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THEM DUCKS

P. K. PAGE

THERE WERE SO MANY SCRAPS LEFT OVER IN PAPER BAGS FROM LUNCHES IN HER ROOM-- CURRANT BUNS AS HARD AS CEMENT AND OLD DRY SLICES OF BOLOGNA-- THAT, ARMED WITH THEM, SHE WENT ONE DAY TO THE PARK TO FEED THE BIRDS.

ALMOST AS SOON AS SHE HAD ARRIVED AT THE LAKE THE DUCKS, WHICH HAD BEEN SWIMMING QUIETLY OR OCCASIONALLY STANDING ON THEIR HEADS IN THE WATER, SAW HER AND MADE FOR THE SHORE. THEIR SMOOTHLY, BEAUTIFULLY ELLIPTICAL BODIES-- BROWN, GREEN AND GREY, BURNT SIENNA AND BLACK AND WHITE-- WERE MAGNIFICENTLY TAILORED WITH A STRANGE NEAT LITTLE FEATHER TUCKED UNDER EACH WING, LIKE THE CORNER OF A POCKET HANDKERCHIEF EMERGING FROM A BREAST POCKET. THEY CLAMBERED ONTO THE GRASS, THEIR HEADS COCKED, THEIR IMPERTINENT BEADY EYES WAITING, WATCHING. THEIR BEAKS ALREADY OPEN FRAMED A TERRIBLE VACANCY, MUCH MORE THEN THE SMALL AREA OF SPACE ITSELF AND WHILE SHE FUMBLED WITH THE BAG AND LAUGHED AT THE WADDLING MOVEMENTS, THEY WERE ALREADY PECKING THE HEM OF HER SKIRT, THE TOE OF HER SHOE.

CIRCLING OVERHEAD AND APPROACHING BY WATER, THE GULLS SWOOPED AND SCREAMED. WHITE AND BISCUIT COLOURED, FIERCE AT CLOSE SIGHT, THEY FOUGHT THE DUCKS AND PUSHED THEM ASIDE.

SHE UNDID THE PAPER BAG, BROKE THE HARD BUNS AND TOSSED THE PIECES TO THE GROUND. THE GREEN HEADS USUALLY CAUGHT THEM BEFORE THEY LANDED. CLUMSY IN HER EXCITEMENT OVER THE WARM LIFE ABOUT HER SHE TRIED TO THROW THE FOOD TO THE PLAIN BROWN BIRDS WHO WERE SHYER AND TO ONE IN PARTICULAR WHICH HAD A LUMP ON ITS JAW. BUT SUDDENLY HER PITY FOR THIS BIRD DISSOLVED. IT STRUCK HER, WATCHING IT SWALLOW, THAT EVERYONE, PITYING IT, WOULD MAKE AN EXTRA EFFORT TO FEED IT, THAT IT WAS PROBABLY GROSSLY OVERFED. THAT THE WHOLE FLOCK SUFFERED BECAUSE OF IT AND THAT THE ONLY FAIR THING TO DO WAS TO IGNORE ITS DEFORMITY AND TREAT IT EQUALLY WITH THE OTHERS. BUT THE ACTION WAS SO AGAINST HER NATURAL INCLINATIONS THAT IT SET UP A CONFLICT. SHE FELT PERHAPS SHE OUGHT TO THINK MORE ABOUT IT, BUT THE PUSHING AND QUACKING AROUND HER GAVE HER NO TIME. AND SHE BECAME SO ENGROSSED IN HER ATTEMPTS TOWARD AN EVEN DISTRIBUTION AMONG THE DUCKS AND IN HER OCCASIONAL FEELINGS OF REPENTANCE ABOUT THE GULLS WHOM SHE RATHER NEGLECTED THAT SHE DIDN'T EVEN NOTICE THE BOY UNTIL HE SPOKE AT HER ELBOW.

"NOBODY NEVER FEEDS THEM DUCKS," HE SAID. "THEY COULD STARVE TO DEATH AND NOBODY'D FEED 'EM."

THE BOY WAS ABOUT NINE. HE HAD HIS HAIR CUT IN A FRINGE AND HIS EYES, NOT UNLIKE A DUCK'S, WERE VERY FAINTLY CROSSED. HE LOOKED UP AT HER WITH THE SAME INSOLENCE AS THE BIRDS.

"DO YOU COME HERE OFTEN?" SHE ASKED.

