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Roots—Chad Perry

GRANDFATHER OF THE PLAINS

Melinda Melhus

Trees are meant to stand tall
and stately—
particularly on Kansas plains,
where rolling flint hills
allow night lights
to penetrate for miles.

Not far from the road,
stands a lone cottonwood—
begotten of a fence post,
now matured to reign over buffalo grass,
mulberry bushes,
and meadowlark nests;
its weathered boughs bear sleeves
tattered by stray lightning-illuminations
followed by streams of
dewless mornings.

One winter sunrise finds toppled limbs
unable to bear the night's gift,
sprawled face down,
framing the suspended soul
now disjoined from frozen sod,
naked, exposed.

A solitary coyote bemoans the waning moon.

WILDFLOWER

Nancy M. Steele

A single royal wildflower,
taken in vacation delight,
rests in a rusty pot
on a paint-peeled window sill
and listens to the mid-day city,
bows to the siege of buildings
and slowly abdicates.

CURBINGER

H. Patrick Killough

I saw Curbinger again today. It was the first time in, oh, maybe ten or twelve years. He was halfway up a light pole on Main Street, shouting curses down at the rhinoceros that was snorting and pawing around the bottom of the pole.

"That's gratitude for you," he shouted at the beast.

That's Curby—they used to call him Curby in the old days—for you. It isn't that he was dumb; he wasn't. Curby had been to college . . . studied psychology. He quit after a couple of years, though, because he said they weren't teaching him anything he didn't already know. Why, you could pick out anyone on the street and old Curby could tell you what their problem was and how it could be solved. It was just that when he got around to actually putting his solutions into practice, and this was often enough to be deemed his life's work, if anything could be called that, they never seemed to turn out the way he planned.

Take that time over at Trout Corner, for example. There was this girl—Julie was her name, I believe—not bad looking for having spent her entire life on a farm with a rough-and-tumble husband and having mostly raised five kids. She used to sing in the church choir at the Southern Bible Baptist Church of Trout Corner. Curby took a shine to this Julie and said that she was the best soprano he had heard this side of heaven. My personal opinion was that she was a good distance from being soprano, and even farther from being heavenly, but Curby had gotten it in his mind that her great vocal talent, of which she must be aware, was being totally wasted, and Julie herself a frustrated prisoner in the choir of the Southern Bible Baptist Church of Trout Corner, and he was determined to do something about it.

Well, old Curby weaseled his way into Julie's household and sweet-talked her into really believing that she was destined to sing with the Metro, or some such institution. He did have a way with women . . . call it the "Curbinger Charm." He told her of his contacts in the big city. He really had them, too, and he was apparently convinced that they were as legitimate as he told Julie they were. After all this convincing of Curby's—which I understand wasn't too difficult—Julie came to believe that she was, in fact, a repressed, frustrated, and unfulfilled woman, and that this somewhat strange but wonderful Mr. Curbinger was her salvation.

All the arrangements were made for her debut in the big city, on the sly, of course, so that her husband and family wouldn't put any obstacles in the way of her finally "realizing herself." The big night came. She went on stage. She sang. The audience screamed for more. She gave them more. They cried, "Take it off." She did. The house was raided.

Curbinger said his intentions were totally honorable and some mistake

must have been made. He couldn't understand why neither Julie nor her family were grateful for his liberating her from her drudgery.

Yes, Curby did have a way with the ladies. Don't get me wrong, though. It made very little difference whether you were a man or woman if Curby zeroed in on your problem and decided to take action. Why, one of the best examples of the luck that seemed to follow Curby's solutions happened over in Uniontown when Curby, in all his benevolence, smiled upon a young fellow there who had been out of a job for nearly a year. The kid thought he was down-and-out before he met Curby. He hadn't seen anything yet.

Curby saw this ad in the paper about a crew wanting drivers to take used cars to the Coast, so, knowing that his new young friend had just gotten a driver's license, Curby took him right over. Joe, that was the kid's name, was offered three thousand dollars right off the bat, but Curby, who always knew what was right, for both sides, insisted that he take only three hundred.

As it turned out even the three thousand wouldn't have covered Joe's troubles. Joe marked up what must be one of the shortest cross-country trips on record, making it all the way to the edge of town before the licivious beast-of-a-vehicle he was driving became enamored with one of those Kings-of-the-road, a semi-trailer, and wrapped itself gently around the semi's front axle, radiator, and several other parts. The indictment delivered to Joe while he was recuperating in the hospital told the rest of the story, and almost finished Joe off. The objections were a little more than the reckless driving he was looking for. A really impressive list: transportation of a stolen vehicle, various violations of the narcotics laws, and various violations of federal laws dealing with the transportation of weapons and explosives. It took a few minutes to realize how lucky he was to be alive. A few months later, when the judge announced his sentence of from 20 to 40 years, he wished he wasn't.

It was only shortly before we had last parted company that Curbinger, having become totally disillusioned with people for their ingratitude for his efforts on their behalf, turned his "special talent" for solving problems to a group he was sure would appreciate it: the poor, defenseless animals. Appropriately enough, he made the transition gradually, determining first to better the lot of Man's best friend, the dog.

As luck would have it, Curby's resolution came at a time when the crime rate in our city was at an all-time high, and a warehouse, which by some misfortune happened to be on the route of Curby's daily walk, had chosen to rely on the most vicious "guard" dog it could find for their protection. This dog was so vicious he had been given a dishonorable discharge from the K-9 corps.

Curby's habitual walk took him by the warehouse shortly after the dog was released for the night and during the first of this beast's habitual nightly howling sessions. Apparently it was the howling—as Curby described it, a "mournful cry for freedom"—that made Curbinger's mind up to set in motion the events which made a most memorable night in our fair community. That poor, wretched beast, Curby determined, must have its freedom.

Curby started work on his new project as soon as he returned home from his daily exercise. He started off in a sane and reasonable manner, something

new for Curbinger, even if it didn't end up that way. The warehouse owner was the first to be called. He laughed. The Humane Society was next . . . sympathy, but. . . . The obvious became apparent; if anything was going to be done, he would have to do it himself.

It was about 2:00 a.m. when Curby landed the blow that shattered the front door of the warehouse. Our friend, dog, suddenly freed, streaked off into the night leaving a somewhat dejected Curby staring blankly after him and reflecting on the beast's ingratitude.

Shortly after Curby retreated from the scene, the local "vultures" descended. At 7:00 o'clock the next morning, when the manager arrived, the warehouse had literally been stripped bare by the scavengers. Gone not only was the dog, but everything not bolted to the building itself, including the storage bins.

Friend dog was making use of the new-found freedom by laying siege to a local apartment building. The first resident attempting to leave for work the next morning was met by bared fangs and a run-for-your-life chase, narrowly escaping the giant monster's last leap by his wife's quick action of closing the door on the beast in mid-air flight.

The second resident to try leaving met similar circumstances, and the third and fourth, etc., until the police and dogcatcher arrived to take care of the situation about 11:00. The delay was due to an initial belief that the dog was the landlord's new pet. All in all, friend dog had complete control of the building, letting no one in or out, for nearly three hours and was having the best time of his life. The residents were having the worst time of theirs.

Things were rather difficult for several days after this incident, culminating in a long discussion that included several police and city officials, a couple of lawyers, and Curbinger, but as usual the cloud passed and left Curby unshadowed. Maybe it was the people he knew. Maybe it was his supposed money—nobody knew for sure about his money—or maybe he just convinced everyone that his intentions were good and he meant no harm but things "just didn't go as they were supposed to." Anyway, Curby was let off with a "don't-show-your-face-in-this-town-again-for-at-least-a-decade." And that was that.

About that rhino. Apparently, the ten years being up, Curbinger is back. Why I wouldn't have the foggiest notion . . . something about returning to the scene, I suppose. He doesn't seem to have changed much. In fact, this whole rhino incident seems to be based on the fact that he felt sorry for the poor thing and wanted to help it out. Somehow he got it out of its cage down at the zoo and into a truck. Apparently he has learned a few tricks in those years of absence. Well, he got as far as mid-town before the pawing of the rhino, and his banging against the side of the truck, finally upset the truck. The back of the truck busted open and the rhino escaped; but instead of running off like you might expect, or charging everything in sight, he simply waited and watched until Curbinger climbed out of the cab of the truck, then he went after Curby. Lucky for Curby that the light pole was near; that rhino most certainly "only had eyes for Curbinger."

