

BLUE WOOD SHOES

Samuel Avery

My fingertips hurt. I watch the children on the playground at recess. They swing around a Maypole like kites struggling on strings. I watch their legs as they pump swings, run for bases, teeter-totter. See-saw, Marjorie Daw; All ye, all ye, alls in free; Safe, Are not, Am too, Are not, Am too

The house is quiet. Death has its own noise. Stillness shrieks, *this* house holds a vacuum that gasps its last breath; silence, injustice.

I am the dealer of justice, the holder of the last card. I play the fair and square, the straight and narrow.

Mother and father sleep wooden in their beds.

Listen: a girl named Joan once heard voices in her father's garden. She was greatly afraid. It was noon, a summer's day. Perhaps she was tending the flocks. Who's to say? Who's ever to say? From the garden she could see a church. This was in France. She was, of course, a Catholic. Thus, the voices would have come from the direction of the church. Let's say it was on her right. Imagine the steeple; imagine it signifying a heaven you believe in.

There was a great light, always in the direction of the voices. She didn't ask anything of these voices though they taught her how she ought to behave. She asked, at the last, for the salvation of her soul. Wouldn't you?

But you see, I hope, that no one *knows*. She could have heard the voices. I could hear voices, or I could *say* I heard them, too.

The stairs in this house make a noise although no one can possibly be on them. They settle into themselves, adjust to the dust motes dropping from sunbeams. The dining room clock chimes. I can hear the children's voices from the playground; they chant, taunt, whine, they work their way into a wheedle for five minutes more. It is 2:00 p.m. It is May 2, 1979.

Something carries me through this day like the dust on light. I am slowly falling. I remember the arms raised high. I remember the high arches in a Cathedral visited long ago. There is a high song the wounded and cornered bird makes, calling for its mate as the cat, bits of wing in his mouth, climbs the tree. The bird knows it is only a matter of time before he is caught in mid-song; death on a treble note.

Always, though, there is the unexpected. Birth in death. Tulips suggesting spring through snow. Fall, too, surprises us. When migration is overdue some birds hang heavy on trees, like berries. Harvest caught in early frost, the tall stalks of corn glistening like diamonds. Who among us ever *asks* for the first sheet of snow?

Birth in death; birth after death, always. In spring, I ask, why are there so *many* tulips? Seasons keep elapsing into one another. In nature, one year the bad seed, dormant for years, will surface.

I am the philosopher, the dealer of justice, a teller of tales. Memory brims with stories: the lives, deaths, loves.

This girl, Joan, her story is not the only one I know. It is, perhaps, appropriate. I wait for the vision; I look for the light. I hear the voices late at night when others dare sleep.

Fools. *I* will not sleep. I stay awake at night, wait for the light, the voices, some vision. I wait for the right moment, the sigh, the verdict of justice. I will be the hero no one believes I have the power to be.

When it came something like God, no not God, exploded like a light within my head. The world was a star, burning. I am flame. I am ember.

The arms, but not arms, points of light, raised high. The fingers, small sparks, held tight. My breath is fire. My breath is flame. And then the sound; a rush of air. Here is the story. It is one story only and this is how I might begin to tell it. Listen: we are not allowed our stories, ever. They are always the property of others before they are spoken. Do you understand? Others will tell this story, in their own way. Thus, it becomes not only my story but also a story told. Let them bark it in the courtroom. Let them set it in type.

They say I am mad. I am a singer of songs. I sing to the wind, I sing to the children on the playground.

Listen: already, now, I think I hear them as they begin to chant my name.

II

May 3, 1979.

Being asked to tell the whole truth concerning the crime(s) of which he is accused the accused makes the following statement.

Asked his name, he replied: Anthony Spinelli.

His age: Twenty-one.