"I BEEN AROUND HERE SIX YEARS. I WATCH THEM DUCKS DAY AND NIGHT I WATCH THEM. EVERYONE'S AGAINST THEM DUCKS," HE SAID. "THEM ONES WITH THE GREEN HEADS ARE TAME DUCKS, THEM BROWN ONES ARE WILD, THEM OTHER ONES WITH THE LITTLE SHORT BLUE BEAKS IS JAPANESE DUCKS AND THAT ONE THERE," HE SAID, POINTING TO AN EVIDENTLY QUITE DIFFERENT SPECIES, "THAT ONE THERE'S A BABY JAPANESE DUCK."

SHE WAS FASCINATED BY THE BOY'S ASSURANCE AND WHAT SEEMED TO HER AN INTENSE INDIFFERENCE, ALL HIS CAREFULLY CARELESS GESTURES, THE EVEN AUTHORITATIVE TONE OF HIS VOICE. LISTENING SHE FORGOT THE FEEDING UNTIL THE SCREAMS OF THE GULLS BECAME SO LOUD SHE COULDN'T HEAR. SHE TOSSED A PIECE OF BOLOGNA AND THE BIRD THAT CAUGHT IT MADE OFF WITH IT IN A FRENZY. OTHERS SENSING IT HAD SOMETHING SPECIAL GAVE CHASE. THEIR BODIES COLLIDED AND BOUNCED APART LIKE RUBBER. THE OWNER OF THE MEAT, IN FEAR OF HAVING IT STOLEN, SWALLOWED IT WHOLE; IT WEDGED IN ITS THROAT SO IT COULDN'T CLOSE ITS BEAK. IT RAN ABOUT WILDLY, ALMOST SUFFOCATING, EMITTING A THIN MUFFLED QUACK AND STRAINING ITS NECK.

"OH, GO AND HAVE A DRINK TO GET IT DOWN," SHE SAID LAUGHING.

"HE'LL HAVE A DRINK," SAID THE BOY. "YOU SEE. THEM DUCKS AREN'T DUMB. NO SIR! BUT EVERYONE'S AGAINST THEM DUCKS. THEY HAVE TO BE SMART." AND AS THE BOY PREDICTED, THE DUCK IN QUESTION STILL QUACKING THROUGH BOLOGNA MADE FOR THE WATER AND DRANK. ITS BILL CLOSED AGAIN.

"WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH THIS ONE'S JAW?" SHE ASKED.

"CHEEK," HE CORRECTED. "THAT THERE DUCK GOT BIT BY A DOG. I TELL YOU, EVERYONE'S AGAINST THEM DUCKS, EVEN DOGS. AND PEOPLE COME HERE WITH SLING SHOTS, TOO, TO SHOOT THEM. I GOT FIFTY DOLLARS OFF OF A MAN ONE NIGHT. CAUGHT HIM SHOOTING AND TOOK HIM TO THE POLICE. THE POLICE GAVE ME FIFTY CENTS. FIFTY CENTS FOR EVERYONE I FIND. YOU SEE THAT THERE DUCK? HE GOT HIT WITH A SLING SHOT."

"BUT YOU SAID A DOG BIT HIM."

"MAYBE HE DID. D'YOU EXPECT ME TO BE ABLE TO TELL THEM ALL APART? SOME ARE SHOT; SOME ARE BIT."

THE BOY'S SHINY BLACK EYES LOOKED AT HER WITH A DISTANT CONTEMPT. SHE HANDED HIM A BUN FROM HER BAG, BUT ALTHOUGH THE BIRDS BUSTLED AND CRIED FOR FOOD HE PAID NO ATTENTION AND WENT ON WITH HIS CONVERSATION.

"EVEN THE GULLS ATTACK THEM DUCKS," HE SAID. "THEY DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT THEY'RE ATTACKING THEM FOR. THEY STEAL THEIR EGGS AND FLY DOWN AND BITE THEIR NECKS," HE SAID. HE BEGAN SUDDENLY TO GET AGITATED, MADE SMALL MOVEMENTS WITH HIS FEET, HUNCHED HIS SHOULDERS UP AND DOWN AS THOUGH TO WORK SOME OF THE EXCITEMENT OUT OF HIM BEFORE HE SPOKE. "AND THERE'S LOTS OF TINY, TINY, LITTLE SWORDFISH IN THEM WATERS," HE SAID. "TINY." HE MADE GESTURES WITH THE BUN AND HIS FREE HAND. "AND THEY'VE GOT LITTLE TINY SWORDS ON THEM AND THEY GO STRAIGHT FOR THEM DUCKS AND STICK THEIR SWORDS IN. SPEAR THEM," HE SAID, "RIGHT THROUGH."