Well, there was Curbinger, up the light pole with that rhino pawing the

concrete and battering the base of the pole in fury. I couldn't just stand and watch all this going on and do nothing. I mean, Curby and I have known each other since grammar school. So I acted.

"Hey, Curby," I shouted. I'm certain everyone could hear me.

Curby looked around, made a gesture of recognition, and muttered a few phrases I didn't quite make out. I was sure I had his attention, at least partially.

"Nice pet you got there," I called. I was sure he'd appreciate me mentioning animals, him loving them so much. "A little unruly, maybe, but I'm sure his intentions are good."

About that time I remembered what my wife was having for supper and figured it was about time for me to be getting home.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN STANDARD AFTERNOON

Carol Hillebrandt

in blue forests walking
in among the silences,
pretending not to listen but
seeking secret whispers
grand answers to my formless doubts,
great rumbling replies to my murmured questions,
for a moment, I understand
that I am searching only for your soft-voiced approval —
dragging rustling silk skirts over dry needles,
posing in white ruffles against dark trees,
flashing a smile for my absent audience . . .
the only response to my performance
is the pine-softened patter
of the usual indifferent afternoon shower.

ARC

Johanna Whiting

CHARACTERS

the OBJECTION
the TRIAL

The characters may be played by either gender.

SET

Background: a deep cavernous black. The stage is divided into three areas. Stage right is a blank black wall. A hole has been cut into it and papered and painted over so that it cannot be distinguished. The area behind the wall is also black. The area stage left of the wall is occupied by a gymnasium bicycle, the sort that goes nowhere when pedaled. It also contains a pair of dangling ropes with circular hand-grips for doing tricks on. The middle third of the stage has a map of the world suspended upstage center. Stage right of the map is a chair in which is seated a sizable doll dressed in a nurse's uniform. Leaning against the chair as though the doll were holding it, is a rifle. Stage left of the map is a conductor's music stand on which is a large and old-looking book. The last half of stage left is occupied by a large box-like construction, also painted black. It should look as though there were no way around it, only over. On top of the box is a vase stand with a pillow in which is couched a golden egg.

LIGHTS

The egg should have its own golden special which, off at the start of the play, slowly intensifies as the TRIAL gets closer to it. At the end of the play when TRIAL holds the egg the special will be at its brightest and will remain so until TRIAL has replaced it and exited. It should then fade out fast before the remaining lights go down. Other lights should come up on the areas as they are entered and go down as they are left.

COSTUMES

The characters should be dressed simply in clothes that do not suggest a sexual/social/economic role. The OBJECTION may be dressed in a bright, but intense green and the TRIAL in light lavender or light blue.

ACT ONE

(The curtain comes up on the OBJECTION, stage left, reaching vainly for the top of the box, but the OBJECTION is obviously too short. OBJECTION drops hand and stands back, silently looking up at the egg. OBJECTION stiffens to attention as some wordless sounds of struggle are heard off-stage, behind the black wall. OBJECTION looks anxiously at the

egg, wringing hands. More sounds are heard and OBJECTION runs over to the black wall. The sounds increase to a fury and the TRIAL, who is taller than the OBJECTION, comes bursting out through the wall and rolls to a balled-up sitting position on the floor with hands covering face. As OBJECTION creeps up on TRIAL in a sinister and seductive way, TRIAL peeks out at the world with big eyes. OBJECTION takes hold of TRIAL by the shoulders. TRIAL is startled at first, but succumbs to OBJECTION's soothing and comforting. Soon OBJECTION has TRIAL relaxed and laughing. OBJECTION helps TRIAL up off of the floor. OBJECTION leads TRIAL into doing some exercises. TRIAL follows OBJECTION's example in a free-wheeling style. The OBJECTION immediately corrects TRIAL to the rigid calisthenic manner that was demonstrated. TRIAL either cannot or will not catch on and in a surge of energy dances stage left into the next area and trips over a big green and blue beach ball. TRIAL holds head as though having hit it. OBJECTION follows, perturbed. After a little head rubbing, TRIAL wakes up to the surroundings, sees the ball and begins to marvel at it and to play with it. TRIAL stands up, twirling the ball on a finger and watching it spin with great fascination. OBJECTION watches with growing satisfaction. OBJECTION claps and TRIAL throws the ball. They engage in a game of toss during which TRIAL bumps into the book stand. Distracted by the book TRIAL starts to finger it. OBJECTION makes some pleasingly distracting sounds, but TRIAL isn't biting. OBJECTION, having picked up the doll, makes some irritated noises catching TRIAL's attention. TRIAL has never really seen the angry side of OBJECTION. As TRIAL turns from the book OBJECTION quickly turns back into a creature whose only desire is to please and captivate. OBJECTION sidles over to TRIAL using the doll as a temptation. TRIAL is tempted and reaches out to touch the doll's skirt. OBJECTION slowly withdraws, keeping the doll out of the following TRIAL's reach. Then, tiring of this game, TRIAL stops, refusing to go any further. The unbelieving OBJECTION tries to force the doll on TRIAL but TRIAL will have none of it and even moves to return to the book when OBJECTION begins to rant and rave. TRIAL watches wide-eyed as OBJECTION gets rid of the doll and picks up the rifle. TRIAL, thinking that if the book can be reached this frightening situation will just go away, makes another attempt to reach it. OBJECTION growls and stamps in a horrible and commanding way, forcing TRIAL to turn back. OBJECTION shoves the rifle onto TRIAL. TRIAL is scared and keeps an eye on OBJECTION, but begins to look over the rifle. OBJECTION starts to march in place and beats on an imaginary drum, improvising the sounds. TRIAL, somewhat over being afraid, puts the rifle up on one shoulder and marches around like a tin soldier. OBJECTION steps up the beat and TRIAL's marching becomes faster and more mechanical)

TRIAL

(As the tempo reaches its height and OBJECTION accompanies with loud drumming, TRIAL faces the audience and shoots them)

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

(TRIAL straightens up with a smile, having found the noise fun. Then TRIAL looks out into the audience and is horrified by the sight. TRIAL screeches, throws the rifle down, runs from the audience and dives for the music stand. OBJECTION retrieves the rifle, treating it like a maligned puppy dog. TRIAL is shaken and slowly comes to a sitting position, resting against the base of the stand. TRIAL watches as though seeing the OBJECTION for the first time, for what OBJECTION really is. TRIAL stands up as OBJECTION sits down in the chair, caressing the rifle and checking it for damage. TRIAL is concerned and puzzled. Leaning on the book to think, TRIAL rediscovers and opens it. While turning the pages, TRIAL's eye is caught by something in the book. TRIAL alternates between being enraptured by the reading and pausing to contemplate what has been read. OBJECTION has replaced the rifle and sees TRIAL with the book. OBJECTION quietly and desperately rushes around behind the absorbed TRIAL to stand authoritatively between TRIAL and the egg. TRIAL's face brightens. Looking up, TRIAL sees the egg for the first time and leaves the book for it. OBJECTION is blocking the way. The actors must make visual the ensuing struggle. TRIAL and OBJECTION come into no physical contact nor do they speak a word, though they may make noises. OBJECTION first tries to dissuade TRIAL by posing as an authoritative figure. This TRIAL weathers easily, but not so easily when OBJECTION takes the weak, vulnerable all-I-ever-did-was-for-you approach, laying the guilt on thick. It is a real fight for TRIAL, who in the end races past OBJECTION, blindly colliding with the box. Shuddering and sobbing, TRIAL tears at the box. Behind TRIAL, OBJECTION yells with anger at being defeated and in a rage knocks over the stand and the book. Then, as though having committed a sacrilege, hurries to put things back in order. OBJECTION is careful not to read the book, and yet cannot help it. TRIAL has turned around and is leaning against the box sighing with relief. A sense of sorrow is added to TRIAL's understanding of OBJECTION while watching OBJECTION replace the book. OBJECTION pauses with the book half open and the two stare at each other, OBJECTION in a blaming way and TRIAL self-confidently. OBJECTION slaps the book closed. TRIAL stands away from the wall a moment, then turns and after some effort, ascends the box and stands up. OBJECTION comes to stand worriedly at the base of the box.)