Questioned as to whether he was employed before the time of the alleged crime(s) the accused said he was a janitor for Toy World Corporation. His salary was moderate. Asked whether this was a factor in his decision to live in his parents' home rather than an apartment of his own, the accused replied that he had always lived in his parents' home rather than an apartment of his own. Asked whether he was happy living in his parents' home the accused replied: Go on to the next question.

Asked whether he had any reason to dislike his mother and father, he replied: they always treated me as they would their own child, as flesh and blood.

Asked whether he was not aware that he was their own child, the accused replied: I can't see how that makes any difference.

He was asked if he was aware of his actions on the evening of May 1, 1979. He said that he was. Asked whether he was aware of his parents' deaths and the circumstances surrounding them on the same date, he replied by stating that he *was* aware that they were dead.

Asked whether he was aware of the exact nature of their death, he replied by saying that he would prefer to go on to the next question. When the question was rephrased and repeated, he replied: Severe bleeding, probably.

He was then asked if he was aware of the origin of the wounds which resulted in death through loss of blood.

He replied by insisting that we go on to the next question.

When questioned as to the nature of his own actions on the evening of May 1, 1979, the accused asked whether that would have been a Monday or a Tuesday. He was told that it was a Tuesday evening. He replied: I seem to remember having a rather early dinner.

Asked to state his actions on May 1, 1979, as nearly as he could recall, he replied: I woke up at 6:30, took a shower, wished I didn't have to go to work, ever. I walked to work. I worked. I ate breakfast and lunch in the automat. I left work at 5:00 and returned home to an early dinner.

When questioned as to whether anything out of the ordinary had happened at any point of the day in question, something that may have upset him in any way, the accused replied: I woke up at 6:30, took a shower, wished I didn't have to go to work, ever.

He was asked to repeat a statement made earlier to one of the psychiatrists concerning any unusual episodes—or episodes he felt were unusual—from his childhood.

His reply: I was given a wooden toy for my seventh birthday.

Asked to describe this toy in detail, he replied: It was a wooden boy, a Pinocchio doll about three feet high. The legs bent at the hips, the arms at the shoulders. They were fastened with white elastic rope. He was made entirely of wood: red pointed wooden hat, green wooden shirt, red wooden shorts. His hair, painted onto a wooden head, was black. He had blue wood shoes.

Asked whether this toy was thought to be very unusual, he replied: I was told repeatedly that it was very expensive. I believe it was an Italian import.

He again stated that he had been told many times that the toy was expensive. He said that he did not care for it and often asked that it be taken away.

Asked whether the toy *was* taken away, he replied: No. It was not.

Questioned as to why he asked that the toy be taken away, he replied: It was very frightening.

Asked to repeat the request he made to his parents each night for several months concerning the toy, he replied: I asked them to put it into the closet and to shut the door tightly.

Asked for the reason behind this request, he replied that he was afraid it would come to life. He did not care, he said, to see it become "real."

Asked whether he was not aware at the time that this was an impossibility, the accused said that he did not see why this was asked of him as he asked often that the toy be taken away. And it was not. Tit for Tat, he said.

At this point the accused began to ramble at some length, refusing to answer directly any of the questions which were put to him. At several points during an incoherent speech the accused claimed to hear various voices, at night, which came, he said, from behind the wooden shutters in his bedroom.

The accused was asked if he was, in his own opinion, under the control of these voices.

He said only that there were two voices and that they asked him not to wish his parents ill in any way. Although, he said, at times it seemed as if they had a desire for me to do so. Asked to comment further on this, he replied: I'd rather not.

The accused began to answer every question put to him by repeating his statement: There were two voices which told me that I was not to blame my parents in any way.

When asked to tell us whether he was aware of the instrument used to murder his parents he replied by humming a tune we could not distinguish. He was told to answer the questions as they were put to him. He replied: An axe.

Asked whether he admitted to using the axe to murder his mother and father while they slept in their beds on the evening of May 1, 1979, he replied: It was from my bed that I heard the voices. I heard them only at night.

