

Blaze VOX 2k9

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Dennis Barone

Now and At the Hour

In the desert I saw my old teacher. We sat together on a bench near the few trees in that desert. He took my left-hand with his right and with an out-stretched finger of his left he pointed skywards. I saw the immensity of the heavens there in the desert night, and then I began to understand the small gray line between something and nothing, the balance between the stars above and the crystals at our feet. We are no more than those crystals at our feet. We are no more than those crystals and no less than those stars. We are nothing and we are everything. We are as we are and as we will be and as we were and we are here and we are there and we are now and we are then and we are all and we are nothing.

We march as we must march when told to do so. And then we march some more. Not one of us marches to a different drum. Each one of us steps to the thrum-thrum of a single drum that beats inside of us and outside and all around and everywhere. There is nowhere to go to escape its pulse. I wish that it weren't so: that its beat and the beat of my heart and your heart and everyone's heart were not one and the same. To separate is too desperate an act. No one has contemplated it: to mention it here, a risk, even an act of courage perhaps.

The mud thickens and an odor of dung seems to surround us. Sometimes we come upon pools of stagnant green water. It is always the same beautiful green. So many have already died, but nonetheless I believe that my chances to survive are estimable.

At the front, before my first day drew to a close, I, too, became mud. My mind short-wired and melted there; my legs, turned to oatmeal. Six months before I sat in a classroom memorizing the necessary names and dates, pledging allegiance, and thinking complacently of the fair set for our graduation date or those warm stews of ostrich feathers and carrot greens.

She's been here three times already this morning, and the more I tell her the less she seems to understand. We speak the same language, though you'd think one of us came from a distant land or stayed forever stuck in the gibberish of infancy. She treats me like a child, and an unpleasant one at that. I tell her again that nothing she does can shake me. It has all been tried before.

Our captain tried to make men of us and to impose some sort of order on the situation. We'd move near the dunes and then have to retreat. I saw my old teacher in the desert. He waved a white flag and wanted to parlay, but our captain wouldn't have any of it, and commanded us to march forward. We'd get right up to the dunes and the big weapons fire there and then we'd have to turn back.

I told her so this morning, but she wasn't listening. Her son has enlisted. Let's see, that would make me his uncle and I told them so much about all of it, but they didn't listen to me. Someone brought cereal and left and then came back.

We had to secure things: our route, a zigzag. These are secret things. They came and got me and took me. A long time later I had to leave, but by then I didn't want to go and couldn't think of where, but they told me. And the ride seemed endless.

After two days of this a few of us broke off, loaded down with grenades. Nobody said a thing.

I knew she couldn't keep a house straight because when we talked she couldn't keep her sentences straight. She'd ramble on too long about one thing or else she'd jump about without completing anything. Though on occasion she'd repeat one word over and over again, weave it into a sentence and have it pop up again two sentences later – like the word blue. She'd say, "Boy. Am I blue?" And then forty-five seconds later she'd say something about the aqua blue water at the city dock.

The captain yelled to us to watch the wire. Her brother, my brother stood there beside me at the door to her room much later while I thought of the captain and the wire. Who tripped it? But I threw them in time before he said watch it and he must have followed us because we heard him say it.

The captain tried to make us into men. (Her brother, my brother looked like a boy. That couldn't have been the son who enlisted, though – that would be hers who looked so like us but did not stand at the door. One of them wore a uniform. I didn't recognize the stripes, but he asked me about the call to arms.) The captain hadn't finished school, either.

So she came in again and said to her brother, my brother and to her son, he's all-bones. Who isn't?

Later they made me do the same thing, though the cereal was far worse there and the number much greater. In those first months there seemed to be thousands. Some died, but not many, and at one point some left. One day it was and one day it wasn't. From a window, I looked out at the gate. I recall waving goodbye.

Then that ripping sound, one acetic colon torn from a soldier's spine, a hand – it could have been anyone's hand, it could have been everyone's – reaching in and ripping it. Who would have believed it those weeks before in the town, in the school in the town, the classroom? We had our lessons then and they were the same as yours now, every chapter called *glory*: the most gruesome hand to hand combat imaginable.

My doctor didn't understand me. At first he had been my captor and understanding wasn't so important at that time. The hallways had to be swept and they gave me the broom. I did the sweeping, thousands of us in the halls and hard to do as fast as he wanted it done.

My nephew showed me his arms. She brought more cereal and I told her. They didn't want me, didn't listen to or understand me. This is easily understood. What's left of me? His epaulets he showed me, thinking there'd be some understanding or camaraderie. Then a hand held out.

At the dunes we held them off long enough to obtain an objective. A reverie overcame me and various parts separated from me, hovered for some moments between heaven and earth. My teacher appeared before us and promised glory. The captain lay face down in the dune. He had finished or was so by then.

A hand lifted me, pushed me along, but did not understand. And so she pushes and doesn't know why I arrived, an ugly reminder egging on a son even though unable to see, to stand, or to be understood.

With only one month left, we were lost and now my niece tells anyone who asks, "He's doing just fine." Her problems so easily cleared up. But her brother, that would be my nephew, has not been so engaged. Has he escaped the hymn to glory?

We went forward, not marching that time, but crawling. Someone said, "secure," and there beyond the edges, a ledge that led to nowhere marked by a wire. "Watch the wire," our captain said who must have followed but also chose then still to lead. One of us rolled over and threw and another went on and reached in and then pulled: the most gruesome act that can be imagined.

She'll be leaving on Monday, she said. Then we'll both be leaving, I thought. In the middle of the doorway she paused a moment, looked back maybe – said so. What she meant wasn't the same as what I did but she didn't know that.

So we left camp and marched thirty kilometers into the desert. We sat together near the few trees, passed around – something: oatmeal again, some cereal for lunch, too, she brought. Back at the hospital they never gave us knives. Here I get one, but have no use for it now.

So many hours stretch by those windows, pulled taunt across each sash. I give them my name and rank and nothing more.

A roll toward, a turn into, and then the darkness -- a trickling sound and then gushing like the fountains at home when first restarted early each morning, so early and so many of them down by the green sward near the river's fertile bank.