TRIAL

(Picks up the egg. Holding it to his navel, TRIAL turns back to OBJECTION)

You're a lot like my mother.

(TRIAL replaces the egg and exits stage left. OBJECTION again struggles to climb the box. Black out.)

VILLAGE

Paul Hart

I. Morning

A young woman
Sports new clothes
Sunglasses
Catches eyes

An old Italian
Wears Sunday clothes
On Thursday
No one sees

A Jewish mother
Picks fresh fruit
Argues the weather
With delight

II. Afternoon

Businessmen
Run the streets
Carry briefcases and airs
Few people stare

An old woman
Hands out pamphlets
Saves souls
Sleeps alone

The artist
Displays his wares
Silent tears
Smear loved strokes

III. Evening

Lonely musicians
Display dissonances
Sing yesterday
Today

Bartenders
Hear broken hearts
Slow beats
That must stop

A young man
Shoots daily bread
Lives next door
Day to day

IV. Night

Black children
Prove their pride
Break windows
Are men

Used women
Are offered drinks
In return
For lies

A policeman
Stands silently
Amidst fallen leaves
Alone

THE BUTTERFLY AND THE MOTORCYCLE DRIVE

Bill Macomber

Butterflies will scream aloud when
Crushed by forty miles per hour,
Surprised in pain by moving humans,
Finding violence,
Their power.

Smacked in flight this summer past,
Not far from here, I must confess that
One such tender rose-food carrier
Was a momentary sting on a human's cheekbone,
And then a puff of wingy dust suspended
Softly for a time above a hot, country highway.

VISITING: A MONTAGE

Patricia Henshall

Cold lighted corridors
and the starchy clicking
of a nurse on her rounds;
Newly-aged men and women
see relatives
in all who enter:
 I am sister
 mother, daughter
 wife
 before I have walked six feet;
A man with drug-padded wits
 gift of his doctor who has no other;
A Raphael Madonna
 fragile hands gouging buttons from vinyl chairs;
In the emergency room
 a young man—a boy
 his soft faded jeans
 shop-stiff and dark again with blood;
And my friend
 whose martyred eyes meditate upon his cat lives
 and wonder if the ninth time is the charm.

CONCEPTIONS

B.F. Abdur-Razzaq

I. Death

Now I, a dry and brittle shell,
a craver of wetness and cool ground,
yearn the worm's turn next to my skin,
to soften compacted earth with its burrowing.

II. Birth

In a younger season, I was the germ
of another seed, that gushed out
in a geyser's spout and nestled first
into that vine-ripened sanctuary;
there to clutch hold of residence
and reveal this pith and meat: produce
this self. Was it the nine moons
and the Twins' constellation that tattooed
me then? No, It was the Subtle One
that molded my soul—it took His touch.

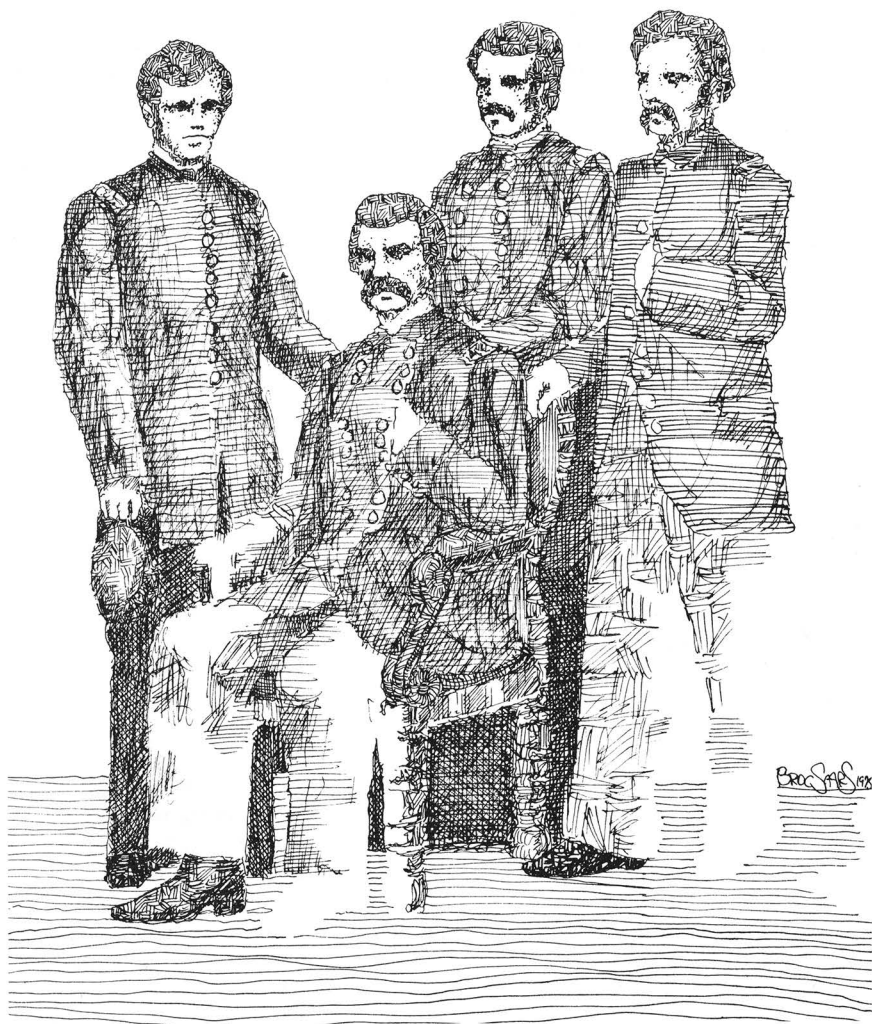
III. Rebirth

So scoop my furrow wide and deep,
and softly sow me to earth. Patiently,
I will wait the rain that awakens
coaxes up corpses from dry-pan prairie dust.

ELEGY

Eileen Smith

Friend, I hear the wind
Whispering wailings of
Your struggle, drenched
In sleepless nights,
Tormented by vague
Emptiness, echoing deep
Within moist chambers
Of your tender body.
Fibers grope in shadows
For a dream once planted
There, a dream which
Lingers still to hypnotize,
Leaving behind the simple
Slice of a knife and
Pat on the back.



Untitled—Broc Sears

PORK SLICES

Richard G. Ives

Fog. I leaned on one leg and stared at the white barrier that drifted—now slowly, now quickly—over our mountaintop. Its impenetrability seemed to protect us from the dangers of this strange land, yet we were also its prisoners, cut off from the rest of the battalion and unable to be resupplied.

Once the sun had shone, and we had looked down to see a wrinkled carpet of green, grey slashes of rivers, and the distant flatlands, pale save for the deep brown blotch of an artillery firebase. During the night the fog came, as if fearful the sun would defeat it during the day. The hills and flats were replaced by the monotony of the mist. The bird and insect noises were stifled. All sound seemed suspended; we found ourselves speaking in awed half-whispers.

I turned away from the fog to see my fellow travelers sitting singly or in small groups, playing cards, reading paperbacks, or just staring at the white. The faded green of their uniforms stood out against the drabness of our mountain, where only a few shattered trees stood sentinel. Explosives had reduced them to less than a man's height to enable helicopters to clatter in, vomit their passengers, and clatter gratefully out again.

A burst of static from the radio turned my head. I watched the radioman pick up the black plastic handphone and tell battalion that our platoon was still fogbound. There was another spurt of static and he returned to the letter he was writing.

"Writing to the wife again?"

He nodded without looking up. Odd duck. Not like our old radioman. I sighed and began walking back to the card game. On the way, I noticed a blasted tree stub I hadn't seen before. Its trunk ended in five fingers of wood, groping heavenward.

"The symbolism escapes me," I muttered to no one. No one replied.

"Jesus Christ, I am fucking hungry!" Carson bit off the words slowly—as if they might be his last. He continued:

"How long has it been now?"

Vader took a short draw on his last stale smoke.

"You mean since we've been supplied? About four days. If you didn't eat so damn much, you'd have some left like the rest of us!"

Carson turned to me as I took my place on my helmet-chair.

"What kind of chow do you have?"

"Ham slices and pork slices."

"You call that food? Shit!"