HER BAG WAS EMPTY NOW BUT THE BIRDS STILL CLAMOURED ROUND HER. "GO ON, FEED THEM YOUR BUN," SHE SAID. THE BOY LOOKED AT IT AS IF HE'D SEEN IT FOR THE FIRST TIME AND THEN WITH COMPLETE DISINTEREST TRIED TO BREAK IT, FOUND IT TOO HARD AND THREW IT AS IF IT WAS A BASEBALL OUT INTO THE LAKE, NOT EVEN WATCHING TO SEE THE FLASHING WHITE FLIGHT OF THE GULLS WHO SWOOPED DOWN, FOUND IT TOO BIG TO CARRY, BEAT ABOUT IN THE WATER, SPLASHED WITH THEIR LARGE WINGS AND SCREAMED WITH ANNOYANCE AND FRUSTRATION.

VERY PROUD, THE BOY DREW HIMSELF UP. "IF A DOG WAS TO COME HERE," HE SAID, "THEM DUCKS WOULDN'T EVEN MOVE."

REMEMBERING THE PREVIOUS CONVERSATION SHE SAID, "THAT'S PRETTY STUPID OF THEM."

"STUPID!" HE WAS WONDERFULLY SCORNFUL. "STUPID! D'YOU KNOW WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF THEM DOGS TRIED ANYTHING? THEM DUCKS WOULD PECK THEIR EYES RIGHT OUT. AND IF THEY WAS UP IN A TREE THEY'D FLY RIGHT DOWN AND BITE THEIR BACKS. DOGS KNOW. THEM DUCKS AREN'T STUPID."

"I STICK AROUND HERE ALL THE TIME," THE BOY CONTINUED. "I KNOW EVERYTHING THAT GOES ON. THEM DUCKS WITH THE GREEN HEADS ARE TAME, THEM BROWN ONES ARE WILD AND THEY'RE ALL STARVING TO DEATH. EVERYONE'S AGAINST THEM DUCKS."

THE GIRL BEGAN TO MOVE OFF. AFTER SHE HAD GONE A LITTLE WAY SHE CALLED GOODBYE OVER HER SHOULDER. THE BOY SEEING HER DIRECTION SAID,"IF YOU'RE GOING UP TO THAT CAGE THERE'S A BIRD THERE THAT WHISTLES JINGLE BELLS. TAKE A LOOK AT HIM. HE'S A HUMMING BIRD BUT HE DON'T HUM. HE'D ATTACK THEM DUCKS TOO IF THEY LET HIM OUT."

CURIOUS THE GIRL WALKED TO THE CAGE. SITTING ON A BAR WAS A SCARLET AND GREEN PARROT THAT LOOKED EXACTLY LIKE GROUCHO MARX. SOMEWHERE, AT THE BACK OF HER HEAD, WAS AN IDEA SHE WANTED TO WORK OUT, BUT HOWEVER MUCH SHE DUG FOR IT, ATTEMPTED TO FREE IT, ALL SHE COULD THINK ABOUT WAS THE BOY.

ADOLESCENCE

P. K. PAGE

IN LOVE, THEY WORE THEMSELVES IN A GREEN EMBRACE.
A SILKEN RAIN FELL THROUGH THE SPRING UPON THEM.
IN THE PARK SHE FED THE SWANS AND HE
WHITTLED NERVOUSLY WITH HIS STRANGE HANDS.
AND WHITE WAS MIXED WITH ALL THEIR COLOURS
AS IF THEY DREW IT FROM THE FLOWERING TREES.

AT NIGHT HIS TWO-FINGER WHISTLE BROUGHT HER DOWN
THE WATERFALL STAIRS TO HIS SHY SMILE
WHICH, LIKE AN EDDY, TURNED HER ROUND AND ROUND
LAZILY AND SLOWLY SO HER WILL
WAS NOWHERE-- AS IN DREAMS THINGS ARE AND AREN'T.

WALKING ALONG THE AVENUES IN THE DARK
STREET LAMPS SANG LIKE SOPRANOS IN THEIR HEADS
WITH A VIOLENCE THEY NEVER UNDERSTOOD
AND ALL THEIR MOVEMENTS WHEN THEY WERE TOGETHER
HAD NO CONCLUSION.

ONLY LEANING INTO THE QUESTION HAD THEY MOTION:
AFTER THEY PARTED, WERE SAVAGE AND SWIFT AS GULLS;
ASKING AND ASKING THE HOSTILE EMPTINESS
THEY WERE AS SHARP AS PARTLY SCULPTURED STONE
AND ALL WHO WATCHED, FORGETTING, WERE AMAZED
TO SEE THEM FORM AND FADE BEFORE THEIR EYES.

