and occurs at a bar where my dad is explaining to me how people at the clubs who eat the free food but do not buy many drinks or tip well are referred to as “seagulls”. The clubs usually have some sort of free food, but the unspoken rules ask the question, is the free food really free?

With eight prints, I tell the history of three generations of men in my family through drinking stories and humor, but also with a deep respect for the people who have gotten me to where I am in my life.

On the surface, these prints have led me away from the economic state of my hometown and the fear that my art needs to help someone or something to be meaningful. However, those thoughts are what led me to creating this series and have influenced it in multiple ways. The prints are in a specific order determined by when they happened. Through retelling my grandpas' and my dad's stories I am putting myself in these situations. While making the sketches and drawings that eventually turn into prints I am able to think of what it would be like if I could stay in Dunkirk and support a family and have experiences like theirs. By telling my own stories I am also made to realize the reality of the current state of America, and understand that I cannot stay in my hometown when I am finished with school.

I am selling my prints for twenty dollars each, which is the philosophy of the print shop, Cannonball Press, which has greatly influenced my work. This idea is also influenced by my dad who practically gives away the desserts he bakes and he snow blows the entire block during the winter just because he has a snow blower without expectation of anything in return. I have had many conversations about greed and sharing with my dad, and we always reach the conclusion that if everyone, people and companies alike, could resist the desire to have an abundance of a particular resource, money or food for example, then there would be plenty for everyone. We do not understand why this method of taking only what you need and helping others with the extra would not solve many major problems such as hunger or economic depression. Sticking with the idea this conversation with my dad generates I am selling my prints, which take around 15-30 hours to carve, and another 2-4 hours to print for twenty dollars each so that people can have a quality piece of handmade art without needing to spend a fortune. The screen

prints, which take less time to make but an equal amount of time to print, will be sold for ten dollars each. When the prints are sold I will have made back more than my material costs and also distributed the stories that are so dear to me to up to eight hundred people. In this way, I am doing my part to take only what I need as a business. Blue Pike Press, which will be the name of my print shop that I plan on opening, will employ printmakers to provide affordable, quality printing, as well as young people who are interested in art and want to learn about various printing techniques. This small business will aim to be involved in whatever community it is established in, in order to give back any successes and improve the quality of life for the people around it.