I had to smile. It was unusual that I had not thrown the pork slices away when the C-rations were passed out. They were foul, almost unpalatable, but I was glad I'd saved them now; there was little else. I had given some of my other rations to some new guys in the platoon who had not yet learned to keep some

in reserve in case the fog came. They had expected to be down in the Delta, where there are no mountains. Carson had said:

"You ought to let them starve, then they'll learn!"

That, of course, had made it definite that I would give them as much as I could afford to. I couldn't be nice to Carson; he was just too damned smug. Now his concern was for our card game.

"Whose deal?"

"Mine."

I dealt them out slowly (what was the hurry?), and the four of us played quietly, murmuring wisecracks as we took tricks from one another.

Carson sat to my right. His childlike face registered intensity—with frequent pauses as he stopped to brush a stubborn dark lock from his forehead. A college student who had made the mistake of graduating. The draft had not even let him complete his first summer as an educated man. Still, he had a smug confidence in his own intelligence and in the powers of rational thought in general. That mildly irritated me and labeled him in my mind as only one thing—asshole.

Across from me, Vader rubbed the sandy stubble on his chin as he pondered what card to play next. An Illinois farmer. His face, too, was youngish, but darker in tone and already beginning to show the toughness of his profession. I liked Vader the best of our little group; he had the no-nonsense attitude of a laborer. Unlike Carson, he didn't bitch much. I liked that; he made it easier to forget the reality around us.

Bates was our fourth. I knew him least well, I think he had been working when he was drafted. He was a pleasant enough person in spite of physical ugliness and thick glasses. He possessed a bland sense of humor and no apparent opinions of his own.

All of us were older than the others in the platoon, except the lieutenant. I was the oldest of the card-players. From high school, I had leapt into a nearby state school, lost my motivation early, and flunked out in the middle of the second year. For the next four years, I stayed in the college town, working small jobs, drinking beer, and waiting for something to happen. It had, in the form of a dried up little old lady at the selective service board, who raged at those unfortunates who did not know their country's formal name. An extra nine weeks of training made me an "instant sergeant." I kept thinking that if I prolonged my training long enough the war would end. It hadn't.

Vader won the hand again. He was a natural card player. Carson got pissed off as usual.

"Deal again!"

"The shortcomings of a high I.Q.," I commented, "you never know when to quit."

Carson's face darkened as the three of us chuckled.

"Let's eat first," said Vader. Carson smiled.

"Now you're making sense!"

"My turn," I added. I stood up and walked over to my rucksack. I groped inside and found a can.

"Pork slices."

Carson grimaced.

"Let's eat the ham slices first."

"Okay."

I put the pork slices aside and located the other can.

"Pork slices."

"Pork slices! I thought you said you had ham slices! Fuck!"

"Yeah, I thought I did."

Vader frowned and grumbled:

"Well, let's stop bitching and start eating." He winked at me and said to Carson, "You don't have to eat if you don't want to."

Carson sighed.

"I'm in."

I fished my can opener from my breast pocket and opened the pork slices, leaving the lid partially attached to the can to serve as a handle. Carson went to his rucksack and produced a small can of chili powder and a bottle of steak sauce.

"Mommy takes good care of her baby," I thought. Bates got out his stove, an empty ration can with holes punched in the sides. We gathered together at the stove.

"My last heat tab," declared Vader as he dropped the light blue disc of compressed fuel into the stove. He touched a match to it, and it ignited with a clear blue flame. I placed the can of pork slices on the stove. The grey-brown meat stared up at us balefully. Soon, the juices began to bubble; Carson solemnly added five pinches of chili powder, then he removed a white plastic spoon from his breast pocket and sopped the juice over the meat.

"A stirring sight," muttered Bates. We groaned appropriately. The heat tab burned out; I placed the steaming can on the ground. A glance at Carson holding his spoon straight up and down gave me a sudden inspiration. I intoned:

"Domini, Domini, Domini."

They laughed and each began to chant his own version of Latin:

"Sanctus, Sanctus."

"E Pluribus Ignoramus."

"Eye Two Aqueous."

"Ono-ma-topaea."

"Let us now eat of the holy C-rations," I stated with mock reverence. One by one, we lifted a single pork slice out of the can and carefully balanced it, waiting for the steak sauce. I doused my slice heavily. We nibbled gently around the edges, hoping to save our tongues the insult of burns on top of the injury of eating pork slices. Bates licked his spoon.

"Not bad for pork slices!"

"Good thing we had the steak sauce," Vader added.

"Yep," said Carson, "straight from the real world."

I looked at the fog.

"It's hard to believe there is a world out there anymore."

There was a pause and then Carson, with a smile asked, "Do you know

what's really out there?"

Bates bit:

"What?"

"Well, if the fog suddenly blew away, you would see a round, green metal wall surrounding this mountain," said Carson, his smile becoming more and more a smirk. "In fact, we are in a gigantic tin can, and if you could see the sky, you would see a big lid labeled 'Pork Slices.' "

The three of us stared at him.

"Carson . . . ," I began. But he went on, his smirk gradually fading.

"It makes sense if you think about it. Pork slices are the lowest of the low; no one has anything to do with them if they can help it. It's the same with us. Do you think your friends are pining for you right now? To them, the war is five minutes of tongue-clucking when the news comes on. Remember all those 'Dear John' letters our friends got in Basic Training? Rats abandoning the sinking ship. And we *have* sunk—right into the can."

Bates squirmed, looking nervous. "What about the protesting?" I piped up unenthusiastically.

Carson snorted.

"A chance to vent adolescent hostility toward mommies and daddies in blue uniforms. Shit, at my school, the heaviest protesting occurs in good weather and during examinations—in lieu of panty raids. Another thing. Not only are we baby-murderers separated from our civilian audience by a wall of army green metal, but just like the meat in the can, we are separate slices from one another. In Basic Training, they used to say, 'shit rolls downhill.' That's true, and we are at the bottom of the hill, so when it gets to us, it just bounces around. Who can we take out our anger on? The lifer Lieutenant? Gooks we never see? No, on one another, of course. Where is that mythical cameraderie in the face of death? Meat doesn't feel cameraderie, men, but I guess we can go on deluding ourselves and sharing our pork slices communion, reaffirming our faith in the hollowness of our souls."

He stopped abruptly. No one spoke. Suddenly, he looked very sad and vulnerable. He stood up, looked at me briefly, then quickly averted his eyes. He walked stiffly to his rucksack, grabbed an entrenching tool and a roll of toilet paper, and vanished down the mountain into the fog. Bates' nervous voice ended the silence.

"I don't see how he's got anything to shit, with what we've been eating."

"Ah, he's always full of shit," Vader grumbled.

But we were shaken; any facade of card-playing-good-feeling drifted away when Carson let loose. The silence began to get to me. I decided to get my jungle rot fixed. I walked over to the medic, who was engrossed in a paperback incredibly entitled *Incest Confidential*.

"Got a minute, Doc?"

He grunted and muttered, "Yeah, I guess so. Want your jungle rot fixed?"

"Yeah."

I sat down heavily on the damp ground as he unzipped his aid bag. Our daily ritual: he pried the scabs off the sores on my legs with a scalpel, dabbed

the bleeding results with calamine lotion, and then covered them with gauze bandages. It hurt. I winced. The medic's face remained emotionless. An odd duck. Doc was a Canadian who had enlisted in the U.S. Army with the sole intent of becoming a combat medic and working his way up through the hierarchy of the medical branch. A screamingly boring hour of my life had been spent listening to him describe his rise in rank. Such tales of grandeur meant nothing to me, who had spent much of his adult life fleeing from the huge olive drab nemesis ("the service" it always evoked a smirk in me).

"Okay, all set!"

"Thanks, Doc."

He grunted and said: "If it doesn't get better pretty soon, I'm going to send you to the rear."

I nodded stoically. Inwardly, I was jumping for joy. The rear! Beer and safety! No more mountains, no more fog—and no more pork slices, I added in deference to Carson. But, I had to play it cool with the medic; he had power.

"I just wish this shit didn't hurt so much," I said, trying to sound long-suffering. He said nothing, so I took my cue, arose, said so long, and ambled away (limping slightly).

Carson was lying on his back, using his rucksack for a head support. His eyes were closed. Vader and Bates were still trying to figure out how to react to Carson's diatribe (they had no convenient jungle rot), so I knew the card game was dead. I went to my own rucksack and duplicated Carson's posture.

