

Nobler, Sweeter Song

There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's veins
And sinners plunged beneath that flood
Lose all their guilty stains.
— Protestant hymn

Easter supper was supposed to be served outside, partly to take advantage of the unseasonably warm weather, but mostly because it was where everyone would fit. Peter spent Saturday afternoon tidying the yard that was strewn with tin cans, construction debris, a rust-eaten oil drum. His face, red from the sun or otherwise, Molly couldn't tell, but she brought her sewing and the baby outside all the same, partly to enjoy the sun, mostly to keep watch.

“Can you believe this weather?” she said as she settled, the sun bringing out the little gold left in her otherwise mouse-brown hair. “Has to be a sign.”

Peter pretended not to hear, focused instead on rolling the oil drum as if the act required his complete attention. Molly was right—it must be a sign—but he wasn't going to risk it by declaring so out loud.

“What time does John come tomorrow?” Molly asked, thread in her teeth as she licked the ends for a sewing knot.

“Same as last time you asked,” Peter replied. He righted the drum and slowly rose to his full height. “Nine o’clock train.”

The trash was all piled now, the mound filling the space between the outhouse and back fence. Peter admired his work which had a sculptural quality, the pleasing shape of chaos fashioned into some kind of order, however awkward and haphazard.

“Church at ten,” Molly reminded. “We’ll eat around two.”

“Yup.” Peter kicked at a patch of melting snow, his boots turning it brown, turning it grey.

“Thinking out loud is all,” Molly said as if she were any wife preoccupied with holiday preparations. But they both knew better, knew why she’d come outside, why she wanted to hear him speak. If only she could be certain, had a guarantee. Perhaps if Peter said—what? What words would be enough? She felt trust in the past tense only now. January, February, the first half of March had been good. Molly believed in that. But the rest of 1913? Well, let’s finish March first, she thought.

“It’s just supper, Molly. Stop fussing.”

“Don’t mean to,” she replied, and that was true. Her mother had been a notorious fussbudget, and Molly had resolved to be a different kind of wife. But Sunday loomed, and her fears pushed themselves onto her tongue, past her teeth.

“Can’t hatch an egg by crushing it,” Peter said more to himself than Molly as he picked up a hammer.

“But what if—”

“Jesus, Molly,” he interjected more sharply than he’d wanted. Her eyes narrowed. They did that a lot now, he noticed, were starting to set into permanent, worried creases. “It’s just supper.” he said more gently, then added, “I’m going to start on the table.”

Molly pursed her lips, buried her head back in her work—an old sheet she was trimming with the lace from her knickers for a tablecloth—and tried to pretend there was such a thing as just-supper. The sun shone on, unperturbed by their concerns. It blessed the afternoon with an amber hue and a soothing warmth that pierced bone-deep. From time to time, Molly hummed or murmured to baby Sally, but she left Peter alone to hack away at the stack of reclaimed wood boards he was cutting over and over again, trying to achieve something akin to uniform length. Molly and Peter worked in parallel like this until the sun dipped low and a chill issued from the southwest. By then, the last patch of snow had melted, and the table was complete.

“Yard looks pretty all done up,” Molly offered. Peter tousled his sandy hair, now damp with sweat, and agreed. Up close, Molly could see his face was pinker where his beard had been. He’d shaved the night before, leaving only his mustache in preparation for Sunday’s just-supper. A sunburn. She allowed herself a smile.

But that was Saturday.

On Sunday, rain started at daybreak, cold and sharp. Throughout central Ohio, dogwoods shut their fragile buds while tender mayapple sprouts regretted listening to the promise of early spring. Around noon, petite pools of mud began appearing in the yard. The new table sat drenched, abandoned to the muck.

Inside, Molly, Peter, and his brother John crowded around a table better suited for two, Sally at her mother’s feet in a fruit crate that served as a crib. The room was tiny, barely

accommodated its fixtures—the table, a two-pot coal stove, a pie safe, a corner wall sink—let alone three adults and a baby.

Conversation was pleasant, but slow. The topic of weather provided whole minutes of easy words. So too the fact that John was taller than Peter now. The sound of rain helped them, filling in gaps of speech with its drum, drum, drum until the next topic occurred to someone. John's plan to join the army. Who Sally looked most like.