Is there a possible elsewhere? A grandchild, grandniece to be more exact enters with butterfly wings attached. Her socks are argyle. Her wings do not move and yet she flutters.

These years in the autumn damp ... longed for a pattern of iron. It is a very comfortable thing to remove a costly mistake. The attack encouraged, in effect, the experiment to succeed. Bells tolled. They would abolish conflict. In a spirit of harmony would be begun the most organized power.

She moved over and leaned in my direction, her wings almost touching me. As she leaned back, for a moment the light from the window had been blocked.

Finally, profit – despite the loneliness – rerouted persistent desire. All these forces led to twice as many locks. And during the routine grinding who were willing to define standards and apply them? Who were willing to be held down to less than half the amount?

For a moment I tried to clap once or twice. She had turned on her toes and made a delightful buzzing noise.

New and perfect intentions carried this crowd to three years of realignment in both mundane paper and illustrated savagery. That split could not be shipped across the best-loved estates. It seemed that to tear down its most worldly gain answered for that realization of their hopes. On the skull was indeed a stage for dominion.

Beneath torture the world became a system – even after a veto – in complete control. For years we worked in secret, promised to the beavers one thing or the other, various aspects – *as a process* – a rich field and an all important moral character acclaimed or a-flutter and the socks of argyle beneath the gossamer wings but when she leaned tight into that wind her tips touched my eyes and they bled profuse and brilliant red, striping the brown land as if it were a universal shirt. The butterfly girl had been our battleground saint. I see her even now: just and sweet, a lively and imaginative creature.

A shift can signal a widening of perception, a tray removed.

“Have all your injuries healed?”

“Does it look like it?”

“What did you do today?”

“Other than a visit from a little girl dressed as a butterfly I can’t recall.”

“April.”

“A new month?”

“No. Who visited you? That would have been April, the little girl with butterfly wings.”

“Tell her for me that we refused to attack. We said, ‘no.’”

“That’s why you’re here. She knows. We all know and welcome your return.”

“Is it dark yet outside?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Darkness fountains, you know. You lean forward when you think it isn’t there and then it hits you.”

“Yes.”

“I ripped his colon from right out of his spine in the most aggressive hand-to-hand you can imagine.”

“Yes. I bet you did. That would be so like you.”

“I feel as if you do not understand me even though we speak the same language.”

“Your words are plain enough.”

“It wasn’t always this way.”

“Yes. I know.”

“Can I have more?”

“Yes, if you like. What is it in particular that you would like more of?”

“Everything.”

“My, my. I’m afraid ...”

“But I went so long without ... “

“Anything. Yes, I know. But you did have your broom.”

“A rather poor companion.”

“Is it solace or sustenance that you seek?”

“A salve for the wound.”

“Does it ooze?”

“Not too badly. Nothing like before.”

“Aren’t you glad you’ve come home?”

“I do like it here. Much better than there.”

“Doctor Dieter will be pleased to hear this.”

“Yes, please tell him for me. Relay to him my exact words, my exact words.”

“Precisely. I will.”

“And my sister?”

“Yes, and your sister?”

“Is she responsible for the little girl with butterfly wings who fluttered about here so earlier today?”

“That I believe would be your nephew and his wife.”

“Ah. And why haven’t I seen my brother-in-law or sister-in-law?”

“They have very demanding schedules.”

“Professionals?”

“Why, yes. Both.”

“Or could it be they have seen me and they can’t be bothered? But I am no bother. Tell them so, if the butterfly girl hasn’t. Tell them so and please have them visit me. I like lots of company.”

“I’ll try.”

“Do.”

“That’s all I can.”

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That is, there is the view that even here we need to appear as models of consistency. What needs to be explained might already have led us to expect a tool that is less dramatic than a hidden argument. We see a complete system discredited in the next right thing. What would be allowed in cases like the spectacular fact that we normally look to other objectives more deeply? In other words, there is another aspect to the question regarding laws. If we had a little boundary, a view, we would notice that our mixing could well be less costly in a more convenient world. The only way to face one sort of footing so that it simply doesn’t overwhelm the existence of such a source is to suggest that we wave those techniques elsewhere, hidden perhaps.

All of which is to make the point that I like having him around even though I didn't always like him and even though I didn't always like him, I always loved him like a mother and so took special care of him when no one else would. Though, for sure, such a decision based on decency and principle comes at a severe cost.

All those years locked away with broom and bucket and no one to talk to, too high a cost. Until one day an exchange student from the far distant hills overhears him singing a beloved melody of his youth, of our homeland, and understands him. The student knows the song and sees to it that this ghost of man is freed.

I don't know whether or not to believe today's bombshell. He has been viewed and treated as a hero, forgotten by a few and honored by some. I have been one to believe that he ripped the acetic colon from the spine of several in the most gruesome hand-to-hand combat imaginable. What if it serves him as a tale told to protect him from further humiliations? By the time this day closes, I pledge to unlock his solemn sealed book! Who of right mind would not do as I have done?

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What remains of me, returns – triumphant? No: only darkness fountains in this land.

And here is that butterfly again, singing now my freedom song. I sing and she turns, looks at me, and stops. She says something then. She speaks slowly and softly and perhaps too softly. I do not understand.

The butterfly brought me a cupcake. It cost a pound and it is a small one for such a price. The cupcake is chocolate with chocolate chips and chocolate icing; a dark cupcake doesn't bode well for either of us.

I don't like chocolate. The butterfly knows that. Perhaps, she bought it for herself, but I hope not. Look how she flutters her wings so!

Relax. Don't grit teeth. Breathe regular. Breathe deep. If I don't have the joy of singing, I can't do it. To sing with whistles and boos puts the voice at risk. They were but boys while I had a year or two of experience on them and could show them how to handle the thing and muzzle their fears.

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One day the butterfly will shed her wings. She will visit no more though speak of him often to her friends and recall to them her visits. One day the sister will be gone, perhaps before him, and then freed from troubling thoughts of him, the constant wonder about what he thinks and if he does and those sounds he makes, what are those sounds?