Staring at the inside of my eyelids, I decided that my chances of going to the rear were actually non-existent; I had let my eagerness overwhelm my good sense. The medic's primary concerns were not humanitarian, and it was well-known that he was a grudge-holder. His resentment of me would stem from a series of exchanges of profanities we had had whenever I felt nasty enough to question his authority. No, there would be no time in the rear for me. Doc himself would be transferred to the rear aid station when his nine months in the field were up. Doc was human, I concluded—human enough to leave me in the mountains while he languished in safety. Maybe Carson was right. Carson! My immediate reaction to the thought was disgust, which began to fade as I mulled over his speech.

Behind his usual intellectual self-righteousness, Carson had spoken truth. We were abandoned, and no parental World-War-Two era platitudes received in the mail could change that fact. One day we had embarrassed our parents with our clothes, hair, and rebellion against the war, and the next day we had embarrassed them by our participation in that war. Baby-murderers, Carson had said. Straw men would be a better term. We had given up the ability to determine our own fates. Even more damning, we had passively drifted into it—as I had drifted in and out of school, from major to major. Indirection had given my life a direction, but not one of my own choosing. But somehow, the miracle that would save me was always just around the corner. Surely I would be made a clerk (infantry), surely I would go to Germany (Viet Nam), surely I would get a job in the rear (the mountains). Now, there were no more corners to turn. It was the end. I had become processed meat, as faceless and soulless

as those damned pork slices. I sat up and looked at the rest of the platoon, wondering if any of them realized what had happened to us.

A burst of static from the radio made me start, then relax. Just another request from battalion for a weather report. I looked to be sure. Fog. I heard the radioman's incoherent mumbles and saw him beckon to the lieutenant, who sprang up from the ground and hurried to the radio. Everyone sat up. The lieutenant ran his hand through his black crewcut as he replied to each spurt of static. Usually, his Mexican-American accent made us smile a little (we had been brought up on Speedy Gonzales and the Frito Bandito). No one smiled now; something was up. He punctuated each sentence with "sir," which led Carson to smart.

"You're not supposed to 'sir' over the radio; it's a security violation. The obsequious son of a bitch!"

Vader looked at me and rolled his eyes. The lieutenant put the phone down and yelled, "All right, let's get it on and get moving!"

Bitter curses and groans. We started to collect our equipment. Plastic ponchos were rolled up, canteens and entrenching tools gathered up, foxholes filled in, and rifles hastily examined.

"What's up?" I called to the radioman.

"Alpha company's chasing some gooks down in the valley. We got to hump down and head them off."

"Motherfucker! All the way down this fucking mountain!"

"Yep."

One by one, we donned our rucksacks and formed a line. The weight of the load made each man bend forward. I looked around and saw that my squad was ready. Behind me was Carson, followed by Vader, Bates, the medic, and the rest. The lieutenant spoke a command and we began to trudge down the mountain.

II

It was a typical march. The going was especially hard for the first few men in line, for it was they who had to cut a path with machetes. I knew from my own experience that they would soon be sweating and gasping in spite of the cool mountain air. They moved forward haltingly as they encountered greater or lesser amounts of vegetation. As a result, those of us in the rear found ourselves alternating between inactivity and hurrying to catch up. Distant observers (there may have been some) would have sworn our line was an insane green caterpillar making its way slowly downward.

The damp ground was churned into mud by the men in front, and on steep stretches, we began to slide and fall. I glanced back and saw the medic, pulled off-balance by his aid bag, hit his helmeted head hard against a branch. He swore between clenched teeth. We went on.

God, it was muggy! I usually used my sleeves to wipe the sweat from my face, but my fatigues became soaked, and then there was nothing to stop the water-torture that covered my face. I kept an eye on those behind me; Carson was pale and squinted through a sea of sweat, Vader was panting, Bates seemed

to be okay except that, like the rest of us, he staggered.

We halted for a rest once, and I could see the lieutenant up ahead, looking at a map. He looked down at his cut and scratched hands, then furtively glanced at the hands of the men on either side of him. They were also bloody. He smiled faintly. He arose. The march went on.

The surrounding vegetation stretched without end. The hills dwarfed our paltry stripe of green. The fog was finally left behind clinging to the peak like dirty-grey cotton candy. Released from the fog, animal cries and hums pierced the silence. A few birds and rust-colored lizards observed the column curiously. Vines and branches clutched at us with sharp fingers, and were repaid with a machete slash. Rocks which had been immobile for centuries were kicked aside, revealing a startled centipede or panicky ants. The forest showed us its reluctance to be violated. We went on. There was nothing else to do. I heard Carson giggle behind me. I turned; he grinned weakly at me and gasped,

"It's so absurd!"

Vader scowled at Carson's back.

"Keep going, goddamn it."

We went on. I made a mental note to keep an eye on Carson for heat exhaustion.

The sun reached its zenith and began to descend, occasionally visible through holes in the evaporating cloud cover. We sweated, now too exhausted even to curse the clinging green that made every step agony.

The mountain's steepness slackened. The sun finally appeared majestically from behind a shrinking cloud, but we were too tired to applaud. There was a commotion at the head of the line, and we halted. Word was passed back: we had arrived at the trail we were going to ambush. I saw the lieutenant smile through his sweat; he gave a few terse commands, and the line of men began to cross the trail and spread out along the far side. Shortly, I was at the trail's edge.

It was more a tunnel than a path. Its floor was the drab brown of dead leaves, twigs, and bits of bark. Thin branches and vines formed the tunnel's leafless roof at neck height. Little light filtered through the thick underweaving, even compared to the forest's usual dimness. The trail twisted interminably to the left and right of me as I prepared to step onto it. Each man crossing searched meticulously where he would step; several scanned the tunnel's roof. I walked lightly, looking for the booby trap that would rip the legs from my body. The settled look of the ground meant that the trail had not been used lately, but I had seen men's bodies shattered on old, "safe" trails. Four slow steps and I was across. I stepped aside and waited for the others. Carson crossed cautiously. Vader, Bates started across, then stopped, his eyes registering panic. I searched the ground around him and saw nothing. I asked him what was wrong. He didn't answer. Everyone stared at him. The medic leaned forward and pushed Bates' shoulder.

"Get going!"

At the touch, Bates jerked spasmodically and hit his helmet noisily on the

tunnel's roof. Carson smiled, but the rest of us glared with contempt at the clumsy fool. Bates' face reddened, he lowered his eyes and walked rapidly across the trail, his momentary panic replaced by embarrassment.

The lieutenant spoke into the radio. He beckoned frantically to the men not yet across the trail as he reported that the ambush was in position. In ten minutes, it was.

We lay on our stomachs and faced the trail. Machine guns and grenade launchers had been carefully positioned to have maximum effect on anyone who ventured along the trail. The lieutenant, the radioman, and the medic were situated farther back than the rest of us. Stateside classes in ambush technique had dictated that this be so, for they are the most important members of the platoon. Ambushes had become a science; there was even a geometry of ambush, in which L-shapes, lines, and U-shapes were juggled to produce a "kill zone"—a term like many others in the Army attempting to detach meaning and emotion from murder.

A moderate breeze came up. I welcomed its coolness but knew that the resulting rustle of leaves and branches would make it harder to hear anyone coming.

To my right, Vader gripped his rifle tightly. Sweat beaded on his upper lip. I wondered if he was remembering our last ambush—the blood, the noise, the fear. I wondered if he was afraid now. I looked around. I saw young men who looked like anything but soldiers, but their faces showed no fear. I gritted my teeth and tried to appear calm. My arm shook slightly as I glanced at my watch. When I next looked at it, an hour had passed.

All of us had relaxed visibly. We shifted our bodies frequently to relieve the agony of remaining in one position for very long; leaves crunched and popped as a result. There were even occasional whispers. The lieutenant frowned at the noise but did nothing. I forced myself to stay alert, wishing the thing would be over with, one way or another. I was the first one to see the bushes move.

It was just a small gathering of shrubs on the edge of the trail where it turned north. It was thick enough to hide someone crawling on his belly. I jerked my head around and mentally screamed at the others, but they were too far sunk in the lethargy of the long wait to notice me. It was impossible to catch anyone's eye. Was I insane? Was it all a dream? I turned back to the bushes. They moved again. I drew a bead on them with my rifle (my front sight was almost a blur, I was shaking so badly). My action finally attracted someone's attention; I heard a disquieting amount of noise as soldiers shifted to look at me and my bushes. I gently fingered the trigger—my fire would initiate the ambush, and I didn't want to shame myself by firing at the wind. Suddenly, a small, brown shape burst from the bushes. A wave of fright chilled me, then a wave of relief. A chicken. A burst of air shot from a dozen pairs of lungs.

