

Boundary

Death is something that doesn't scare me like I think it does some people. I've killed things and saw things killed since I was pretty little. Like all country boys, I killed bugs, birds, and fish with regularity at an early age. So, it wasn't seeing the old woman, bloated, gray, and dead that made such an impact on me. It was thinking about her life.

Since I was a very young child, I was in trouble all the time. I had a natural curiosity about things and was only four when I learned to use hammers and screwdrivers and scissors. Thus, there were broken toys, partially disassembled small appliances, and dresses missing an arm or two. I was messy little boy, clumsy and noisy, and was appreciated by my parents and older siblings mostly by my absence. So it was that my mother invited me to spend the bulk of my waking hours outdoors.

I was a whirlwind of imagination and energy, and I easily entertained myself. I built brush forts and created cities out of rocks and dirt. Although our house sat on twenty-two acres, I was required to observe a boundary of about a hundred yards around the house. But boundaries tempt us all to push on them and to go beyond them, so, by the age of nine, I had a range of two or three miles in any direction.

I was in possession of a pocket knife to make marks on trees and a pellet gun to shoot small birds. Dog (and sometimes the cat who would eat a dead bird) in tow, I ranged the hills and dells, becoming adept at going, under, over, or through barbed wire fences and sneaking past scattered neighbors' homes.

What I liked the most was to fish in the ditch that was along the road a half a mile from my house. There was a small pool of water that was backed up by a culvert where the little ditch disappeared under the asphalt. This was at a place where a small road branched off the little country road that I lived on. The water disappeared under the pavement and reemerged in about thirty or forty feet, on the other side of that branching road. From that water, I caught bluegills and occasional catfish, nothing longer than six inches.

In the summer, I sat on a low cement barrier by the hour, my feet sometimes dangling in the cool water. I stared long and deeply into the gently flowing, clear waters. I saw the sun's refractions from every angle. The nearby tree and sky were reflected at the water's quiet edges. Water striders played and struggled with each other. I'd catch them and let them go when I didn't accidentally kill them. I saw that sometimes they would exit the water's edge and traverse the land. I even spied them getting onto the road and heading for water at some other place. Little hoboos. I related to their independent streak.

During the times I spent at the ditch, I examined the old and run down house across the main street that separated us. The house was bare wood, splintered and weathered gray. I could see the two upstairs windows from where I sat, windows like giant black, vacant eyes looking down at me. I couldn't see much of the house below the roof and the windows because the bulk of the house was covered with huge juniper bushes and gigantic gnarled olive trees. There was also an old oak tree at the corner of the house. A weed-pocked, dirt driveway came out to the road from the back of the house. The whole place looked like it had been deserted for twenty or thirty years, but I knew there were people in there. Sometimes I could hear a faint sound, a faint note from a song or maybe a howl of some kind. Sometimes it sounded like an old man who was hurting from something. The house made me shiver and gave me occasional nightmares. One of

the distant neighbors had peacocks, and I could hear the birds call out early mornings as I awoke. They sounded to me like a girl calling out, "Help, help," the sound high pitched and drawn out. And I surmised that the house would be a perfect place to keep a prisoner locked up in a cellar or an attic. I carried that small fear with me when I went to my place down the road, ostensibly to go fishing in the ditch, but also so I could be near to that house. I wanted to go over there. I wanted to explore the place and peek into the windows.

I developed a specialized method of fishing in the ditch where the water disappeared into darkness beneath the road. I discovered that the small fishes spent their days in that darkness, in the cool of the tunnel. I attached a bobber to my line, a few inches above a hook and worm. Then I spooled the line out under the road. In order to watch my bobber, I wiggled my stomach and hips into a place on the cement barrier where I lay and looked at the world under the road upside down. This, I discovered, resulted in a marvelous bit of perspective. Top was bottom and bottom was top. Thus, the water was my dark, flat sky above a concave earth. There was always a half circle of light from the other side, backlighting my bobber. The bobber would disappear into the sky whenever a fish tugged on the worm. I loved the novelty of it, and sometimes let the little bluegill or catfish eat my worms with impunity.

I fished or fooled around by the hour and passed time through the hot and dry days. I looked at the grass or the leaves in the trees or the sunlight dancing on the water's ripples. My thoughts were musings and questions about the nature of things. I wondered about the wind in the trees and the sparkle of light. My upside down world made me wonder at things that were right-side up. Why was I me and not my sister? How long is forever? Did others see green the same way I saw green? I guess all children ask these and similar questions. And like all kids, I understood there was a gulf between my ditch questions and school questions.