John eyed about the room and said, "Lordy, Pete, that is one small sink," as he pointed to the porcelain bowl that was obviously intended for a lavatory not a kitchen. "You chopped up this room but good. How big is the other side?"

"About double this," Peter answered.

"So, you gave the rental side the bigger half of the kitchen, the whole parlor, and the bathroom?"

"No bathroom," Peter said, nodding toward the backyard.

"He's fixing to close in the back porch this summer though," Molly interjected. "Link up to the city line."

Peter stiffened at his wife's voice. John continued, unaware, "How many room upstairs?"

"Three to start," Peter said, turning slightly away from Molly. "Cut the middle one in two so Sally could have a room. Now it's two and two."

"But still, most of the house must have gone to the other side."

"Yup. Figured I'd get more for it that way."

"And did you?"

Peter replied with a drawn-out "sometimes," which was the most accurate answer he could think of without flat-out lying. He regarded his brother a moment before venturing, "You

warming to say something, John?” Molly held her hands on her lap, tried not to breathe as if her lack of respiration might ward off the moment, fool it into passing by.

But John merely responded, “Nope. Haven’t seen you in a while, is all. Haven’t seen this place. Just trying to understand what’s going on.”

“A good life,” Peter countered too quickly. “That’s what’s going on.”

John nodded curtly, eyed about the kitchen some more, not staring at anything in particular. Molly kept her gaze low, poking at Sally’s blanket as if smoothing it were an urgency. Only the rain dared a voice, each of them hearing disquiet in its endless drumming.

Molly got up and ladled the ham soup. As she worked, she hummed a bit of the morning’s processional hymn. “I don’t care for the bloody hymns,” she said, “but they have the catchiest tunes.”

John nodded. “That was one of our grandma’s favorites. She always liked the ones where sinners got their due. Used to say, ‘When I get to heaven, I’m building a porch where I can sit and watch Jesus deny those who forsake him.’”

“Bet she’s on that porch right now,” Molly added, her voice quick and eager. “Peter’s always saying how Jesus doesn’t needed to hold grudges—your grandma will do it for him.”

John smirked, and Peter shifted in his chair. Molly leaned forward in her seat, hopeful for more words, but neither brother spoke. There was only the rain as the three of them slurped their dinner.

By three in the afternoon, the sky was night-dark. Molly lit a small lantern strong enough to illuminate little more than the table, making the room seem even smaller, the rain somehow louder. If only they could sit outside or take a walk. Maybe a change of scene would have pried words from their tongues. But there was nowhere to dally except the kitchen, and nothing to do

but wait for the clock to say John should walk back to the station. The rain had them, each thought, rats in a hole.

“Pete, remember that Fourth when it rained like there’d never be sun again?” John ventured after a time. “All of us stuck in the house?”

“Sure, I remember.”

“Then just after supper—*boom*—the clouds disappeared like the devil himself snatched them.” Peter nodded as John continued, “Remember the lightning bugs that night?”

“Lit up the field like stars,” Peter added.

“A whole field of stars,” John agreed. Peter started to speak again, but something held his tongue, forced its retreat. The rain pounded harder, tried to goad him into sharing, but Peter closed his mind to it. A full minute passed before he spoke again, softly now, a whisper: “Like stars.”

John helped Molly clear the dishes, which entailed dumping them in a squat barrel of soapy water, the sink being too narrow for the task. Peter didn’t move, though, didn’t even alter his gaze. When the dishes were all soaking, Molly sat again, but John paced a bit before braving the words he’d been holding, “Got a letter from Ma, yesterday.”

Molly stiffened as Peter said in a dull tone, “And?”

“Bank finally auctioned the farm.”

Peter rubbed his knee with his knuckles. “Well, it’s done then, I guess.

“Never thought I’d say it,” John said, looking arrow-straight at Peter, “but thank God Pa’s gone—didn’t have to see it.”

Peter pushed his chair back but didn’t stand. He held his brother’s gaze like a stone.

“Sounds like Ma’s still waiting to hear from you,” John continued. “Thought you wrote her.”

“I said I was ‘writing’ her.”