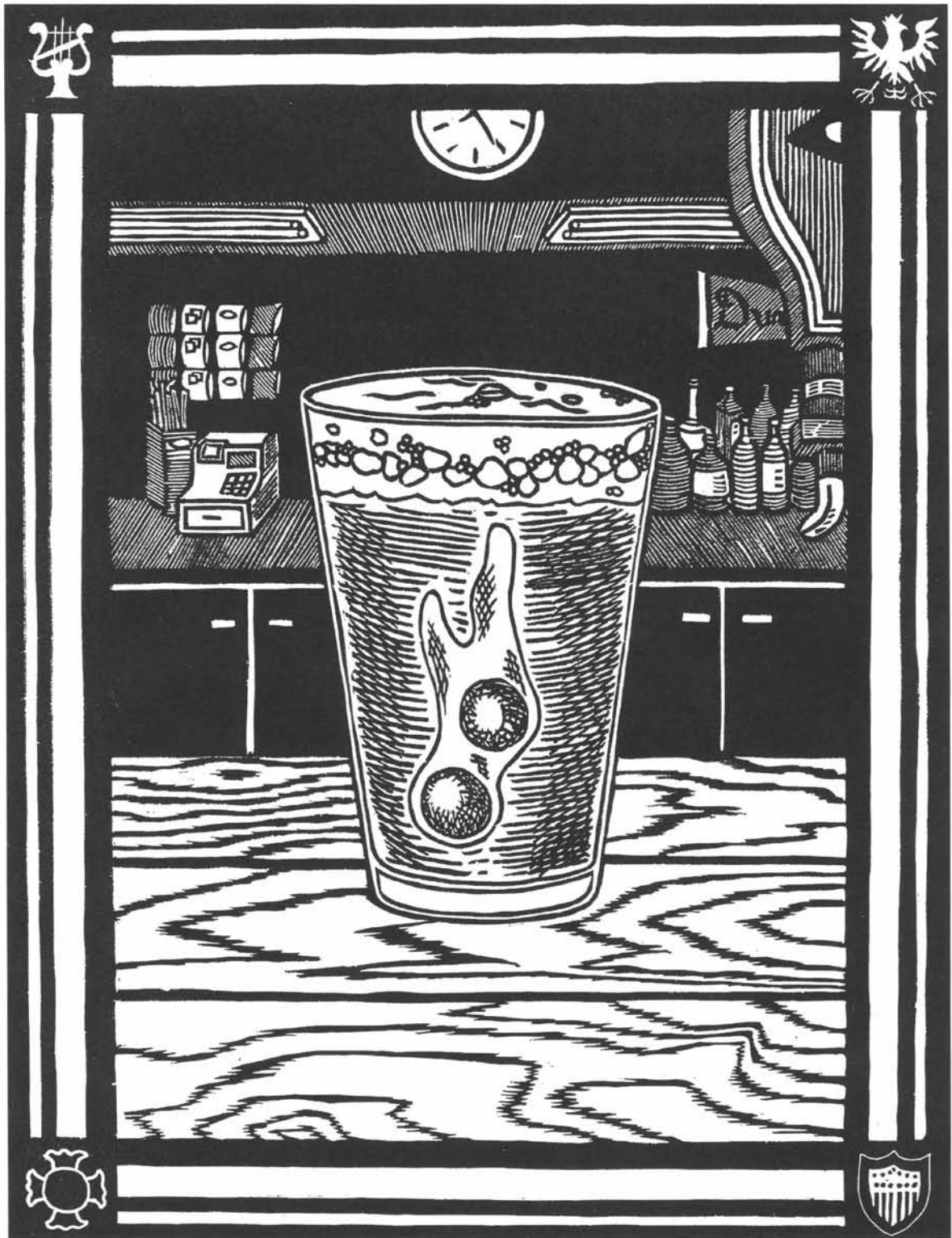
Epilogue

I'm not exactly sure when it all started. It could have been when I caught my first yellow perch, or when I put together a band with my best friends, or when I wrote a paper on the meaning of home. It could have started a lot of different ways, the connection I have to a declining city in Western New York, but I'm willing to bet that is not the most important part. It probably started at the beginning, since that is where things usually start, but they change as they move along and how things change is a very important part of how they progress.

TALES
FROM A
PATRIARCH

For my Dad, who has done more for me than he probably realizes

**And for Ellis, who changed my sparkplugs and reminded me the car
has to be in park before it starts**





In a bar back home, the “vets” I imagine, my Grandpa Bob was sitting with his friends playing cards. The first seven drawn names the drink. The second seven drawn buys the drink. The third seven drawn drinks it. A beer and two raw eggs in this case. My grandpa drew the last seven. He didn’t play very long after that round.