Asked whether he feared the voices, he replied by saying no, and stated further that he had been told repeatedly that the toy was very expensive and knew it was only a matter of time before his parents would insist that it be taken out of the closet and put on a shelf near his bed.

Questioned as to his age when he last saw the toy he replied: I'm not sure. Perhaps eleven. Perhaps twelve.

When asked if he knew what happened to the toy, he replied: I believe it was taken away in the end for they saw I truly could not love it.

He added that he thought he was in possession of the toy for four or five years before this was acknowledged.

Asked whether it was not true that he had seen a similar toy in the warehouse of the Toy World Corporation on the afternoon of May 1, 1979,

the accused replied: I asked them to take it away. I repeatedly asked that it be taken away for years and it was not.

Asked again what he found frightening about the toy, he said: I was told a wooden boy becomes real. The wood contains life.

Asked why he found this prospect frightening, he said that he could not say.

Asked what he thought the toy would have done if it had become real, he replied: It would have been very angry, I was never kind to it.

Asked to elaborate on this, he replied: I tried to keep him hidden for a very long time, a very long time, a very long time.

The accused began to ramble incoherently, repeating often that he was aware that wooden boys became real and that he felt he denied his this right. He said that he felt under a great responsibility to love the toy and that this, in part, was why he often asked that it be taken away.

Finally, having been quieted, the accused was asked again whether he remembered murdering his parents with an axe while they slept in their beds on the evening of May 1, 1979. He replied: Yes. I do.

Asked whether he drugged them first he said that this had not occurred to him and that he therefore had not.

He further said that he killed his mother first as his father was the sound sleeper. He knew she was dead because of the great amount of blood.

Asked whether he was aware that on the evening of May 1, 1979, as she lay in her bed his mother was the victim of fifteen blows from the axe he held, he replied: Go on to the next question.

He then quickly added that he thought it was his mother who bought the toy but that it was his father who refused to take it away.

Asked if this was why his father was the victim of a lesser number of blows, he replied: No. I knew he was dead after the third blow. When the steel hit bone it had a distinct sound.

Asked to describe this sound, he replied, in a surprisingly lucid voice: It sounded like doors slamming from all the rooms he left angry.

Asked if he regretted the death of his parents, he stated that he did not see why it was thought he would not as they were no less real to him than the life of the wooden boy.

III

I am made of wood. It's true what they say about us, we become real if you wish it. But as for the boy, Tony, of flesh and blood, I knew right away he wouldn't want me to become real.

I have only small regrets.

He was twelve when they took me away. The father came at night before dinner and carried me to the attic. It was March, 1968, still cold. I'd forgotten about becoming real and being taken away didn't matter, although, I would have liked to have seen the boy one last time.

You see, I think this is *my* story. Not the boy's, not the father's or mother's. It's a story about a wooden toy, nothing else. I'm not a symbol. I'm just a wooden boy who's lived a very long time.

I'd almost forgotten about Tony. Wooden boys are like that, so careless with memory. Then I heard the blows. Such a dull rhythm, steel/bone, steel/bone, steel/bone. I feared for my wood.

IV

My Tony, as a little boy he was always like that. So imaginative. I used to long for Papa—my husband, you know, Tony's Papa—to come home from work so I could tell him what Tony had done. Always, he said to me, "Why is this so? Why is that so?" Always the questions. I used to tire of making up the answers.

Now he has a good job. He lives at home with us. I tell him, "Tony, marry a good girl, start a family." "Mama," he says, "and who is going to take care of you and Papa?" That's Tony, you see, always thinking of me and Papa.

My Tony.

V

It wasn't just the toy. Or the voices that you will know if I did or did not hear. It wasn't Mama, Papa, the job, the long stream of days, the endless mornings. It wasn't, either, as they like to suggest to me, something I wanted. A wish for this, a wish for that, the children chanting my name on the playground, my story interwoven with the rhythm of a jumping rope.