Against the rising sun he sees the black uniformed gathered in orange light. Beside him, his brown rifle and the other boys and their rifles held close, tight as if ending their first all night date, sneaking back just before sun-up so as not to be missed when the family wakes up. He tells them to stay down, but it doesn't matter. They've been spotted. Those men made large by hillside and dawning light point and fire and the boys run.

In the city hospital doctors treated his wounds. When they removed his leg and he called out in pain and fear, they did not follow his words, though the tone was clear and communicative to them. When he left the room, in the city hospital he remained for ... how long was it until overheard and understood? How long was it until his call received its anticipated response and he left the room, the hospital, the city, and returned a reluctant hero?

His family argues. Who will bring him his dinner? They did not expect to see him again. They had forgotten him, and did not expect to see him again, to have to feed him, did not expect nor want an extra mouth. Is it a test of their strength and fortitude, they sometimes wonder? And he eats so sloppily. Each night a pea or a small splatter of Swiss chard falls to the floor while he greedily reaches for the meat.

Tonight he gets neither vegetable nor meat, but a broiled fish with cottage cheese and polenta. He becomes noticeably taciturn. His visible reaction noticeably hurts the feelings of his sister. The salmon is Norwegian she thinks.

"I have tried," she tells her husband. "Lord knows. I have tried."

"Tell him it's fresh. Tell him it's Norwegian. Many people are particular about their fish. Tell him I caught it just this morning, a very fresh fish he has there upon his plate."

“I’ll tell him no such thing.”

They bicker each evening about her brother’s menu, never about their own. With their own they are and have been for sometime quite satisfied. Perhaps, this bickering has brought them closer together. They expected his sudden appearance after so many years to shake things up, but who could have foretold such a pattern to the shake-up? They feel guilt and anger and occasionally a small dose of pride. Tonight, for example, television cameras and their accompaniment of cameramen will arrive from the capitol to film the relic of a distant war. They will preen a bit for the camera and they will mention the fish and the sacrifice, but not the cottage cheese or polenta.

He’ll ham it up a bit for the cameras, find his props and use them expertly. He’ll arrange for an ice-cube to become an object of special attention, of exquisite attraction. With a hand he’ll turn it and, childlike, as it melts he’ll grow frantic at this newfound loss. Would he call for another if he could or walk about, then, and get it for himself?

The story will be repeated: that hand to hand combat, that vicious ripping away from the spine an enemy’s acetic colon, hanging it to the post in the ground, leaving it to flop in the wind and dry in the sun.

A bird will appear at the window and the voice over narrator will take it as a sign. *This*, the voice will say, *was meant to be*. The bird, just any bird, will glance away from the bright camera lights. A child will take the hero’s hand and pledge to follow the recumbent man, to repeat his acts of glory. The child will say one word, as the cameras roll, and the one word will be “*action*.”

The former soldier will add chagrin to his taciturnity. The former soldier will wonder what has become of the world and what has become of the most basic victuals: vegetables and meat.

A big wave will dissolve the sand castle and then the journalist will leave, tired of their rush for better ratings. The veteran will talk of vicious hand to hand and the raw recruits, their short time training, their desire for victory so that they might return home for the Pot Pie Players’ annual summer fest in the Oval Park. He will address an empty room, a balloon

without its air, and in that vacuity his words will dissolve: their stateliness stripped of all pomp by the startling singularity of absence. He will raise his hand and point and then let it fall upon an errant pea settled into a crease upon his comforter. He will lift the pea and smell it. He will place it toward the center of his tongue and swallow. Satisfied, he will nod.

A clanking of plates and silverware upon a tray awakens him. He can sense that his niece has returned wingless, but not wonder-less, sweetness fills the room. She places a parfait before him, hands him the long-stemmed glass and a long-handled spoon, and then takes hold of the ice-cream sundae she has carried here for herself. He admires the swirls before him and begins the downward movement of the long-handled spoon into the long-stemmed glass with some regret. His first taste refreshes him, enlivens him. He considers telling his niece a story about a hill and the hand to hand, but decides not to disturb the wondrous slurping sounds they make in harmony as they finish their treats.

She reaches for his empty long-stemmed parfait glass and the long-handled spoon. She places them on the tray upon which she carried them into his room. How briefly she visits, he thinks, and how little she says to him.

She nods to the physician as she leaves. The physician enters and methodically checks the pulse. The veteran's sister enters and looks to the physician. He shakes his head, but what he means by this remains unclear.

Moonlight enters through the window after his sister and the physician have left, after the light bolted into the ceiling has been shut off. He sits up in bed, not yet tired enough for sleep. It is such a white light, this enchanting moonlight, that he recalls the long shadows of spring, the hospital grounds, and the battlefield. In other words, he reflects. He recalls someone named Sarah, but he only remembers her name. No one watches now: invisible man.

Imagine a set of types best described as raw materials and outstripped for the petty order. Failure was so common that the longest writings of middle-level lieutenants produced here procedures dedicated to the harnessed power of small enterprise. The term "variable" offered no comfort.

Obscure forces could not move the depressed into a model to emulate. They were the poorest and the most active as well. The hallmark of these lusty traditionalists deprecated orthodoxy by lumping survival skills to baser passions. Even at the height of drastic change these incidents developed competitive sentinels endeared to the political forces in some far-flung districts. Portentous as they were, they easily routed the slashed and already troubled victims.

“Quick, hand him his hammer,” he hears a nurse whisper and wakes from his woeful reverie to ready his knee for the ensuing shock and as the doctor takes the hammer, the patient concentrates on the word “twinkle.”

Nurse and doctor look at one another. They consult. Something doesn't look good. He knows that, but hopes it isn't him.

He considers the street outside. How fast the traffic moves! It roars, almost. He considers what it must be like racing by so fast, a blur.