“That must be one long letter, taking you nearly six months and all.”

“Maybe it is,” Peter said as he held his fists tightly to his knees, a man biding time. “Been busy. Been working. Thought I’d send her some extra with the letter. Taking longer than I thought, is all.”

“She doesn’t need your money, Pete, and it only takes two words to say you’re sorry.”

Peter’s jaw tightened. He nodded. No use denying the obvious.

“She’d like to meet her granddaughter,” John continued, “I mean, hell, Pete, you named her Sally.”

“Peter’s been working real hard, John,” Molly interjected.

Peter rapped the table so forcefully even Sally’s crib vibrated. “Molly, don’t speak for me.” He rose, squared off with John who didn’t budge from his spot. The brothers eyed each other until Peter raised his hands in surrender. “Jesus, I can’t do this.” He ruffled his hair as he walked to the pie safe, pulled a bottle from around back.

“We all wish things were different, Pete.” John offered.

“Sit down, John.” Peter said, waving the bottle slightly, a white flag in liquid form. “It’s Easter. Sit and have a drink with your brother. Maybe we’re better with a bottle between us. Maybe this is how we wash our sins away.” Molly looked from Peter to John and back again. She tried to smile, but her lips held a thin line, her eyes, sharp as glass, somber as rain.

Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious blood
Shall never lose its pow'r,
Till all the ransomed church of God
Are safe, to sin no more.

Molly rose with Sally's first cry, which pierced the air, a needle through skin. She reached Sally by the second, her eyes never leaving Peter's slumbering frame. How long since he passed out? She must be fast, hush Sally before he woke. But the rain had other plans. It craved action, pounded like feet on bleachers, so loudly that Sally could not hush, Peter could not stay asleep.

"Molly," he grumbled, a low gargling sound.

She hugged Sally closer, but the firmness of her arms wasn't enough. Sally kept bleating, a lamb, her need urgent but unnamable.

Peter slid a foot out of bed, his body falling after. "Goddamn it." His words slurring as he tried to right himself.

Molly was already to the door, every muscle clenching, anticipating the next moment. Sally wailed while the rain pounded presciently on the roof.

Peter found his feet. "Shut her up. Shut her up, Molly, or I'll shut her up."

Molly scurried and screamed for John, who had stayed the night, bunking in Sally's room. But only the rain replied. Molly's eyes darted, terror-wide. John must be nearby—in the kitchen, the outhouse, maybe. The door to Sally's room was open, blocking the hallway, another of Peter's botched jobs, the door hung backward, hinges hall-side.

The rain battered the roof as Molly barricaded herself in her daughter's room. She had scarcely locked the door when Peter's fists found it, his mind a pulse of blood and rage. The rain beat greedily along, the door shuddering as it withstood.

Molly clutched Sally, her arms pledging ransom. She will keep her safe. No matter what. But the rain disagreed, struck more loudly. Sally's unholy wails filled the room. Peter shouted words Molly could not decipher, her ears throbbing, thick with fear. But the pounding stopped, and the door was still. Silence. A moment, two, three. Then new sounds. Footsteps followed by metal scratching metal. Wood splintering. A clang on the floor. A hinge, Molly realized. Sally's wails found a shriller octave, heralding the truth of it.

Molly frantically searched for a place to hide Sally, deciding on a dresser drawer. Sally's cries would betray her, but Molly would be the first target, at least. Perhaps her blood would be enough. When a second hinge dropped, Molly grabbed a chair and readied her defense.

Then, mercy, an angel-song, John's voice asking, "Pete? What—". Molly didn't let him finish. She yelled "help," the vowel long, consonants full-throated. And it was as if she could see what was happening on the other side of the door. John looking confused, then understanding. Peter, disheveled, clutching a hammer or whatever he'd been using on the hinges. Each brother eyeing the other, waiting to see who moved first. Molly held her breath. Even the rain seemed to pause, suddenly the world so still.

Then, a flash, a blunt thump echoing down the hallway, the sound of a body shoved against a wall. At the same moment, the rain reanimated, crashing in a torrent, cheering as the brothers fought. More thumps, the wall curving from the force. The distinct smack of skin punching skin. Then, feet running down steps.