Chuckling softly, the chicken started toward us. I kept staring at the bushes. Could it be a trick to distract us? I couldn't help smiling as I pictured the headlines, "Killer chickens aid Reds." Oh Jesus, that was too much! As a

feeble act of protest against the rotting of my mind, I purposely turned my back on the sinister undergrowth and joined the men who already were staring meaningfully at the lieutenant. He looked back blankly. The radioman leaned toward him and loudly whispered,

"They want to know if they can kill the chicken, sir."

The lieutenant scowled and emphatically shook his head. We stared at him momentarily, then rolled back over, muttering.

"Asshole."

"Prick."

"Lifer."

"It would be better than those fucking pork slices!" Carson added.

The bird strutted indifferently by us, then turned and vanished up the new trail we had cut coming down the mountain. The ambush continued for a short time, then the radio hissed. The enemy had escaped. There were new orders.

III

Our bodies were arcs as we stood in a line along the tunnel-trail. We had to bend to keep our helmets from scraping on the branches. We dumbly waited for the lieutenant to give us the order to move. He wandered around, earnestly inspecting the ambush site; just before we had trudged on, he had noticed that we had left cigarette butts and ration cans lying around. That was against orders, so, naturally, we had to pick everything up. We were happy with the new orders, so we carried out this bit of military bullshit cheerfully, startling as we discovered that all the abandoned ration cans were unopened pork slices. The new orders were that we were to proceed to a nearby hill to be lifted to a base camp for three days of rest.

The lieutenant finally spoke his command (in his best command voice), and we shuffled forward, our pockets filled with trash, and a can of pork slices in almost every rucksack. Carson made his usual snide wisecracks along the way; even Vader occasionally laughed. I, too, smiled now and then, but it was not at Carson's remarks but at the thought that it had been another dud ambush. Ahead of me, I could see the lieutenant plodding solemnly along, no doubt unhappy that, since he joined the platoon, we had killed no one. During one of the usual pauses, Bates turned around and said to me.

"Twelve."

"What?"

"There are twelve guys ahead of me."

I smiled. He meant that there were twelve bodies ahead of him to trigger ambushes or booby traps. He thought he was pretty safe. I couldn't resist saying it:

"Thirteen."

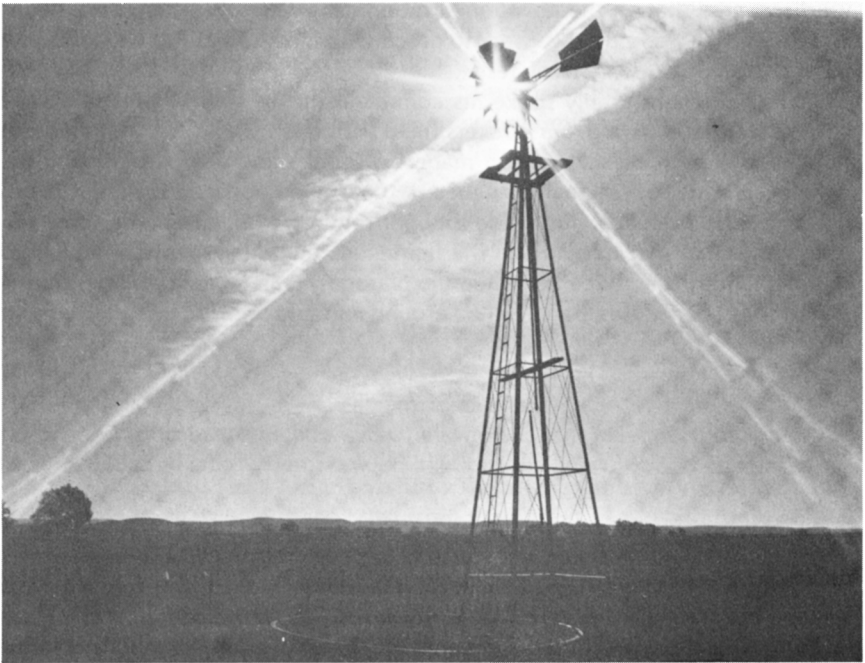
He turned around again and stared at me, then snorted. We went on.

Between the intertwined vines of the tunnel's roof, the hill we were headed for gradually became visible. It looked low and easy to climb. There were no trees on it, just broad-bladed grass. There would be no sweating in the sun with machetes to clear a space for the helicopters. We speeded up. The

late afternoon sun was bright but not too hot; breezes rippled the grass on the hill as we approached it, finally leaving the tunnel behind as we entered a wooded glade at the bottom of the hill. I saw the lieutenant stumble over something and the radioman reach for the officer's rucksack to steady him.

The explosion. All sound is overwhelmed by the blast. Trees thick as a man's body are shattered and topple. Saplings are bent double, stripped of their limbs. The air becomes a flurry of leaves, branches, and dirt. Birds scream in alarm and hurl themselves heavenward. The grass turns red. Then, there is a hush more startling than the din. Only pieces of dirt and wood, thumping back to earth, mar the perfect horror of the silence.

Others come to help the survivors pick up the litter. Remnants of rifles and rucksacks lie scattered about; some hang from far-away branches. There are shattered ration cans everywhere. The soldiers often cannot tell which were once pork slices and which were men so they load everything together in bags and throw them on the helicopters.



Windmill—Ron Nichols

KANSAS

Dedicated to Milton Pelischek

Giovanna Cook

Kansas sleeps in the twilight,
suspended on the edge of time.
Winds stir the dust of recollection,
lovingly recaptured and locked
in the museums of human hearts and minds.

The earth sleeps.
Kansas and the earth are one.
I know Kansas in the spring.
Peonies and irises, irises and peonies
shiver in the wind. They line the walls
of the old houses, mark the plots
around the tombstones.

Memorial Day. Flowers and flags,
and always the memories.
Memories of people gone and of people going.
Memories: on the walls from old lithographs
stare dead faces of long ago,
mirrored in the faces of the living,
the same dreams, the same will
to hold and possess the land
which owns them all.
The house may crumble
but the new roof on the barn
gleams in the sun.
Maybe there is no plumbing,
poor harvest, illness;
still, the clatter of tractors
breaks the stillness.

The earth is wonderfully pitiless and innocent.
Deer wander where once man planned
and dreamed.
Tall trees tower
where houses stood.
Sunflowers burst into bloom
and cover the wilderness with glory.

THE TAR PIT

C.E. Rogers

The mammoth, leaving hoofprints in his steps,
came to drink and shuddered. At the puddle
companions crouched in vain against the depths.
Drinking deep he never felt the grasp, its subtle
pull enfolding hooves that had pawed at enemies,
matting hair that had kept away the sun.
For this dark and dragging thing there was no answer,
no mother's help for the calf grown up and under.

So now they come with picks and books and brushes
to find the bones the pain had left behind.
The matted hair, the hooves are gone. The flesh has
left only a boneframe risen from the slime.
The wooly mammoth is a memory,
caught, trapped in sticky immortality.

BATTLE OF NERVES (TO J.L.)

Tricia Cavanee

As I talk to you
Your office grows
Hazy with a
Grey, burning
Aroma, becoming
Thicker as the
Tray on your desk
Fills with
Cigarette butts,
My ears focus
On your knuckles
Cracking at
Each major point.
If I make you
Nervous, I'll gladly
Stop biting my
Fingernails and
Leave.

GRAINS

Kim Wilson

I like the beach best
 when it's packed
 cold and wet.
I dig my fingers in,
 pushing
 the breaking hole.
 I write
lovers' names and mine,
 watch them get
 washed away.
But tiny grains remain
drying under my nails.

THE OLD MAN AND I

Michael Hurd

She
carries me away
to an old country farmhouse.
 Tumbleweeds
barricade the door, guardians
to keep out the evil spirits.
In the front yard lies a cracked
 ceramic vase
 holding our memories
and the dust of many years.
The path leading out into the field bears
 cloven marks
 from cattle past,
but now stands silent,
used only by the wind.
 And leaning against
a tumble-down woodshed is an old man
playing his harmonica.

