

The Signalman's Story

December 7, 1941

What do you do with the news? When the call
comes in from Honolulu — Sunday morning,
the San Francisco coast is clear, all
the other men asleep — nobody warned
you, just a kid from St. Cloud, that today
you would handle history's lightning bolt,
you would be the first to know. Do you pray?
No one even knows the words: Midway, Gold
Star Mothers, Guadalcanal, Saipan, loose
lips, Hiroshima. Right now it belongs
to you, alone at the teletype. Refuse
to believe, as if you could choose? Not wrong,
not right. What do you do with the news?
You do your duty: you pass it along.

Alcova, 1971

Thirteen, so I knew all about it — how
to tack, how to jibe, how to sail it flat
on a broad reach or close-hauled, with the prow
pointed home, the foam boiling astern, cat's-

paws ghosting the water, the telltale clues
to the fickle mind of the wind — yes, I
knew all that, I'd read not one book, but two,
so all those words were mine. He let me buy

it: bright yellow Sunfish, thirteen feet, used,
let me launch it just two weeks after ice-
out on a raw, squally spring morning, too
soon but I couldn't wait, wouldn't wait, I

said I was ready and hoisted the sail,
cleated the halyard, ducked the boom that missed
my head by inches, inducted myself
into the Order of the Orange Life-Vest —

he cinched me in tight. I clambered aboard,
took up the tiller, fumbled for the sheet,
squinted into the wind like Nelson, Hornblower,
Jones. I said I was ready. He

pushed out the prow, reconsidered, then stepped
a big step, unexpected, irretrievable —
barely onboard as the boat leapt
ahead, already planing, the wind heaved

its shoulder full force into the sail's belly,

and I hadn't thought of any of this —
how it would really feel, surging pell-mell
into the lake, hearing the frantic hiss

of cold water gurgling beneath us, how
the sheet would cut into my untested
right hand, or how the hull would buck and jounce
while my left fought a phantom that arm-wrestled

me for the tiller. I hadn't dreamed
of fear, of being overmastered — my
command redoubled. We beat a hard beam
reach, downwind fifty yards, no more, and I

shouldn't have fought the gust that turtled us,
should have dropped the tiller, let the sheet slip
harmless from my stubborn fist, should have trusted
the old adage — *just let go, the ship*

will find its own level — but no, I held
on tight and over we went, first a shock
knocked me breathless, electric ice, the shell
of the hull rolled belly up and it rocked

away from my groping, squirted away
slick, ungrabbable, the daggerboard streaming
snotbrown water, and then — what? I may
have lunged for his flailing hands, may have screamed

Dad! — may even have seen him go down, slip
silently down while I bobbed above, useless
as a newborn in the bright orange grip
of the vest — I may have watched myself lose

him, may have seen what I had to unsee,
to make unhappen: his face disappearing
into the deep beneath. Some fury
of refusal possessed me — *no, not here,*

no, not now, no, no — possessed me to poke
my frozen fingers at the frozen buckles
savagely till they gave, the vest broke
away like a parachute and I ducked

myself madly ass over end, kicked, felt
the burden of my clothes, my shoes, the skull-
crushing cold, I came to him, saw him still
sinking, still, like a statue in the dull

filtered light, a waxen head with arms raised
as if in blessing, or forgiveness, or
surrender, blank bewilderment, a dazed
emptiness, limply sinking. I lunged for

his wrist, latched on, kicked hard, up, clumsily
tugged him up toward the light, up, I clawed
for the light, lungs heaving, up, suddenly
broke the surface, gasping violently — by God

he breathed too, coughed up water, breathed again.
Dad! I sputtered. *Are you okay!* He nodded
dully, eyes half shut, lay shivering when
I draped his arms across the gently bobbing

hull, hooked the frozen claws of his hands
on the upended chine just as the roar

of a motor approaching fast, a friend
appeared (the man who ran the music store

in town), he'd seen it all, revved his ski-boat,
rescued us. I don't seem to recall how
we ever managed to get warm, how we got home —
another thing we never talked about.

The Brace

I was afraid to look at it, afraid
to touch it. The cold steel plate that mapped
the curve of his torso, the canvas straps,
buckles — when it was invoked, I obeyed.

It scared me more than the scar itself, neck
to tailbone, the incision and the sutures,
a faint pink highway of pain. I knew
the story: Montana, a horse, the wreck.

He never complained — not to me. He'd say,
"Maybe you can help me . . ." and Mom would add,
"Or does your dad have to put on the brace?"
As soon as he died she threw it away.

Patience

A music man, my father — always whistling,
singing, mastering the flute. He did
it all, loved it all, called it his ministry
— a true amateur, even amidst
his gleaming instruments and x-rays — dentist
was just his day job.

Evenings were
for practice — lessons, band — and Sundays meant
mass, incense and bells, and God must have heard
what all of us heard: he sang for his soul
in a thunderous baritone.

Even better
than the hymns and churchly rigmarole
were Gilbert & Sullivan shows. He let
me tag along — *Mikado*, *Ruddigore*,
Pirates of Penzance, *Patience*, *Pinafore*.

His favorite? Hard to say. He cut a dapper
figure as a commodore, was paired
with the handsomest matrons, doffed a cap
like he did it every day.

In the glare
of the footlights he found reality
in make-believe, his face behind the makeup.
When they did *The Mikado* he'd be
Pooh-Bah, Lord High Everything Else, never break
character, ever so pompous, so stern,
so silly. He had it all in him.

Pillow-
bellied and berobed, he took his turn
with eyes painted Japanese, high plains style.

He sang while assuming a sumo stance,
and brought down the house with his Pooh-Bah dance.

I saw all the *Patience* rehearsals, sat
in the back of a drab, musty old gym
while the prairie howled outside.

Maybe that's
when the notion first took root, in the dim
confines of adolescence, childhood's winter,
that poetry is ridiculous. Night
after night I took it all in: the thin,
simpering figures of poets, their tight
velvet knee britches, their lavender-scented
hankies, their frilly cuffs. No one laughed
harder than I did — I got what it meant.
But my dad was a dragoon, a man after
all, and that's how I learned that men wear swords —
something to sing is the whole point of words.

for my father