One day while fishing, I heard shouting. I was surprised to see a man lean out one of the windows of the house across the street. Then there were two men, one behind the other. They were looking down on me and shouting. It was as odd as my little upside down world. They weren't really saying anything; it was like a mixed-up tantrum, half crying and half shouting. I could tell from their voices and actions that they were mentally defective. And I could see that they were badly misshapen, faces distorted with eyes at different heights, bulbous foreheads, their physical disarrangement mirroring the disarrangement of their minds. They were brothers, I guessed.

Even though they were shouting at me and making menacing gestures, I wasn't afraid. They were more child-like than scary, more Halloween spooks than angry and dangerous adults. They railed and ranted for a few minutes before someone pulled them back inside the window and shut it. I knew they were in trouble. I had a feeling of camaraderie, of being a kindred spirit.

I went to the ditch almost every day that summer. And even if I wasn't at the ditch, I was rarely at home. I loved the beauty in the simplest of things and the quiet of empty places. I didn't have the human interaction that for some reason caused my father so much disgust and pain, and I felt a kinship with the solitary lifestyle of the inhabitants of the house across the street. They were isolated on the other side of the street behind a wall of greenery, just as isolated as I was, searching for the boundaries of my mind.

I pondered life as I held it wet and wiggling and squirming, pulled up from the darkness below the road. I was growing respectful of life, and if they were not too hurt, I released the catfish or bluegill back into the water. Around this time, I put away my pellet gun as well.

Sometimes something grabs us and yanks us out of our dreams. One August afternoon, I was surprised by the sudden appearance of the two men from the window across the road in front of the house. They were shouting at me, but not like before. I could see both of them jumping about and flailing their arms and shouting things that were more pleading than threatening. They were both frighteningly disfigured: faces the wrong shape in every way, hair in clumps and sticking up. One was taller than the other, but both were oddly shaped, with the top part of their bodies larger than the middle parts. And they weren't really saying intelligible words. They were speaking gibberish, like babies. But they were not babies, they were at least as old as my own father.

I was afraid they would come across the road and grab me, but they stayed where they were. They were very pale and looked at each other as often as they did at me. I could see they were trying to tell me something. Were they yelling at me for something I did? That didn't seem to be it. They looked scared, too. "What do you want?" I called over.

They were trying to say something. But they couldn't speak. That is, they couldn't use words, but they were communicating need, that much I gathered. The taller one seemed to beckon me. I walked into the road and stopped at the middle. Both got very excited. So I made a brave decision. I walked the rest of the way over to them.

They were childlike and timid, afraid of me as much as I was of them. They were being brave, themselves, so I followed them as they pushed through the trees and bushes to the side of the house. There was an old car parked in a wide dirt area. It was pointed down the driveway that went around the back of the house. An old and frayed piece of rope was hanging from a tree, but there were no other signs of life: no old tools or a wheelbarrow or chairs or anything. It was just a wild tangle of trees and weeds and brush around a wide spot to park the car.

The men led me to the side door. And this is where I should have stopped. I knew what was inside. Everything was communicated to me in feelings. But we are creatures that demand to see, touch, hear, taste, and smell things. Intuitively knowing the truth is never enough. So I went inside.

The house was dark. I could see a mud porch with an old washing machine and stationary tub on one side. The floor was gray and brown linoleum with bare wood showing through a couple of worn spots. The men went before me and led me to the living room. And there lay their mother. She had been dead for several days, and she was stretched out in the middle of the floor, bloated, still, and gray. The tallest son looked at me. Words were unnecessary and tears were inadequate. The smaller son sent up a howl of sorrow. I wanted to howl, too. I wanted my world back as much as they did, but that could not be. I backed away and ran out the door, ran home, and told my mother. I stayed close to home for several days.

I never saw those men again. Several weeks later, I was listlessly fishing at the ditch and saw a fat man and his children at the house. Three children, all younger than me, were playing hide and seek in the yard. The man came out to the road, looked up at the house, and then he turned around to me. He didn't give any more thought about me than if I was an old dog. They disappeared after one more day, and I never again saw anyone at the house across the road. I fished at the ditch a few times the next summer, but it was not the same. I quit fishing there.

When I was in high school, the bus stop was near the spot where I used to fish. I got on and off the bus and glanced at the house, or what could be seen of it near the roof. The trees got larger. I could see holes in the shingle roof.

A few years later, on a trip home from college, I noticed that the house was gone. It had finally crumbled, or the county had deemed it a hazard and tore it down. And recently, I went to visit my ninety-three-year-old mother, herself abandoned by my father's death last year. I passed by the empty ditch where I used to fish (now just a long low depression along the road). Where that isolated family lived, there was nothing but weeds, brush, and trees, a solid barrier to the past.