The grey numbs me. Grey of iron, the cement floors, the clothes I wear.

There was a great light, exploding inside my head, yes. Something like God, but not God.

They ask me if I would like to have them back. I regret nothing, wish only for another few good years, an unfolding of days with order. What good is a wish? A wish is a bright flash of steel.

The story of the toy. They make too much of it here. It pleases them, I can see, to ponder its significance. *What can it mean?* I hear them whisper in the long halls, in the paneled courtroom, in the smaller room where they took the preparatory interrogation.

They ask themselves, the toy, is it significant? Does it mean *this?* Or *that?* It must mean something, for them, at least. It is an endless debate. It becomes more than a toy; it is a symbol, a great myth.

They delight themselves by pondering my need to lock the toy away, to keep it far back under a shelf in the closet. Aha, they think. The closet. But no, I tell them, no. It was only a closet. It was only a toy.

VI

I heard. Still, I did not move. Gina was asleep in her bed. I thought, this is happening to me? Such a thing? Then I thought of my Tony and I knew he couldn't be doing this. It is perhaps, then, a dream?

You see, I saw him come into the room. He was just a shadow along the wall.

It swung from his right hand, heavy against his thigh. He looked at me, first, and then moved right to his Mama.

I saw the arms raised high, thought, *dream, dream, dream*. Can such a thing be happening? Can it be real?

Now I know. What is real? Only something we call something we believe.

VII

Imagine bending only at the hips and shoulders. You would have no elbows, no knees. Your legs, then, are either straight out in front of you and you are sitting down, or, they are perfectly straight, never bent, and you are forever standing up. Or, of course, one leg could be thrust out and up—a mock goose step—while the other leg keeps the balance, blue wood shoe on the floor. If you were this toy, it wouldn't be your choice. The choice is given to the boy made of flesh and blood.

Or, imagine wearing clothes made of wood. You are made of wood too, yet, there would be little comfort in this in the way we, who are made of flesh and blood, wouldn't want our clothes made of flesh and blood. Do you see what I'm getting at? It's a matter of familiarity. You would have to spend eternity wearing a silly red wooden hat, green wooden shirt, red wooden shorts. The shoes, merely a painted on affair, a splash of blue on little wooden peg feet.

You have no muscles, no marrow. There is only the white elastic rope. Sometimes the boy who owns you pulls your little wooden arm — his fingers tightly gripped on your shoulder — until it comes away from your body. The elastic is visible, vulnerable. He wonders at it, this seemingly simple construction. He laughs at it, and it is all that you have.

If you were real he wouldn't dare to do this.

Finally, perhaps, you have the chance to become real. After all, this is the right of your species. You have been promised. You have harbored little wooden hopes, guarded them carefully, sheltering them, perhaps, under your little wooden hat.

But it does not happen. You admonish your wooden expectations. You tell yourself to keep in your wooden place.

You don't really blame the boy. It isn't his fault that he doesn't understand you. But you wonder, just the same, what he has heard about you that

frightens him so. There is nothing really to you; just a lot of wooden artistry that can be reduced to a pile of sawdust on the workroom floor.

Imagine yourself in a pile of sawdust, red, green, and blue paint chips, the wooden threads of your clothes.

VIII

Always, they ask me here: Do you regret it? Yes, parts of it I regret. The day, May 1, a bad pun, that's something I regret. But it was not by choice, it is coincidence. Nothing more.

Telling them about the voices was a mistake. Too heavy-handed, it makes some of them wonder if I am cleverly assuming a madman's pose. Others among them think it is the deciding factor to my madness.

I told them many things. Some of what I told them I don't remember now and when they tell me to repeat something I have said many times they must remind me what it is they want me to say.

I remember only the physical sensations, the arms raised high, the splitting of bodies like wood. So many things I told them. If I don't catch myself I begin to wonder, the wooden boy? Did it mean something? Did it mean this? Did it mean that?