Everything was silent now, even Sally who had fallen asleep. Molly's heartbeat slowed so that she could no longer hear it. The rain was smooth, soothing. Molly crouched low, fingers splayed, her senses straining to penetrate floorboards and gather information, determine whether the fight was truly over. But she heard only the rain cooing to her.

Never again, it said. Not ever again.

Molly sat on the floor, crying now, Sally in her arms, hushed and sleeping. Molly rocked her for a while before she braved the bedroom door and entered the empty hallway pocked with battle scars.

E'er since by faith I saw the stream
Thy flowing wounds supply,
Redeeming love has been my theme
And shall be till I die.

Steam from Molly's tea rose into the dark of the kitchen while John picked at the crust of his sandwich. The rain should have stopped by now, both agreed, although it had slowed to a mere pat-pat on the roof, intimate, like the rustle of a quilt.

"I'll look again tomorrow after work," John offered, chewing while he spoke.

"Isn't going to be found until he's ready," Molly responded. "He's ashamed."

"Well, he should be."

"This wasn't how Sunday was supposed to go. He's been dry for months. I know you won't believe me, but it's true. He's been doing good. Working. Day jobs, but working all the same. He's trying to make right, John. Easter was supposed to be him showing that—have you go back and tell everybody. But then this rain pushed us inside, put us on top of each other. Talk of the farm, your ma, it just —"

"And you think I pushed him too," John said, leaning back.

"Yesterday dredged up the old, and he fell into the old. Right back in." Molly traced the rim of her cup with a finger and glanced at the window. The gloom of night stared back. The rain

seemed to quicken. “I didn’t know he had a bottle in the house. That was my mistake. Should have checked.”

John regarded Molly’s face, the corners of her eyes. “We’ve all seen the bank records now. Pa had the farm so leveraged—no way Ma could have kept it no matter what Pete did. I should’ve said that.”

“I wish you had, but that wouldn’t have fixed everything, and you know it. Peter’s clear on his mistakes. If he’d have paid down the second mortgage instead of—” Molly smoothed her skirts before continuing, “well, that doesn’t matter anymore. He knows he’s guilty though. And the things he and your Ma said to each other. That haunts him. It’s in his bones now, and you can’t logic with that kind of hurt.”

John stood, motioning to a water pitcher. Molly nodded. As John poured himself a glass, she said, “I just wish you could have seen him the way we planned it.”

“I don’t know if you ever heard this story,” John began after a long, slow drink. “One spring, maybe I was seven, Pa gave me a piglet. A little Berkshire, pink with dark patches. Named Brownie.

“Anyway, I got it into my head that Brownie hated her pen and wanted to roam the forest, wild-like. One morning, I just let her out, ran her into the woods. I guess I thought she’d come back if I called her, like a dog or something. I don’t know.

“Pete noticed she was gone, took me out searching. We found her dead, mangled. One eye gone. Her snout chewed away. I sat right down and cried. Just wept. So cruel to let a piglet in the woods like that, no defenses. Just plain cruel. I started hitting myself, pounding my own legs, calling myself a dummy, a goddamn dummy. Pete stopped me, gave me a hug, said, ‘We keep

animals in barns for a reason. Pa will teach you this lesson a different way, but I think you've learned it. You've had enough.' I didn't know what he meant until later.

“When Pa found out what happened, he cut a switch and came for me. But Pete charged right up to him—almost as tall as Pa, even then—claimed he was the one who let Brownie go. Pa must've known Pete was covering, but he took Pete at his word. Whooped the hell out of him, but Pete never changed his story.”

Molly regarded John. “I don't need reminding my husband's a good man.”

“Not my point,” John said as he set the glass in the wash tub near the sink. “Sometimes, it takes someone else to see we've had enough.”

Molly was silent a moment before saying, “I'm not the leaving kind. I love him, John, and I will always help him. It's just that simple.”

“I'm not telling you to stop loving him—nobody can tell you that—but it's not your job to redeem him, Molly. That's too much for anyone.”

“I don't know,” Molly said drawing out her words as if contemplating each syllable. “If you can't redeem someone with love, then what's it for?”