He considers that if he could go back to his childhood knowing what he knows now, he would leave the country before he had to go somewhere and fight for it. He would walk over the mountains at the border and into another nation, and he'd keep walking until he got himself far from all things red, until he got himself to a land of Gingerbread houses and there he'd remain for the duration. He'd learn the language and become a teacher at the local school, but never tell the children of the desert, never tell the children of the flame that scorches. He would miss his sister more than any of the others. Late at night he would call her name in his sleep and early in the morning he'd awake in doubt. Have I done the right thing, he'd wonder? Am I a coward, he'd ask himself? Perhaps, I should return he'd consider, but then he'd see the faces of the children as they leave their Gingerbread houses to walk across the blue stream and enter the red schoolhouse where he'd await them and another bright new day would begin.

But now it is night, and he feels torn between a desire for some few moments of calm and quiet and another visit from the butterfly girl, wings attached. An odor of strong cheese overcomes him. He wonders if it is some special dish prepared

for their dinner: a quiche or fondue perhaps. He likes the smell and wishes he had some of whatever they're having next door.

He sighs and remembers the time during the long march they paused at a barn turned tavern and ate their fill of roast pork and drank large steins of ale. He remembers how the evening continued with songs sung by the whole crew as one young recruit banged out a melody on an old upright piano. Some of the fellows sang and danced. The next morning he could not recall having fallen asleep, but he awoke and then roused the sluggish men for their tedious march.

He closes his eyes and then feels a strange movement in his throat, a node of some sort knocking against a pulsing vein. This irregular motion wakes him from his momentary slumber and just at that moment Doctor Dieter enters. He lights a match, places it to his pipe, inhales deeply, and then exhales a cloud of noxious smoke.

The veteran thinks, if only Doctor Dieter knew that he was killing me he'd consider his oath and take it all back: the smoke, the match, and the pipe. But just as he completes his thought (brings it to its reverse motion fruition), he hears Dieter clap his hands and utter or utter and then clap his hands – the exact order escapes memory – one word: “right.”

Let's begin, he thinks, all over again. Let's listen to the old vet and not make fun of him. Let's mock the young vet and not heed him. Let's become Friends, objectors immersed in George Fox and Thomas Lawson, *A Mite into the Treasury*. Let's become students again meeting down town to discuss Locke. We were so enthused then. Can we be so again?

No, I suppose not, he thinks, since that *we* has now become *me*. I am alone. There is no butterfly only a mass of caterpillars coming this way to overtake me, to cocoon me, to coffin me in a dinged and dirty particleboard box. I'll outlive them all, he determines, so that I might remind them.

Wouldn't it be some tiny satisfaction to be of use, he thinks? I must get outside, he says to the empty room as he looks toward the window, the air that until a moment ago he hadn't thought about or looked at all day long.

Yet, bare bones skinny and eyes tiger-red, wouldn't he rather lay in front of a train than try to get back out there again? He'd have to bounce up and down again and call the men to gather round then abruptly shift them into so many straight lines for thirty side-straddle hops followed by sixty push-ups.

The line between reality and hallucination is getting very thin. But no thinner than it had been and not as thin as gossamer wings applied to the shoulders of an ordinary girl metamorphosed into a butterfly nor certainly not as thin as a tiny twine wire that must be seen so that it can be avoided, so that a stout soldier can lead his men onward and see the sun rise another day.

An angel pulls up outside in a splendid carriage singing such exquisite melodies that he feels in the presence of God and that these must be the melodies of heaven. He feels blessed to hear them, but he considers that although he feels them devoutly he does not understand them and once again he has become saddened by events he cannot control. He becomes taciturn. Why is it, he wonders, at this moment an angel should arrive outside my window?

His hands curl: at first, as if he struggles on stage to recall his lines in the Pot Pie Players' production of *The Rainmaker*. Briefly, he recalls an image of his father and then he realizes the struggle does not concern lines lost from a musical, but rather a grenade he holds, pin removed. His major has ordered him to rise and walk to the window, to hurl it at the ornate coach of an angel. "That's an order soldier," he hears the major say.

How many seconds does he have left on the ticking clock, the grenade in his hand, the heart in his chest? How many seconds left in the republic, the valley, the square, or down at the city dock? He whispers to a nurse by his side, "only darkness fountains."

She ignores him or does not hear him but after a few moments – maybe in response to his whispered words and maybe simply at random – she says, "soon it will be light out."

It is at this precise moment he understands. He has held on to the grenade for too long. He has forgotten the words, the lines, his words, and the way of the world, he has forgotten it all and asks to be buried in the rubble, to trip the trip wire this time, to call it a day now at the end of night.

Even the vegetables have eyes and ears, antennae to send out a message; though he feels, too, that a heart could be involved, a deeply saddened and troubled heart.

Visibility is viability, I said to the major. Let's get out there. Show them what we're made of – steel, forged in flame!

Later he couldn't believe how much yen he spent at the arcade or the brilliant colors of the lights. Although he couldn't find a date, he rode on the Ferris wheel. This failure is one of his regrets.

For a moment he feels ready to accept his death, but becomes rather annoyed that the universe neither blinks nor winks and so he returns to his game, nothing wild. "Oh, how sweet are the brains of Santa," he read in *The Cannibal's Christmas*.

He makes an impulsive decision. He will demand oatmeal in the morning. He will reject the egg: hard-boiled or otherwise. On this demand he sets all his determination.

Part of what constitutes real estate remains physical. Let us suppose he has the ground beneath his feet. Let us suppose he will not – yet – fall off the planet nor through the window and out of his room. Let us suppose geography has never been neutral.

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We went AWOL one night, two of us – up and over the barracks' iron railing.

"You got cut," Alfonse told me.

"I can still play, can't I? No one will find out. No one will be any wiser," I told him.

We went down the side and then made our way across the open field. Because of the hour and the international situation there were few lights and even fewer sounds. But we found our way to Main Street and the one place open for business.

We went inside and ordered drinks, then went to a table in the back having decided to keep a low profile.

“Well, you’ve certainly hit a home-run,” Alphonse told me, all excited and friendlier now.

I told him, “We’re not home free yet,” somewhat darkening the mood.

A couple of sailors approached us and said something to us, but we didn’t understand their language; nor they, ours. They tried some body language to no avail although we did laugh a bit. We were set on keeping a low profile, content to look around the place and listen to the music, good music, too, completely new style, imported perhaps.

