5-1-1993

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Recommended Citation

Available at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol1/iss3/10

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SIGNS AND WONDERS
by Randy Bush

I imagine the bird I tormented to death in the arrogance and heat of my ninth year long ago dissolved into the living mud of that brown pond. But to haul this heavy, clean, thirty-six year old body, so unlike its nine-year old shadow, to a distant forest lake to ask forgiveness would be a waste of effort. Worse still, it would be a lie. My Celtic and Cherokee blood has lost the romance of its earlier faith. And so I find shelter in the anonymity of adulthood, protected by coffee and bites of sweet roll, and watch for signs and wonders. Because in the end, and in spite of my treachery, it seems the messy residue of my crime has, itself, become part of the miraculous. By this time, each flake and molecule of my tiny victim have been sucked into trees and rain clouds and a hundred grey-backed jackrabbits. I have seen their reincarnation with the secret eyes of my mind. I have accepted their gift of sight. The signs and wonders are the denizens of a singularly beautiful natural world that remained unseen by my eyes and undetected by my brain until I had become a killer. Now, shocked awake, I drink purple hills and scarlet clouds. By sight, I know many of the trees, as individuals, that live beside the dark lines of highway that follow me from my home to Concordia College.

The price of the gift, though, is perpetual repentance without hope of atonement. The hardened burl of sin has never left me but hides in my memory, coiled in on itself. "Guilts" that would never have bothered me before that day at the lake now hold the tang of misery. Shall I answer for the act of casting an infant chicken onto water and heaving rocks at it until it perished from shock and horror? Then what of the others who, each in their turns, lost to my superior strength and cunning? The truth is, there were so many I could never recall them all. When I was a boy, every small thing that moved was an anatomy lesson begging to be unzipped and taken apart. There were frogs and snakes and wonderfully speckled lizards with detachable tails and June bugs and magnificent moths that shimmered like flapping cellophane. I might have filled a spectral zoo with those crumpled victims of my amoral angst. If I caught them, they died. And only once, while torturing a tiny toad, I was the one caught. I was Kwai Chang Kane (from the old TV show, "Kung Fu") and my mother was the ancient, blind priest making me walk on rice paper. She shook me just a little, and said that God had made the toad. The rice paper was under me and I ripped it to shreds without even feeling it.

But the killing of the chick, stolen from our henhouse and secreted beneath my hat, was unique. Until I had committed that act, the wonder of a half-inch heart with its impossible rhythm was nothing like a miracle. It was no more grand than the action of a wind-up toy's motor. It ranked with my cap gun, my Legos, and the wad of bubble gum eternally and mysteriously made new by the magic of having been stuck to my headboard during the cool night. The notion that a small animal (other than a dog, of course) might have innate worth never occurred to me. Not once had I thought that the desperate lives fluttering in the palms of my hands and dying under my shoes sparked of real and true magic. The knowing of it had been obscured by my own childish clumsiness. Yet in one flash of time, even the air that recharged my wild, salty limbs became a mystery and a romance. It hissed through the grass at my feet and echoed in the stirring of autumn's first bright flags. Never again could I kill virginally. Never again would I grind a toad or a snake into ruin and head home, whistling, to scrub up for peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. All this happened because, in the instant before I launched the stone that forever unraveled the tiny tapestry of the bird's memories, that ruined, white shape gazed at me with its remaining eye, and I was caught full by the fiercest blast of destiny I have ever known.

That gaze gathered my stomach and the muscles
of my arms and legs into a black wad of fury. With the sudden passion and potency of the truly fearful, I aimed and fired my chip from the earth’s stony heart. The bird vanished for a moment and rose, settling onto its back. I found more rocks and fired again and again until my arm and chest were sore and burning. Each time I struck, dead on, the wretched little corpse would disappear from the world. Horribly, maddeningly, it always returned to the surface. I cursed it. “Stupid Thing!” I said, “Stupid old thing! I hate you! I hate you.” What I actually meant, of course, was that I hated myself. And now, looking back, I know why the hero of “Kung Fu” had to walk that rice paper before leaving the cloister of Shou Lin temple: until he could pass so gently that not the smallest tear was left in the soft runner, he could never be trusted with Creation. Otherwise, he would have left his mark on all that he touched. And it seems to me now that we have done that. Not we Americans or Soviets or Chinese, but haven’t we humans, the original storm-troopers with bellies full of Manifest Destiny, done that?

Orwell would have understood perfectly. In “Shooting an Elephant,” he recalled the sting of self-disgust when, as another killer with impure motives, he became his own greatest victim.

_The sole thought in my mind was that if anything went wrong those two thousand [Burmes]e] would see me pursued, caught, trampled on, and reduced to a grinning corpse... That would never do... [I] poured shot after shot into [the elephant’s] heart, and down his throat... In the end I could not stand it any longer and went away (50-51)._

In the same way, I was my own victim and fool. That night, sleeping in a tent because the day had been warm, I suffered and squirmed and twisted, yet could not escape the terrible look of that dying white face dimmed by the shadow of passing innocence. I had done a wrong of appalling measure. I could never tell my mother and so would never receive her absolution.

Having spent the hours wrapped in a troubled sham of sleep, I was startled awake by the extraordinary call of the first bird of morning. There is nothing like it. I wiggled out of my sleeping bag and

Randy Bush

Works Cited