DO THE LILACS STILL BLOOM IN VERNOUILLET?

Giovanna Cook

Do the lilacs still bloom in Vernouillet?
In the secluded garden where each blade
hangs heavy with recent rain?
And does the turtle, timeless and voiceless
still pace the solitary walks?
And does, sometimes, an echo of children's voices
return with the song of the birds?
In my garden of memories there is eternal spring.
Marika's eyes still shine from behind the trees
their mischievous glance.
And the red flash of Rob Roy's toy wagon
streaks on the green.

Alone the cat softly prowls the now silent haunts
in the ceaseless quest of yesterday.

WAKING

Chad Perry

Dew makes the green sea
wet. Air breathes turning its lungs
blue. Sun sighs yellow.

SURRENDER

Dan Harlow

A story about the death of a lonely man was in the paper today. I nearly missed it because it was at the bottom corner of the page.

He was an honor student, had a purple heart from Vietnam, and was divorced. Those who lived in the same building left him to his own, thinking that he preferred his solitude. He had many hours for contemplation. Darvon, Valium and alcohol were helpful to him. They helped him take his life.

North Korean soldiers, routed, clung to their lives in well-camouflaged sanctuaries. Engine roar could be heard as letters drifted to within their grasp. "Surrender" they read. The word haunted the men who were alone. Singly, they entered the enemy's camp. Only the lonely men submitted.



Flint Hills Sunset—*Ron Nichols*

LOVE SEAT

E. Malcolm

I.

Who knows what happens to people when their lives crumble around them? Some people make the best of things, others pine and suffer their lives away, and still others put a shotgun in their mouths and pull the trigger. I'm not sure what will happen now; you see, my father died a few months ago, and I'm worried about my mother. She just sits in this damned condominium, in one old chair and stares out over the city ten flights below. When I'm home for a few days, I often sit and wonder what's happening inside her. I've lost things before, but never anything like what Dad must have been to her. I mean, you live twenty-five years or so with someone, and all at once, they die, leaving you alone; Je-s-u-s! It would be like all at once finding yourself naked on that street down there and having no way to get back to the tenth story. I wish there was something I could do for her, but tomorrow is another day and I have another town to be in.

"Mom, goodbye, I'm leaving now."

"Oh Tom, do you have to leave so soon?"

"Ya . . . ah, I have to be at work at 8:30 in the morning."

"Son, I love you."

"I love you too, Ma. See you in a few weeks. Goodbye."

"Goodbye Tom, drive safely, work hard and take care of . . ."

Well, I finally made it out of there. Now, I'll probably have to wait on the goddamn elevator for half an hour. God, I can't believe the way she just sat there in that shitty old love seat. She looked like she was afraid to get out of it. Love seat—what a name; you couldn't make love in one without being a contortionist. It's not only too short to lay down on, but it's too wide to sit in and rest your arms. To top it all off, that love seat isn't even nice. It's old, bulges at the seams. It's not exactly something for a junk dealer, but it sure as hell doesn't fit in that sixty thousand dollar apartment either. Finally! the elevator, punch the lobby for me, will ya? Thanks. Well, it'll be good to get back to work. Boy, I sure do hope the old lady makes out all right. God, I don't know what I'd do if I lost her too.

II.

Now that he's gone, what am I going to do all evening? Oh, I wish the kids could stay around longer. Now I'm all alone again for another month, just me and Felix. Felix! Felix! Good kitty, good kitty, good boy. My you're getting big for just three months; you're going to be a big boy—aren't you—yes—you're a good boy. Now lay down, lay down here next to me, good boy. I wonder where Gene is, I wonder if he can see me. I wish I could see him right now, just the way he used to be, big and strong and calling me Mac. I can hear him now,

"Mac—Mac I'm home, want a drink?" But there's no fun anymore, no places to go, no people to see, no one to love me, just me alone in my chair and the city sprawling below. Those streetlights look so lonely down there, all shining by themselves. There are so many of them, but they're all twenty feet apart, each one's light not quite touching the next one's light. Kitty boy, kitty boy look at the people down there; they can't see us. I wish they could see us; I wish they knew us. But they don't even know each other; they look like worker ants; they probably don't even want to know each other. What a life, no babies to take care of, no man to keep happy and no one to care about me. I'm just an old woman nobody loves . . . love, love . . . I need someone to love me. You love me, Felix, don't you? Yes, good kitty, good kitty. Remember last year, Felix? Oh, that's right, you weren't here. Well, Gene was here, and at night the family would be around and I would fix a big dinner. The girls each brought something, and Tom was here for a week. The babies, yes the babies were running around, always in the way. I remember Beth having to keep settling them down and how much her daughters looked like she did, when she was a baby. How fast things change, how fast things change. . . . No one needs me anymore . . . no one needs me anymore. If I died, Tom would take Felix, the girls would take the condominium and the car, plus the insurance money, and they would all be better off . . . they would all be better off. . . . I'm just a lonely old woman anyway, and I don't think I could look at another man, not after Gene. God, no other man has even touched . . . but I'm not old, I'm not old, I'm not old! I'm only fifty. God, what if I live to be eighty! Thirty years by myself, thirty years. . . . It's only ten feet to the balcony and then just over the edge. It would all be over . . . everyone would just think I went crazy. I wonder if I'd go to hell? I'm sure Gene's in heaven. But no, I can't even kill myself or it just isn't in me. God, how long has that phone been ringing? I wonder who that could be . . . my legs are stiff from that chair . . . "Hello, Hello Ma, it's Tom."

"Oh! Son, where are you?"

"I'm in Manhattan. I just thought I'd call to tell you I made it back all right. I figured you'd be worried."

"I was Tom. I was Tom."

"Ma, I also wanted to tell you that I'm proud of the way you're holding up; you're an inspiration to all of us, Ma, and we all love you up here."

"Thanks son, thanks son. You know if it wasn't for you and the girls, I think life just wouldn't be worth it sometimes."

"We all have each other Ma."

"I know. I know Tom."

"Love ya Ma."

"Love you son."

"Goodbye."

"Goodbye Tom, see you in a few weeks. Be good and take care of. . . ."

That boy, that boy, he's right, Felix. We gotta keep on going. Come on, Felix, let's go to bed. Mother's got to go see about a job tomorrow. Just think—me, Ellen McKinley, gets to go find a job, just like I used to dream about when Gene and I first got married. Maybe I'll even do something with this old love seat, maybe I'll. . . .

SAVED BY THE BELL

Lee Ann Simmons

Ten blocks from home
I'd walk to school each day,
for that daily surrender
to your elementary glimpses:

the time I trusted you
to swing me higher, higher
and that time you pushed
so hard I fell out on my knees,

the time we teeter-tottered,
and you held me up where you
wanted me, up so high,
then dropped me so hard,

the time you started to tell me
how much we needed
each other; then the bell
rang and recess was over.

QUESTION FOR A "BADGER"

Patricia Henshall

Is your mouth holding
tight your pipe or is your pipe
holding closed your mouth?



Discovery—Dave Kaup

CAGES

Gordon Fiedler

Every morning the old man came to the zoo and sat on the bench across the wide walk from the lion and lioness. Today when he left his apartment it was cool and he wore his long black coat and his tan beret that kept his white hair from falling in front of his ears and into his face.

When he arrived at his bench the lion and lioness lay stretched on the concrete of their separate cages staring out past the bars, past the empty walks, past the old man on the bench, past the manicured grounds of the zoo, past the city skyline and into the yellow ball of the sunrise.

At this early hour there were few people along the walk or on the benches but the pigeons still swarmed about looking for handouts. The old man tried to shoo them away. He hated pigeons. When he had painted portraits in Sherman Square the birds swarmed about in groups disrupting the pose of his subjects and caused him to make mistakes.

He shook his hat at the birds around him now but they just fluttered their wings, moved off a short distance, then strutted back, clucking and cooing.

He thought of moving to another bench when he heard someone call his name. He looked up and saw a figure bending over and squinting into his face from about four feet away.

"Sollie?" The man repeated excitedly. "Is it you? Is it really you?"

The old man bent his head and stared at his feet.

"Yes, it's really me."

"Sollie, you must forgive me, but I thought you were . . . I mean, when you didn't come to the square anymore and I found your studio empty, I thought—"

"But I'm not dead, as you can see."