“Hear that,” Alphonse said, snapping his fingers and tapping his feet.

“You can’t miss it,” I told him.

The drummer hit the high-hat then, accentuating the words I spoke, a leader of men.

The horn man pointed his instrument skyward and let go. For a moment I saw it pointed at us, turned into a weapon and our table a boulder behind which we hid hoping for the best, hoping to survive. I pulled Alphonse down, out of the enemy fire. I saved him. He brushed my hand from his arm and told me I’d had enough to drink. I agreed and as we got up to leave those sailors approached us again. We thought there might be trouble. We certainly didn’t want any and, thankfully, there wasn’t any. There was some sort of gambling action out the back, in the yard. We had no interest in it, certain as we were that we’d face enough of a gamble out the front door.

It had started to snow. Better now than before, though bitter in this wind. We didn’t want our footprints by the barracks’ iron railing or across the open field. We didn’t want that blood either, but what are you going to do once it starts to drip?

One of the first convoy trucks of the morning picked us up on Main Street and brought us all the way back to the base. The driver was a young kid; younger than Alphonse and he looked silly smoking his cigarette and with his beret slanted off to the left side at a rakish angle. He told us he had been a mid-fielder for his hometown team. All he wanted to do, he told us, was to play ball.

We had nothing to say. That new style tune still surged through us, perhaps pushed along by its strong beat.

We thought it best to jump out and roll near the north side fence. The hometown mid-fielder slowed down a bit so that we could do so. We hit the cold and hard ground, rolled under the fence there, and dashed for the barracks.

“Safe,” Alphonse said.

“Back on the base, back on the team,” I added.

“No one found out. No one’s any wiser,” he said.

I knew that I would have to count on him in the field some day. His trust had to be won. If he grabbed hold on any suggestion I made, the others, too, would greet it with enthusiasm, and execute it with great soldiering skill. We would need this enthusiasm, this teamwork and so I risked the captain’s ire.

Sure enough, minutes later when he summoned me to his tent – he always used his tent even if more palatial lodgings were available – thus, he believed, he sent an example for the lads to follow – the captain ordered me to be sure everyone had a good hearty breakfast. I knew what that meant well before he said another word and the words that did follow I only half-heard for to tell the truth I was afraid. This was it. We were moving out of the base camp and into the field of action, there to have tested all our training, all our skills, and all the courage we could muster.

I saluted and left to rouse Alphonse who in turn would rouse the others.

The smallest places in the world often add motion to the words we speak. Snow on the ground, even at noon it will be mid-night.

The ground cover varies. Thirty kilometers on it has vanished entirely. This is the desert, made so by the men who march and then set the world ablaze. For some hours now it has been daylight even at mid-night.

None of us dare sleep. We crawl through the hot sand searching for the wounded, our comrades who bleed, yes, but also still breathe. We save them from the flames unless we can't save them.

The major tells us to leave them and to advance. Others will mop up he says -- those are his words. And I curse him, silently. Don't worry, he says as if he knew my thoughts, others will attend to them. Don't worry, he says, and we all get one good laugh.

I grab Alphonse by the sleeve, and try to drag him to safety, away from that red glare. I grab an ankle.

"Leave me," he says. "It's no good."

"Come on," I say. "Remember the Maine."

"It's no good, I tell you," he says.

And I say, "Well, al-right then." And I've had to live with that ever since.

We used to call him Chip when he first came to us from a farm way back deep in the hill country. We never saw anyone excel so in basic training. We knew this one had the resume for heroism while the rest of us were lucky each day that we didn't get shot in the back for turning tail and running out of that maze of chaos as fast as our scrawny legs would take us.

My hands had his blood upon them. The major told me to forget about it, to take that hill over there.

"Watch out for those trip wires," he yelled after me.

I ran and climbed and pulled the pin, tossed the grenade right in to the bunker there. Ca boom! But the sound echoed strangely; came back to me: boom ca! And then I must have blacked out.

When I awoke a very tactile mist covered the dunes and the sandy valleys between. The paper car, dripping ink, picked me up and then dropped me off at a distant fortress. I was taken to a room and left, locked into it. Three, twenty-three,

eight: two full turns to the right, one to the left, and then one back to the right stopping at eight and pulling down hard because of the rust, but it didn't work, despite all my training. There must be another combination, there must be another way, I thought. The fiends, they changed it!

Several days elapsed without a drop of water or a morsel of meat. My hunger became such that I craved the sauce even without the meat. Every so often I heard a noise, a birdcall of an unidentified species. This heartened and sustained me, although I knew now I had been taken far away from my beloved homeland. I thought of sausages, sausages and hot griddlecakes to be exact.

Eventually, they fed me, came and got me and interrogated me. They could not understand me when I spoke and gestures said too little to fulfill their cruel desires and so they beat me. There was on my part no attempt at brave heroics. Weakened, worn down by hunger, fatigue, and perpetual darkness, I told them everything, but they seemed unable or unwilling to understand me.

It seemed that several weeks of this torture had been perpetrated upon my body. I was, by then, senseless and my mind, as they say, had gone off elsewhere, perhaps to a sylvan hillside, all in bloom of poppy and loosestrife. All of a sudden, it stopped. An arm raised ready to strike once more my defenseless skin and skeleton, lowered peacefully to a brute's side, silent there, resting and readying for some other victim's mid-section.

My torturers exited, leaving the door wide open. For sometime I sat against the far wall looking out that door. Then an amazing occurrence unfolded before my reddened and swollen eyes. I saw daylight and this sight beckoned me from that room. I went down a hall and out a second door and entered the day.

I soon discovered a prison room had been exchanged for a prison yard. But this did not deflate my renewed spirits. What a wonder to walk in the light, to drink the water!

My sword had become a ploughshare and my rifle, a broom. Broom in hand, I attended to the neatness of the yard, the cleanliness of the hallways that branched off of it in all directions.

We still could not speak and be understood. My gestures left the others puzzled. I would point in the direction of my homeland (though I couldn't be sure of the direction). I would look down, saddened by my failure to make myself understood, saddened by my failure to pull Alphonse away from the flames that ate of his flesh and turned him to ash.

