

# Poetry Porch: Poetry

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## Sliced Bread

By Michael Todd Steffen

I don't remember Simon Rike saving  
the free world. I only remember the story  
about my mother, when she was a kid

at the supper table, saying she couldn't remember  
Simon Rike saving the free world. She was  
fourteen then, with a tendency to be ironic,

to exaggerate, like saying *I don't remember  
Simon Rike inventing sliced bread,*  
in order to tell you this Simon guy

was *something*, cooed about  
by all the girls, a big shot at her school,  
a track star, or maybe a straight-A student.

But Simon was neither. What he had was money  
jingling in his pockets. He would buy you  
sour balls, a comic, treat you to a movie.

He had a silver pocketknife. They said  
he stole it from Sammy Jansen. But Sammy Jansen  
wouldn't take it back from Simon because

the Rikes were numerous in that little corner  
of farmland in Nebraska. Pick on one of them,  
you'd have a dozen other Rikes on your ass.

My mother lived with her Aunt and Uncle Taggart.  
Her father, a heavy drinker, had abandoned  
the family. This had made her a grimly

humored kid, or “smart” as they said back then.  
She hated bullies and anything flashy and wasteful.  
She was the one who called Simon Rike a thieving chickenshit

and told him where he could stuff his sour balls,  
to give the pocketknife back to Sammy Jansen,  
while the girls at school gasped and craned their necks.

Resentment worked on her. Midway  
in a phantom conversation, at supper one night  
it just popped out of her: *I don't remember*

*Simon Rike saving the free world.*  
She spoke it like a spoon chiming on crystal.  
Time all but stopped. Uncle Jack looked at her.

He'd served in World War II. His hearing suffered  
still that many years later from mortar blasts  
in Normandy. Which harkened to another thing.

Jack Taggart was from the silent generation.  
They'd overcome Hitler and cleaned out the death camps  
to return home and face the insurmountable

nemesis of their own victory  
in Asia, looming after Hiroshima and Nagasaki.  
To these men and women, my mother knew

without ever being told, you didn't talk  
about the war, certainly not in terms  
of saving the world. That wasn't what she meant

about Simon Rike anyway. Uncle Jack  
shook his head and pointed at his bad ear  
as he passed her the butter and a slice of bread.