John offered Molly a tight smile. “Just be careful,” he said after a time. The rain picked up again as the kitchen clock chimed seven. John grabbed his hat, his train schedule, and nodded to Molly as he walked into the night, into the rain that swallowed him whole.

When this poor, lisping, stamm'ring tongue
Lies silent in the grave,
Then in a nobler, sweeter song,
I'll sing Thy pow'r to save.

On Tuesday morning, the Columbus Dispatch declared the city lucky. The rain was just rain, it reported. Better than the tornadoes in Kansas and Nebraska, or the hurricane-force winds in Indiana. The back door propped open, Molly stood, watching the rain that was just rain and waited to feel lucky. “Going on two days,” she said to Sally who was asleep in her fruit-crate crib on the kitchen floor.

Water pooled deeply along the porch now, along the back fence. The street had spots of standing water too. Molly noticed it earlier when fetching the milk. The rain was noisy, tapping forcefully a long string of dashes and dots, like a telegraph message. She listened until she thought she understood what it all meant. She needed to work harder. That was always the answer. Everything that was wrong just needed to be fixed, starting with Sally's wrecked bedroom door and ending with—well, she wasn't sure yet, but the door seemed a solid start.

Molly removed the final hinge and slid the door to the top of the stairs. It was too heavy to heft, so she tethered it with a jute rope to keep it from sliding too quickly as she lowered it step-by-step down to the kitchen. “There,” she said triumphantly to Sally who still slept.

Molly autopsied the piece. Peter had whacked the hinges so hard they were bent. Later, she'd have to rustle up some new ones, but for now she set about with a file to smooth the wood where it looked like a wild animal had clawed it. Sunday's hymn played in her mind as she worked. When she came to the verse, *I'll sing thy power to save*, she sang out loud.

Outside, standing water rose, the rain proving too much for the snow-melted ground, and the Scioto river that had been chipping at its levees for days finally won. A roaring, ripping,

rushing sound was Molly's only warning. The kitchen window offered little seeing, but the wall of water rushing down the street didn't require a clear view. When it hit the house, Molly was already to Sally. The walls groaned as they bent, spit as they strained. Water seeped up through the floors as the house slipped from its foundation, which was just a messily-laid collection of bricks, no match for the hungry water.

Molly's mind frantically calculated. A raft was what she and Sally needed. The door. She had just enough time to slip Sally under the rope tied to the middle of it before she was knocked off her feet, the rear kitchen wall gone. The ripping sound was all around her now, vibrating as if it were alive within her. The house pulled and twisted as it devolved back into its original components, a whirlpool of lumber and nails.

Sally's door mercifully floated, but Molly was not on it. She screamed for Sally, but the rain and the river and the fracturing neighborhood kept her from hearing her own voice. A tree limb floated near. Molly grabbed it, clutching it uncertainly, the bark cutting her hands and forearms.

Afloat now, she kicked and bobbed with the current, trying to follow her daughter's door. She must catch up, reach her baby. Molly's legs burned as they grew numb until she couldn't be certain if she were kicking or not. But she could still see Sally's door ahead, and so there was hope. The hymn came back to her, noble and sweet, a fire in the dark, compelling her forward. She repeated the lyrics, kicked in time to the meter. *I'll sing thy power to save*. Louder now, an incantation, as if the lyrics had the power to calm water. *I'll sing thy power to save*. Molly chanted, lisping and stammering, as water numbed her trunk, sputtered into her mouth. She prayed the lyrics until they no longer seemed like words at all but random sounds that no longer held meaning.

The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day;
And there may I, though vile as he,
Wash all my sins away.

Stripped to his skivvies, Peter huddled in the bay of a second-story picture window, blanket drawn to chin. His new boss, Gideon, dabbed at a cut above Peter's right eye with a wet sock until the blood clotted.

"Lucky," Gideon said as he worked. "To swim here, I mean. The houses on this street have real cellars. Limestone. It should hold."

Peter sniffed sharply. "If we're not on the roof in an hour."

"Look outside," Gideon insisted. "We're lucky."

"My pa used to say, 'Man can say luck's on his side, but when the floodwaters come, God'll sink a liar.' Never knew what he meant before."

Gideon regarded Peter, his black eye, crooked nose. "Maybe we're proof otherwise."