My sister has sent for the priest. She may be getting a bit ahead of things, rushing so much that Father Dunkelberger ignores me and consults her. "Peace, peace," he says where there is no peace. And I think some sherbet would be nice, can't get that out of my mind.

It gives one pause: the violence at the center of an honorable life. Shame has sustenance for this body, eyes left and right and both framed by the same house, the same doorframe: patterns on the wall; hands in the light. Outside the house - - glasses ripped from eyes -- an imagined country -- studio-built -- has replaced the desert.

A monk looks for the structure that will hold his vision. Behind the glass panel of a closed door he holds a broom. He looks skyward, but there is no sky only the ceiling of a hallway that leads to other rooms and other halls. Beside the door are cans of tuna stacked in the shapes of barely remembered mountains. He drops the broom, kneels on the floor, and pretends two fingers of his right hand are the legs of a little man, a villager, walking, hiking in the hills, and going toward the high mountains. The monk's little man slips on the ice, stumbles, and falls. He grabs an ankle and hollers for help.

Some of the newspapers reported it, described the process of decomposition and the remains: no picture sharp or critical. It hardly needs the title of rare charm or the electric effectiveness of a now obsolete drilling technique. And I am happy by that date and composition of high-speed steel. In fact, the situation under review groups simplified skills in the most successful of specialized machines. Entrails, specific organs, substitute for change. Complex bodies, apparent in metallurgy, witness uncovering.

They moved upon an island black as night, always deadly. They searched water, fire flaming down, and an arrow pierced my hand. They saw everything on fire, that enemy addicted to suffering. That night was hungry, thirsty for souls, wandering ghosts before the eye just as in my bad dream. There through the sun's rays, flames roaring. There: men of action; men of dust. There: the sky fills, drinks the naked, the wild, the children, the aged, the people of the world. Everyone needs to back up. Everything dinged.

That is why the most recent report is the first attempt at hand wringing. That is why we want to win support. That is why soldiers have again become a passion for many. That is why bodies surface days later in a sewer. That is why a virus attracts us. That is why officials place our country on high alert. That is why not everyone is sentimental. That is why some few others say it's not really dangerous. That is why four days later the police found another one of them. That is why we started out on this progressive plan, to try to raise the level for each individual one of us. That is why opposite sides are often just like each other. That is why even in those terrifying moments everyone needs to back up and have a chance to breathe.

Someone has struck a match. Someone has struck a match and lit the gossamer wings of the butterfly girl. Look how she flutters now! Look how she flutters about the room and the world outside, too -- looking for water.

One day when I returned from the prison yard outside and entered my room I saw that all my pinecones and all my gray rocks had been gathered together and boxed.

"You're moving to the Heffernan Wing," a uniformed attendant said. "You'll be happy there."

I turned to leave though I did not know where to go.

"Take your broom," the attendant said.

I went to the corner and got my broom, held it, and looked at the attendant.

“Yes, you’ll still be in need of that,” the attendant said and then rushed me along with his words, “Come along, now. We will have to move to the Heffernan Wing.”

I wondered why we had to move in that direction. I wondered why this uniformed attendant said “we”. I wore no uniform and the attendant carried no broom.

If you pay close attention you’ll see that the word “inhabitants” ends with “ants” and that’s what we are whether we wear a uniform or not; whether we never leave or get to go to a house on the perimeter each evening but to return each morning to make certain that I’ve changed my pajamas and swept the halls.

Detlaf Steffens wore a uniform, too, and he saluted and stood up tall and took his place on the line with pride. Hand him a broom and I guarantee it: he’ll sweep and at the end of his day be content with crumbs swept from the tables of the generals.

When not sweeping I tended to sleep, grew not to worry about the life I had left, the life I had lost. On the rare occasions I heard a visitor speak the familiar and harmonious strains of my native tongue I’d hurry broom in hand to where that visitor stood. Sometimes I’d arrive in time and try to make myself understood. What had they done to me? Even my gestures failed me.

Out beyond the brown hills there stood an old statue in the shape of a swan. Sarah took me there, one warm spring day. I carried the basket. After sunset we were still there, lingering. We sat on the ground looking away from the compound and toward the distant water of the blue lake. While she danced I tried to hum. We sat on the ground and the sun set out beyond the brown hills turning them a different shade.

Detlaf says everyone must cultivate the earth. Fruits and vegetables had been planted and in time we were relieved by our improved diet though there seemed to be an ever-increasing resistance, too, that unsettled our life there.

My sister does not look so good. What does she expect, relief or renewal? When she entered the odor of their dinner still clung to her housedress. I inhaled, wishing I had some of it to try but after some minutes the odor grew tiresome, repulsive for there was none of it to be tried and she waved its smell around me as if the flag of the nation that had defeated us, weaved its smell around as if a spider's web and I to be the creature's next meal, subsumed by an odor. My hands are on my stomach. I am resting for now, and glad at least to be free of the broom and its splinters that pierced my flesh.

I will remain in this position and become as stone, become as a swan, a swan of stone, a stone statue on a brown hill looking away from the compound and toward the water of the blue lake. Take wing, become as the angels and reject both fire and water and fly high into the bright clear air far away from the brown hills and these sounds of a sister sleeping, a sister snoring over in that battered chair that's so tired of being rocked back and forth, that has lost something long ago and somewhere.

And in the water there is a raft. And on the raft there is a mirror. And in the mirror is the past as we have lived it. Water surrounds the raft and stretches far in every direction away from it, reaches far away far in endless asymmetrical waves.

*

A boat, strung with colorful lights, cuts across the water. He could see it approach the mirror. On its deck were three: drummer, flag-bearer, and flute player, the last limping a bit and with headband pulled down over one eye.

“Alphonse?” he said.

His sister woke up, walked over to him, and put her hand on his head. She turned, blew out the candle, and left the room. During the time she opened the door, passed through it, and closed it, he could once more smell what they had earlier that night for dinner and, he concluded, it must have been good.

