

Hillside Redux

There's a sharp, shallow ditch with a fence row along a gravel coulee road. Across the fence a heavy, balding man stands in a pasture redolent with horsetail and jimsonweed, memories and patches of nightshade that lie in poisonous wait to be eaten by some unwitting species.

The man looks up and his grandmother, dead some thirty years, stands nearby staring at the ditch as if searching for the tears she'd left half a century before along the road.

He shakes his sleeve to rid himself of the burdock that clings, hoping memory will fall off with it. This unkempt landscape – where this old woman would take him for lush Sunday walks on the green, clipped hillsides as his grandfather drove off alone in the grey dust of an old black truck.

The smell of sour pollen gusts over them. His long dead grandmother starts up the hill toward the coulee ridge. Rabbits shoot out from the brambles concealing them in the undergrowth of chickweed, toxic smartweed. He wonders what is hidden in the flowered full skirt she wears to mid-calf; and in the patch of hoary alyssum with its innocent white flowers. The dew is still heavy in the quack grass, nearly a foot high as she walks from it to a patch of curly dock as damp as her eyes, its green spirals bent over like the hump on her back that formed from decades of calcified loss at the end of her life.

He follows her.

They do not speak.

Great expanses rise, of thorny horse nettle, wild blackberry and raspberry bushes – weeds that choke his childhood like the press of the truck's ancient fender in the roadside ditch against his grandfather's breathless chest.

She crosses to the east and another hillside covered with nettles and berry bushes.

He follows.

At the top of a knoll, a rooster pheasant's scratchy-trebled call pulls her back in a desperate, rasping struggle to capture the elusive air. The man startles when another pheasant rises in the flutter of determined wings jerked heavenward by fear of an instant death.

They reach a familiar ridge field to see the purple-blue alfalfa heads going to seed, past prime cutting. This small, odd-shaped field was always the last of the harvest. His grandfather navigated the treacherous bluff road now overgrown; how the long dead man gathered-in the low-grade hay from this difficult spot as slow and deliberate as cherished time.

The black raspberry thorns rip at his rolled-up khakis, pierce the cloth and tear his skin and he senses the scratches ooze blood that will dry and swell from the sanding of his trousers as he walks. His grandmother moves to the side of a dense patch of berries and into jagged green burning nettles.

She looks cool as anything.

He follows her into the nettles' jagged green sting and is saddened by the pain of the tear of thorns on his flesh. The tang of the cuts linger like the dank scent of his grandfather's sweat.

They spy a section of giant ragweed and work their way there where the broad leaves loom above them as they pick their way through the sour smell. He rubs at the itch on his bald scalp, worries it to a pernicious rash, as strong and persistent as the pull of the tavern on his grandfather's thirst.

When he was a boy all the pastures were neatly trimmed. Hillsides were clean-cut beauty. There were defined fields and defined pastures and defined woodlands.

It was all defined.

His grandmother reaches the top of the hill and while the view is hidden by an expanse of goldenrod, she walks toward the spot where a favorite oak tree stood. She peers over the weeds.

It isn't there.

By the time he arrives, he sees the tree split and toppled over. Lightning hit it not so long ago, probably less than a year. Must have been a vicious jolt, something sent by God himself splitting it half way down the main trunk and peeling it in two directions as a woodsman splits a log.

It was rumored among his family that beneath this tree she'd been impregnated with his father by an unnamed man who, once named, was never spoken of in that context.

She was fifteen.

"God is everywhere here," she once told him. He wonders how that could be in a place she once lay, body jerking in his thrusts, scarring her back and buttocks on the coarse feral timothy, her skin yellowing on dandelion.

The coulee has decayed to the point of uncertainty in the overgrown landscape that defies permanence, defies God himself. He takes out his handkerchief and daubes the sweat from his grayed temples then presses it to his nose in the memory of the scent of his grandfather.

The old woman sits down and leans against the remnants of the oak. She closes her eyes. The difficulty of the hike aches in his hip and in his left knee where arthritis seeps in like the vague limp his grandfather had before the jack failed and the truck slid across his body for eternity. She stands and climbs the remaining spike of the tree trunk and surveys the hill below her. He turns to look at what she sees.

The thick weeds and brush look benign from the distance, unlike the place they fought through the chaos and his grandfather's staggering dismissal of the danger of a jack hazy from

alcohol. He gazes downward, across the changed landscape where purple-winged wood nymphs and monarch butterflies, their red-brown wings with black and white dots, float above the embattled hillside like a thought in a pause during war.

He struggles but does not hear the whippoorwill's voice in the woods behind him, that voice his grandmother's comfort her in the evenings when she'd sit without breathing until his grandfather would have drunk his fill or run out of cash and credit and friends, come home in the staggering truck.

Perspiration dries on his face. The cloth of his shirt remains damp and he drinks deeply from a canteen. The clear distinctions of pasture and woods and fields come back in the near-warm water dribbling down his chin and onto his chest in a baptism of memory.

He turns to the tree. She is gone.

There is no definition between pasture and wood, cause and effect, and even the remaining fields blur together. Nothing is defined, hasn't been for decades, not since the truck slipped from the jack and crushed his grandmother's sole source of tears and her only reason to live.

Below him, the heavy pasture thorns continue to cover over the flashing black truck once stuck tight against the angle of the ditch. They vine their way through the ghost of his grandmother, between the ditch and the truck where his grandfather lubricated death itself.

Eventually the weeds will cover him as well. But all things pass, all things pass at the end of time; cleansed in the salty bitter beads of struggle, all things pass. He watches as they grow, faster, choking all things out, overcome in the desperate exuberance to erase what was, but is no more.