"Yes. Yes!" The man sat down next to Sollie, smiling.

"Ten years, Sollie. It's been ten years! What has become of you? What made you move away?"

Sollie straightened up and looked at Jake, who was still grinning. He still had the pencil-thin mustache, his hair was just as black as Sollie remembered, and he smelled of paint.

"Please, Jake, go away. I don't want to talk."

Jake frowned as he placed his hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Sollie, this is Jake you're talking to. For God's sake man, what is the matter? Are you in trouble? If you need money—"

"No, no money. I don't need any money. Please leave me alone and go away. You never should have found me. Go, please go."

"No. I'm not budging until you talk to me. Tell me the trouble you're in and maybe I can help."

"I'm not in trouble. I just had to get away, that's all."

"Away from what?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Away from what?"

Sollie turned away from his friend and looked at the people starting to crowd along the walk and at the lions swatting flies with the tufts of their tails. When Sollie first started coming to the zoo the animals were together in one cage but at least once a day they would fight viciously, and the crowds that gathered to watch always booed loudly when the keepers hosed the beasts apart.

"You haven't changed, have you Jake? Always the inquisitive bastard." He breathed deeply. "Very well. If I tell you, will you go away then?"

"Maybe."

"No. You must promise to go away."

"All right, I promise to go away. Now, tell me."

"You're a liar."

"As you said, I haven't changed."

Sollie stared straight ahead, his eyes focused on the brown haze hanging over the city. When he spoke, his voice was low and airy and Jake had to lean close to hear.

"Renee died."

Jake said nothing. He took his hand off his friend's shoulder and sat up straight, nodding his head sympathetically.

"I'm sorry, Sollie."

"Well, now you know."

"Is that why you left?"

"I just couldn't paint anymore. Everything I did, everywhere I went, I thought of her. I had to get away."

"Did you have to stop coming to the square too? Where are you painting now?"

"I'm not. I don't paint anymore."

"Sollie, what is this you're telling me? I don't believe you. Come, tell me where you paint. If you won't visit me, then I shall visit you."

"I don't paint anymore. Renee hated every day that I went to the square. She hated it when I came home to clean my brushes and knives. She hated the smell of the oils."

"I didn't know."

"She said it made her sick all the time."

Sollie continued to stare at the caged animals. A group of young boys pressed against the guard rail and threw food at the two animals. Sollie recalled when such acts provoked the male beast into a frenzy. The lion seldom moved at all now, except to eat, to drink, and to transport himself to and from the stone shelter. The lion spent his time stretched along the back wall of the cage staring through the bars.

"I only met Renee once." Jake said, quite suddenly. It pained Sollie to hear her name mentioned with such force and clarity, but he allowed his friend to continue.

"I didn't know you had married and I saw you walking down Blackmoor's

Alley early in the evening. You introduced us outside of Sarducci's. Do you remember, Sollie?" Jake gazed into the air, above the cages and above the trees.

"Renee was so shy. I remember she didn't smile or say a word—she just looked at me. I can see her still, those large, dark eyes staring at me. She was beautiful, Sollie, the most beautiful woman I ever saw."

"Stop, please stop."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't ramble on like I do."

"I have to go."

"Wait, Sollie. What will you do? Where will you go?"

"I will make it all right. Trust me, Jake. I can't see you anymore. You must not look for me."

"But Sollie, why can't you come back? There is a place near me you can move into right away and it's closer to the square than your old studio."

"No. Renee hated it there and there are too many memories for me to go back to."

"Ahh, the bad memories haven't faded, is that it?"

Sollie grabbed Jake's arm and looked deep into his eyes.

"I loved that woman. She gave me everything. There were no bad memories."

Sollie let go, and as he did, Jake could see the bitterness in his friend's eyes become soft, watery.

"I killed her, Jake. She meant everything in the world to me and I killed her. I should have given it up."

"Why *didn't* you give it up?"

Sollie started to say something then turned away. The lions had gone inside to escape the hot sun and the flies and the laughing people.

"I have to go," Sollie said finally. He picked up his coat and straightened his cap. "Goodbye, Jake."

"This is the way it has to be?"

"It's the only way."

"Will you ever come to the square again?"

"No. Never. I couldn't do it to Renee. What would she think if she knew I went back to the square? What would she say?"

Sollie turned and started to walk away.

"I don't know, Sollie. I really don't know what she would say."

**NOTE TO THE ONE
WHO CANNOT LOVE**

Barb Kohl

My dear boy
Have a sweet roll,
Frosting unlimited and
tartness so fine.
Everything savory and
take one with you all
the time;
Nothing more for you
is necessary.
It is not
straightforward as
it seems—
The devil in your
mouth makes
my gray morning ever
so morbid and satisfying.

BREAKFAST SCENE

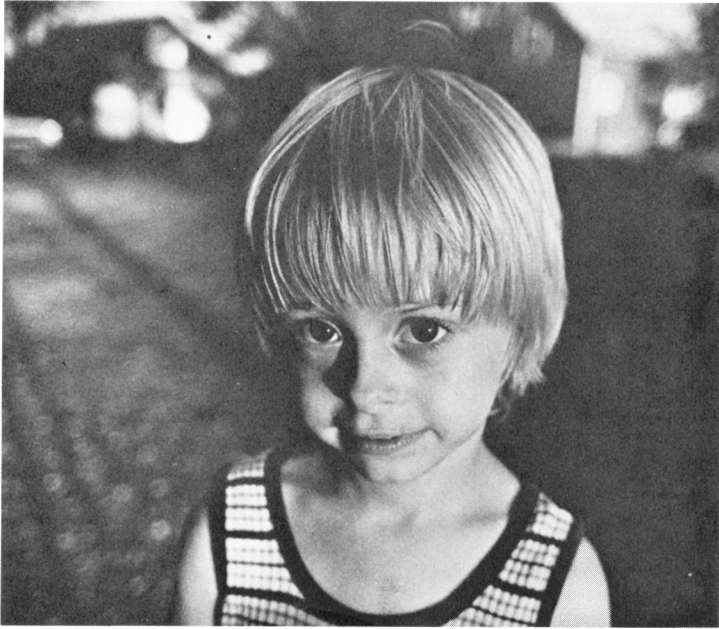
Linda Brozanic

they have a
bit of strained
conversation
with their
steady diet of
superficial
camaraderie.
they serve
it heartily
with breakfast
sprinkled on top
of their cereal.
Wife munches benignly
while Husband reads
the morning edition.
Mary Sue, five-year-old
wunderkid,
sits, her face
marked with
sorrow, borrow
a cup of sympathy
for the little one,
give it to her warm.
her parents are away.

PEELINGS

Kim Wilson

She takes friendship in both hands
like a section of orange.
She delights in the
impulsive-juice-spurting-punctures
made by her teeth.
She sucks thoroughly
on the sweet juice
till it is gone,
then tosses the pulp,
wrings her hands,
and asks for more.



Brian—*Tim Janicke*

I LOVED MY BASSET (but he still died)

Mike Terry

I love my Basset
as a curious pushcart
he jangled over at the drop of a book
and I rubbed our rickety tummies,
then he trundled away
to poop on the master's immaculate lawn,
I love my Basset's eyes
like dry smiles in an emerald hull,
furling between combined fingers
I harvested my Basset's autumn fur,
snow dusted
like
ripening
whiskers,
I love my Basset
and his barks sprout echoes
like chimes on the tip of my
tongue.

NOON HOUR

Becky Compton

So many sauntered by,
Unaware of what was happening inside me,
And simply turned the other way and
Made me disappear . . .

POLISH LEGACY

C.E. Rogers

The Vistula, wide river, runs through me.
Into its sloping valleys drain the Carpathians,
and in other yesterdays
accepted the ashes and desires of my people.

The lonely men who raked the ashes knew
the same fate was their destination.
The dulled men who dumped the tons of gray
into slow swirls of muddy river
saw the dying by fire, burial by water.

Broad river, its green banks transformed
my uncle's remains into his land.
This final act is part of the bitter joy
my people survive with.

How does this river reach into my head?
How do the lazy waters call to me?
In the echoes of family tales, in my peasant face.
In the green-gray-brown eyes that stare from my mirror,
and become the green trees, the velvet mud,
the gray ashes of the Vistula, my uncle's home.

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