He had the idea of the grenade. He had the idea of the laser weapon and the rock-penetrating bomb. He had the idea of the knife yet loved the waltz and fox trot. He had the idea of the rifle and howitzer. He had the idea and he held in mind the form of the engine that powered the flight of warplanes and the holler before battle. He would move to the center and back out. With or without a partner, he would turn and move to the next target. He had the idea of an arsenal and H-bomb. He'd be happy with hands, when his held the bomb, the H-bomb, H for happy now content and quiet with his hands and his ideas, all of those ideas that turn to blossom without water turn to blossom and flame in the air like a rocket in the air and on the ground.

He stands on a bridge with his hands in his pockets. His sister walks beside him; she, by the road, and he, closer to the water. His right hand clutches his money, his movie money in his right pocket. Halfway across they stop to look at the river. It forms a border between two towns. They live in one town and go to the movies in another town. He holds on tight to his money. He wants to see the Indians on the screen. He wants to see them ride their horses. There are Indians on the walls of the bank where brother and sister, mother and father keep their money. The bank is in the town where they live and the movie-theater is across the river. They have stopped halfway across the bridge to look at the water and to look around. They see woods on one side and a park on the other side. The river is high today and it flows by them rapidly. He holds tight his money. He holds it so tight his hand hurts. He holds it like this because he can't get the thought of throwing it into the water and watching it sail down the river out of his head. The only way he can stop thinking this thought as he stands on the bridge half-way between the two towns and beside his sister is to picture himself in the water, to picture himself being dragged along in the water by the swift current, his arms flailing. Then they turn and start walking the rest of the way across the bridge. They are going to the movies. They will see Indians ride horses across the dry land and die on the big white screen.

*

Our road curves like the letter *S* and *s* is in its name and it is silent, too: silent and dark, very dark. Even during the day, it is dark, our street. Children are afraid of this street, retreat from it after every dare to step upon it, to walk down it. The houses along these double curves have been sealed and shuttered, and the occupants seemingly sent somewhere else, another place, one of straight lines perhaps. The oldest house, gambrel roof, occupies one end as if standing sentry to the dark and silent and empty street. There are steep and severe crowns to each side that allow rainwater to slide into culverts of paving stones. The street is old, as are the inhabitants that we don't see and their houses are old, the stones are old, but the children who fear the dark are young, young and bright, though they don't realize the latter, not amidst all that dark. They mope and there's no telling them different and so each one takes the dare, hoping to end their sullen mood. None of them makes it, of course. All of them are fated for the broom perhaps or for the rifle. None of them – yet – disappears. What protects them today from the *S* curves and the old stones and the fast moving water and the dark thick as mud? What will protect them from their own inventions or those of the elders? They will make their own path across the barren yards along the *S* curves' route or they will fail to do so and hence, as others sometimes say, die trying.

Is it a capital *S* upper case and large type, **bold**, or just a little brushstroke of an *s*, a mere scratch upon the topographical townscape? Everything shrinks with time, not just the room but the house, not just the street but the country, not just the screen but the Indians and the horses they ride.

I believe there may be someone following now those curves as they walk from start to end, down to that busier street that intersects this one. I hear their shoes coming and going click-clack like clogs on the stones, careful, no doubt, to keep out of the culvert and that still and stagnant water. Someone may board the bus that stops at the corner. Should I sit-up and rise and warn this solitary soul that they may go and never return, go and be taken from the bus, be taken to a compound beside the brown hills, the barren desolate hills? Our shutters are closed, as they should be. Stay home now.

Don't move. Don't breathe. Relax. Breathe. Our shutters are shut. We are inside, shuttered and sheltered and safe, at least I think so, for the night.

The street hasn't changed, only the people who live on it. What ever happened to ... I want to ask my sister, but she has left for the night. What is so essential about this dark, this stone, and these shutters that keep it the same, unchanged and unchanging? Here, take my hand. Read my palm and tell me the answer: this is no place for either butterfly or blossom.

Here, let's mix some mercy in with this old soldier's nerve. Let's set to fire the beauty of steelworks along the river's steep bank. How bewitching the light is in the artful eye of an arsonist. Let's recall how two trench mortar shells like roses blossom or two scraped carcasses lay out their bits that he once knew how to love. The soldier in forestland dreams of his lover; holds tight his revolver. The catch unlocks and expectation follows. Then: roses perish. But suddenly he bends his head for a fresh rose rewires the weakness of his crooked hip, costing him a leg. At the compound the air fills with a terrible alcohol rising from half-sealed fate. The shrapnel still strokes the soft nocturnal sweet in which he reclines. They'll have to go back into him tomorrow or the next day.

*

“What fruit do you carry two when you carry one?” the teacher had challenged his class.

And he popped up like a sprung jack-in-the-box and cried out with delight, “A pear!”

Then he started to take one with him each day inside his orange book-bag along with a sandwich his mother would daily make for him.

Some of his classmates grew to dislike him: his pear, his sandwich and orange book-bag, his gung-ho enthusiasm. Some of his classmates wished he'd get his comeuppance like the boy they read about in the book they carried to class at that time.

What's the use, he wonders. All these memories that he has, what will become of them? If only his little butterfly had a school report to do. Choose a relative to interview. Find out the meaning of your relative's life. Turn the words of your interview into prose, into a story. Remember: "memory exists not in the form of true or false facts but as multifaceted stories open to interpretation." That would be the lesson. If only he was the chosen one, and he could tell her his story – everything: the desert, the barn, and the statue by the lake -- Alphonse.

*

The captain had asked each of them and all of them, on cue, replied in the affirmative. What wondrous things: words. And those who utter them had the good of all at heart.

"I've brought someone to see you," Alphonse said.

What was Alphonse doing here now, he wondered. Who had he brought to visit him?

"Alphonse," he said. "You have wings."

"Yes. Somewhat like your precious butterfly."

"Butterfly," he repeated softly. "But, Alphonse. Who have you brought to see me?"

"She must have fallen behind a bit," Alphonse said. "Don't worry, my friend."

"Friend," he paused. "You called me your friend."

"Yes."

"Then all is well?"

"Yes, all is well."

"All is forgiven?"