The pair sat side by side looking out the window, silent, contemplating the storm water outside as it bit and brayed, a river that just an hour ago was still a street. Peter craned his neck to see as far skyward as his vantage allowed. His view but grays and browns—slate clouds, mud water. The most optimistic shade, an anemic taupe, the scant light of day. After a time, he tousled his hair with an edge of his blanket and responded with a simple, "Maybe, but I've got to get out of here."

"Who you got out there?"

Peter looked at Gideon, regarded his wizened face, his scraggly, half-grown beard as if seeing the man for the first time. "I not sure. But I should go."

“You got a boat all of a sudden? Out there is nothing but a good way to drown.”

“I gotta try.”

“Stand. If you can do it without shaking, then go out and try.”

Peter flexed to stand but knew at once Gideon was right. His energy was spent. If he were going to go home, it should have been his first effort, but it hadn't occurred to him until now. He returned his gaze to the bits of flotsam, pieces of heaven-only-knows, that twirled and bobbed in the new river—window curtains, pans, clothing, and wood, so much wood, splinters of houses snapped easy as pea pods. Across the way, an eddy whirled between the porches of neighboring houses. Detritus circled a spinning wagon wheel. The carcass of a dog, broken and bent, caught in the vortex and swirled until the body smacked into a porch column where it stuck squarely as if nailed.

Minutes passed. The bedroom air, ice-still. The rain, unrelenting, like one endless sheet on a printing press that had no break, no cutter.

“You grow up on a farm?” Gideon asked. The dog carcass broke free of the porch as he spoke.

“What?” Peter responded half-hearing, his focus on the animal floating downstream, another thing washed clean away.

“A farm,” Gideon repeated. “The way you were with those horses when the levee broke. I thought maybe you grew up on a farm.” Gideon paused for a response, but none came. He continued, “Never seen anything like it. Everything getting smashed to bits. But you, a regular Johnny-on-the-spot. Got right to those horses hitched to that porch, freed them before I even climbed on top of the truck. City boys don't think like that.”

“Horses will always find their way to dry land.”

“Is that so? Well, it was smart of you, humane, to free them like that. You’ve got that farm instinct. Just do right without thinking.”

Peter looked at the man searchingly. “Sounds like you’re not from a farm.”

“Well, that’s true. But you can always tell the weight of a man by how he treats animals. Always can.”

Peter shook his head. “I don’t know. Animals are easy. They’re so pure-hearted. You just help them. It’s people that are hard. How are you supposed to pull somebody out of the same hole you’re stuck in?”

“Lordy, Peter, that’s a dark thought. Matches that eye,” Gideon said, pointing at Peter’s face.

“Matches what’s inside us, that’s all. We can try to deny it, pretend to be more, but the truth’s always there, waiting, creeping like a thief, ready to pull us down.” Peter stood abruptly, his legs shaking with exhaustion. “I don’t know. I’m just saying nonsense. Just need some sleep, I guess.”

Gideon nodded, “You sleep. I’ll keep watch.”

Peter crawled into the room’s large bed, disappearing under the covers. Consciousness left him quickly, Peter issuing a sharp grunt as it did, a great burden lifted.

Five minutes, ten, a quarter hour, Gideon watched bits of the city float by. Then, a distinct shape came into view. It wasn’t broken junk like the rest, but a rectangle, intact and definite. Gideon squinted until the thing came close enough to recognize it as a door cleanly removed from its frame. Now he could see a bunched-up wad of yellow fabric tied to the middle. The bundle twisted and squirmed as rain punished it from above. The fabric shifted. Something kicked out. Gideon rose in disbelief, pushed his nose to the glass, the blanket around his

shoulders falling, gathering in a lump about his naked feet as he stood. The door floated closer now, and he could see it was a foot kicking out.

Gideon beat the windowpane with a bare palm and stammered, “A baby—Peter—it’s a goddamn baby.”

Peter snorted but did not wake. The door was past the eddy now, past the house. Guilt in his blood, Gideon could only stand, impotent, and watch as the door floated down the river toward the blurred horizon. As the door passed from sight, and for a long while after, Gideon stood and watched for he was the only witness and could not think how else to mark what he had seen.