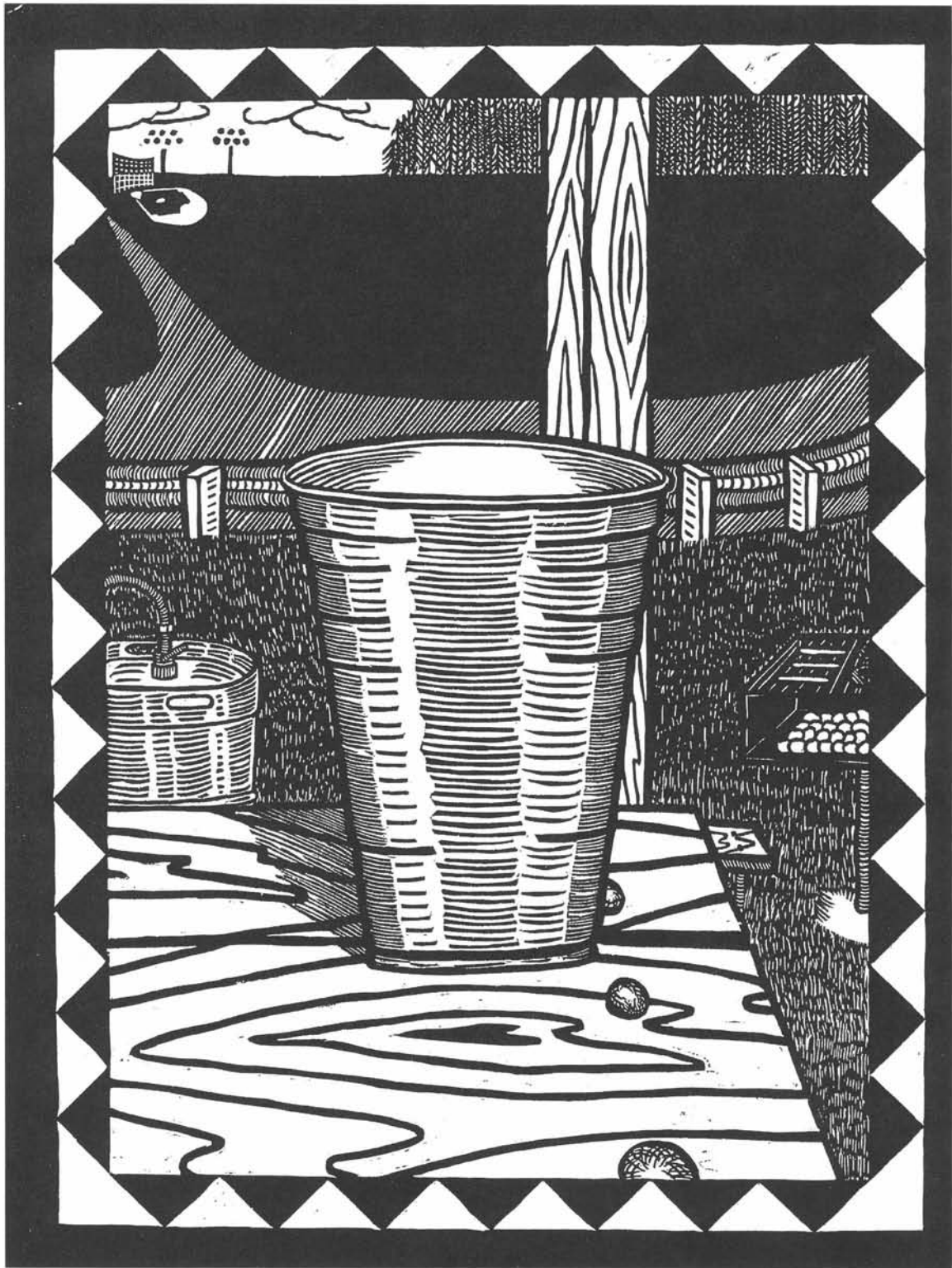


Somewhere in my grandma's house there is a picture of my Grandpa Ray playing bocce ball with his friends. They are all standing and holding the bocce balls normally. Except my Grandpa. This is his pose, which explains a lot about our family





My Grandpa Bob and Grandma Betty were at a wedding together. She didn't want to be the only one to order black coffee, so she asked my grandpa to order one too. He did, but up until that point he had always taken it with cream and sugar. He said he couldn't drink coffee any other way but black after that wedding.





It was a Fourth of July party at The Pines. My dad's friend was running the keg. He said, "Drink up, cause I'm not stopping till the keg is kicked." It was finished pretty quickly. When they picked up the second keg the bartender was shocked. The second keg lasted a lot longer.





I was fishing with my dad and uncle when I got snagged on what was probably a tree or some other type of debris. When I began to pull on the line they yelled for me to stop and told me I might be hooked on a plug. They cut the line and said my Grandpa Ray pulled one when he was younger and drained part of the lake and our family got in a lot of trouble. I didn't believe them so they told me to ask him. Later that day, at my cousin's birthday party, I asked him and he told me he did and got in a lot of trouble. I was terrified, because there was no way my grandpa would lie to me. My mom filled me in later that night.





My mom passed away in 2005 when I was thirteen. For some reason one of the most vivid memories I have of her was when we bought papa-bear-sized chocolate peanut butter ice-cream cones from The Big Dipper, and drove through Point Gratiot to eat them. Thirteen wasn't a good year for me.





My dad and uncle were out perch fishing one night. Their lights weren't turned on and the waves were rough as hell. A coast guard boat approached them, and while they couldn't kick them off the lake they said something like, "You assholes are gonna die out here." They shouldn't have been out there, but hey, the fish were biting!





In the clubs back home if you eat the finger food and don't spend very much at the bar you're called a seagull. Makes you wonder why they call it free food...

tip your bartender