"Yes," Alphonse paused a moment. "Well ... There is nothing to forgive. You did the best you could – the best any man could have done considering the circumstances."

“Yes, the circumstances ...”

“Ah,” Alphonse said. “Here she is now,” relieved he wouldn’t have to consider those somber and less than pleasant moments of their shared past.

He saw her, too. He grew excited and exclaimed, “My Sarah, my sweet Sarah. You’ve brought Sarah to me!”

And she entered, still clutching tight to those sandwiches but now, as Alphonse, with wings fresh and fragrant unfurled.

How quickly moods shift. He suddenly became intensely sullen and gave sweet Sarah a piece of his mind.

“My, my,” he said. “The crow calls on the same line that you used to.”

She understood his angst, his anger. He had felt abandoned – as well he might after all those years with a broom and then she, too, had seemed to disappear. She called him her little lamb and tried to comfort him. She asked him to come with her, to follow them.

He grabbed the rails. He held on so tight his knuckles turned red. Doctor Dieter tried to pry his fingers loose. It was useless.

Sarah mentioned the mustard, his favorite.

Dieter called for a nurse, but instead Father Dunkelberger entered. This would be trouble, Dieter considered.

Meanwhile, the patient had an odd sensation that Detlaf Steffens tickled his feet from a hidden location below the mattress.

Too many differing systems were in the most intense competition, a too close proximity.

He wanted to ask Sarah something. She held out her hand.

He felt burning in his feet, a sensation that no longer tickled. He had a dry mouth and swelling hands, still gripped tight and immobile to the rails. He had trouble concentrating. He had something he wanted to ask Sarah. He felt muscle pain and tiredness.

“Alphonse,” he said. “Did you know that the word ‘inhabitants’ ends in ‘ants?’”

Dunkelberger kneeled in prayer. Dieter finally got his nurse.

“April,” Dieter said. “Take this. Here,” he said, “good.”

His sister came back into the room, complaining, saying, “Not again.”

Dieter said, “Pull, Nurse April. Pull!”

It seemed no good.

Sarah unwrapped one of the sandwiches while she watched.

“Nurse April, hand me the pliers,” Doctor Dieter commanded with some urgency.

Detlaf Steffans reddened and Father Dunkelberger continued his pastoral prayer.

His eyes opened wide and he said, “Harbor or all, you’ve sent worms for my shoes!” No one heard him, busy as they were pulling and praying, reddening and unwrapping.

Sarah split one sandwich in half. She gave half to Alphonse and she kept half for herself, pocketed it for later. The other one she gave to him and she said, “Here, eat.”

But he said, “I am afraid.” Once more his mood had shifted as abruptly as the desert sand became flakes of snow. He needed an explanation more than a sandwich, even if the latter had been smeared with his favorite mustard.

Alphonse did not hesitate. He took his half-potion and ate it or rather ingested it with a single swallow then wiped his lips with the topside of a wing.

“Dunkelberger, will you please get up from there and out of the way,” Doctor Dieter requested with more than a hint of impatience.

The sister had returned to the battered chair. She may have been asleep. Her presence, as she figured it, sufficed for doing her familial duty.

Dieter wondered how she could sleep through this commotion, but wished Father Dunkelberger would also nap instead of kneel and mumble right in the thick of action.

These were men of action – Dieter and Dunkelberger – though representative men of two opposing systems that could co-exist, edgily, as long as there remained a shared task to distract them from their differences. Take away this task and fisticuffs might well break out in this room to which an odor of cheese hung like a cloud, and not a pretty one.

He let go of the rails. Sarah stroked his hair, damp with perspiration.

Nurse April prepared a syringe.

Alphonse started to sing: “Swing low, sweet chariot.” He had a lovely voice.

Nurse April poked him with her needle though he thought that Detlaf might still be under the bed.

Father Dunkelberger said, “Lord,” a bit too loudly. He put his hands together and with one foot attempted to nudge the sleeping sister, to wake her, and to get her to join him. No one should discount the power of prayer Father Dunkelberger thought as he repeated, “Lord ...”

Doctor Dieter reviewed various charts and made sundry notations upon them.

Sarah started to cry.

He felt bad then and said he was sorry and after all this time, waiting for so long first with a rifle and then with a broom and then to see you again and, he thought, to compare you to a crow. You are not crow-like, he concluded, but angelic. Yes, that’s it. Sarah, sweet Sarah, you are an angel!

“I feel better now,” she said, “especially now that my hands are free of those sandwiches.”

“Is there anything to drink?” he asked.

Nurse April took a dampened cloth and gently rubbed his lips.

“We’re going now,” Sarah said.

Alphonse now merely hummed. He no longer sang the words, but he certainly knew them and he had a beautiful voice whether singing or humming.

“That’s it,” Dieter said.

No one knew whether those were words of finality or the offering of some new hope sprung from the doctor’s deep knowledge of restorative cures.

Someone had lit candles in every chapel, a lovely scene, postcard-like. At the corner lovers returning from their dates at the picture show on the other side of the river would leave the bus, enter the late night air, and pause to admire the way the old street glowed.

Some of them turned up the street and walked along those stones to the entrance of one chapel or another. A guide pointed out the first one that had been finished and hence the oldest and suggested the lovers fill that one first. Appreciative or faithful, they obeyed the guide.

Before them the jeweled altar sparkled in the candlelight and the beauty struck them powerfully. This is the work of my father, he thought. He felt a tear as the assembled – so awed – started to hum. Old two hundred, that favorite hymn, they knew it so well – at least the tune, for they only hummed.

They filled the chapel and sat down upon the carved pews, each with elaborate scenes of a Gingerbread world. They crammed together, rubbed shoulders, and continued to hum.

Father Dunkelberger stood before them, the assembled multitude, and raised his hands. Later, some would report that they saw two angles ascending while others said it was three had ascended and a few believed they saw nothing at all but enjoyed the humming and the rubbing of shoulders and the swaying to the sound and the jumping light of the tall candles scented with jasmine and sandalwood and magnolia and lotus flower, something strong enough – at last – to drive out the cheese.

