

Adolescence · Sydney Lea

WHAT did they think he was?

Standing by the small beaver pond in his back woods, he recalls asking the question of the empty air. Merest rhetoric: he alone had known what he was.

The *they*—changed or gone. Likewise, he half-believes, the *he*.

An April breeze cuffs at him, cooling the sweat of his walk among trees, lifting and drying a few lonesome strands of neck-hair.

He regards the water. What, what is out there? Anything? If not there, where?

That morning in his fifteenth year had begun slowly, the slowness part of what would enrage him. He studied his placemat with its nursery-rhyme inscription, a thing designed for the little child he'd long since stopped being. Pale orange pulp floated in his cup. Eggs gummed his dish; their very yolks seemed bleached; one of his own long bangs had fallen athwart the mess, so low did he mope.

In the kitchen, as ever, Nana plied her mother-of-pearl brush and spoke her mealtime grace. Even in dankest summer, he could hear the crackle of her electrified tresses above the drone of her prayer. His mother's mother, she had always lived with them (and always will, he sometimes cursed).

In a corner clucked the grandfather clock, which never told the right hour. Its function was probably to impute some grandeur to the small house, but it looked squat to him. Its tuneless chimes referred to nothing.

Their blown locks streaming over all quadrants of the clock's face—four personified winds. How fat, each beaming visage!

Thud thud thud.

His bald father came mumbling downstairs, though cheerfully, too much so, in fact, and then Mother, equally heavy of gait. In curlers.

His sister, already there in what was called The Breakfast Nook, spooned wet Wheaties, reading the words on the box, rapt, twirling a pigtail with chubby fingers.

No breath of air.

One thing and another, others:

August, everything laden, the leaves swollen thick, and the shadows. Pompadours of diesel exhaust over tractors that slowly combed the neighbors' field, flushing hordes of dun grasshoppers into silly, listless arcs. Grape vines, parched and hairy. Under the bay window, the usual few escaped steers, shearing the brown-spotted lawn—the boy winced at the ticks and the botfly eggs on their shagged pasterns, picking at a gooey clot in his own coarse mane. He looked away to that small portion of the Nook's beige wall where hung no idiot knickknack nor watercolor.

Fitch, the Nubian goat, stood on the roof of the Studebaker, his beard green with cud. This daily antic had been funny once.

From somewhere landed a question—"Why don't you cut your hair?"—perhaps not even designed to land on him. (By now two younger brothers and another sister were seated, blearily conning the tabletop.)

Furious, nonetheless, he flung his fork: it skittered the length of the room. He vaguely noted the small ligament of foodstuff it left on a baseboard, and noted as well the family's expressions as he sped away. They seemed more interrogative than alarmed, so he paused on the porch for one more bellow, all vowel, before slamming the door, on which dull claws had over the years inscribed desultory trails.

The heavy door seemed almost to sigh, though, shutting with a minuscule pop. Its brass dragon wheezed itself horizontal, as languidly settling back: *click*.

The burdock-matted spaniel heaved from the floorboards and, deaf and trustful, lumbered over, dragging bad hips: would there be a walk? The boy cursed, swinging his foot. The dog half-fell down the three steps, only to limp along at heel, its naiveté infinite, galling.

What might he do? He felt cruel.

Yet the spaniel, eyes no better than its ears, soon deluded itself that a dusting pigeon was catchable prey, and bumbled pathetically toward it. The bird flapped lazily onto a mulberry branch; the spaniel's charge died off into an indifferent gaze, benign paralysis amid the rank, smeared berries on the driveway. The boy sneaked behind an unbarbered hedge and made his way toward the slough.

The hills were swathed in haze thick and cloying as shave-cream.

It would be ninety degrees and humid by noon.

Frogs twanged, torpid on the slow stream's banks.

The familiar smells of mudflat and algae both deepened his dispiritedness

and honed his anger. He beat at the muck on shore with a deadfall branch . . . which broke almost at once. He continued his vague but furious assault with fist, knee, elbow, foot—over and over and over. The muck parted with every blow, but instantly re-gathered.

There wasn't any way out.

Four gadflies choired dull harmony around an iris, gone to wilt and bruise.

Everything was a blur as he looked back over the lawn. *Go face the music*, he thought. Then he grimaced and spat: *Music!*

He wanted somehow to be watched, to have his mind read.

What did they think he was?

Now he remembers how a sudden wind came up, clean-edged, wiping the haze, stropping the shadows.

He is inclined to skepticism (o, the breeze just happened along) but to some form of credence as well (o, those gusts were *meant* to happen). From nowhere, as if a presence invoked. . . .

And more miraculous: out where the water lay deep—at least to the eye of a child, even an angry adolescent—a huge fish slashed at the surface with its tail, coursed the length of the pool, disappeared. Probably, he now surmises, a mirror carp. Great big trash fish. In that moment, though, so many years back, he thought of how a meteor would now and again ignite the August sky.

The burnished scales on the fish's flank were as exciting as such a fall, or as chips of mica had once been, when he found them glinting in dull quartz and prised them free.

The scales shocked back the forenoon's rays.

Or, there being this motif to the day, he remembered the swirl and gleam of the barber's pole in the village, which had signalled something both fearful and seductive when first he was led by it, and inside. . . .

He shies a twig into the beaver pond. He chuckles. He is wiser now, or ought at least to be. The chuckle fades to a wry smile.

How could he have known, back then in a fathomless rage, how thin his hair would go?

How his figure would thicken. . . .

Like a plot.

He could not have predicted these after-moments (which would wait

decades, and then come in a rush more sudden than the carp's) when all his thoughts and gestures seem as fuddled and feckless as the ones he'd performed on that ancient August morning.

You learn something, he supposes, from having children of your own, though he'd be hard put to explain just what. When his half-grown daughters and sons natter or fume, he needs—as he couldn't have guessed then—to pray for some animating reference. Some flash, some silvery flume.

As well offer up prayer, he occasionally judges, for the head of hair whose thickness had occasioned that old eruption.

But little miracles may happen.

He may study the pond for hours. He seeks to read something after all.

What, what?