AERIAL SURVEY

JAMES WREFORD

THIS HILL OUR HORIZON AND YET HIGH
HOPE, LIMIT AT ONCE AND FIND,
TAGS DOWN TO EARTH THE KITE OF SKY
THROWS UP THE GLIDER OF THE MIND,

PLUMB LINE, OR YET EXPLOSIVE, THIS
HILL SHALL IN ITS TURN RETIRE,
EVEN THE IRON OF IT IS
POWERLESS TO MOULD THE NEW DESIRE

WHICH SEES IT NOW PROPORTIONED BY
PEAKS THAT ON FAR AND PALE PEAKS FADE
WITHIN A WORLD MAPPED FROM THE EYE
OF AEROPLANE, NOT ALIDADE.

CHILDREN

(For P. K. P.)

PATRICK ANDERSON

THESE TO WHOM EVERYTHING HAPPENS BUT HISTORY
CONTINUALLY WASH WITH COLD WATER OF THEIR EYES
THE WORLD, SELECTING ITS PEBBLES
AND GLASS, WHICH LIE UNDER THEM BEST.

FORWARDED TO THE FUTURE ACROSS THIS TIME
THOUGH THEY BE LOST OR SPOILED BEFORE THEY EVER REACH
THAT DESTINATION, THEY STILL PARCEL SECRETS
AND ANGULAR LIKE PRESENTS CAUGHT IN MID-TRANSIT
THEY SCATTER CHRISTMAS AND TINSEL BETWEEN OUR HANDS.

PLAYING LOW DOWN, CLOSE TO THE FLOOR, BENEATH OUR ATTENTION,
ROAMING BY WAINSCOTES, SNOWED ON BY THEIR GAME,
THEY SETTLE ON DAYS AND HOURS FOR WHICH NO ONE HAS PUT IN A WORD
AND BUILD IN GAPS AND SILENCES CAUGHTS AND THROWNS.

AT NIGHT, PUT TO SLEEP, THEY FILL THE HOUSE
WITH THE SOUND OF THEIR EYELASHES. IF THEY RISE UP SCREAMING
IT IS A FULL-DRESS NIGHTMARE. THEY'D NEVER WAKE
ON ACCOUNT OF THE BEAUTIFUL DREAMS THEY DO NOT NEED.

AND SO ON OTHER LEVELS TO OUR CULT
THEY MAKE OUR LOVE SEEM STEEP AND DULLY WISE,
CONTINUALLY IGNORE THEIR COLOURED VILLAGE
AND BLOW THEIR WHISTLES ALMOST IN CONTEMPT OF OUR RETURNING EYES.

WATER POEM I

DENIS GIBLIN

CHANTING THE WORDS OF FANTASY HE WANDERED
AT THE CUSHIONED WALK OF A PALE LAKE
A LAKE WITHOUT SURFACE
WATER OF CONDENSED LIGHT.

HIS WORDS WANDERED AS HIS FEET
AS THE UNCONSCIOUS MOTION OF THE WATER.
HE STOOD IN NO WORLD AND TIME WAS TRANQUIL AND UNAIMED
HE WAS SUSPENDED WITH THE WATER
AND THE DEEP-SURFACED GRASS
IN HIS WEIGHTLESS WORLD OF LIGHT, WITHOUT COLOUR
TIME THE CHANGELESS CIRCLE.
HE LAUGHED AT THE FANTASY
OF HIS FLOATING FEELING.

MIME OF PERSONS LUDICROUSLY UNAWARE OF ONE ANOTHER

PROLOGUE TO A MASQUE OF THE CITY

DENIS GIBLIN

PICKED AND CHOSEN FROM THE SPECTRUM COMMUNITY, THE SHELVES OF MAN
THE FIRST OF THE RANK TO REPRESENT THE SEGMENT
PUT ON THE SLOPING WHITE EXAMINATION TABLE WITH THE BLACK STICKS FOR TREES
IN THEIR BLIND SKIING THEY DON'T KNOW THAT WE ARE ADDING THEM UP
TO THE HUGE TOTAL.

IN THEIR SKIING THEY CRYSTALLIZE A TYPE TOO EASILY
THE FLOURISHING POSTURED SHOWMAN THE DANGEROUS "WOLF"
THE QUIET WHITE-FACED OFFICE WORKER, UNPRETENTIOUS IN BROWN LEATHER
THE SHRILL GIRLS, FULL HAMS FUZZY IN GREEN OR MAROON WOOL
GRISLY MOUSTACHED BOSSES FAIRLY GOOD, WITH FLOUNDERING DOG.

OH WHY DO THEY WEAR STREAMING SASHES
AND TASSELS THOSE HOPELESS ONES. CAN'T THEY UNDERSTAND
THAT ONE IS A MUSCLE NARROW ON AN AXIS
A PEAR-LIKE MODERN SCULPTURE. BUT THEY GAZE AT THEIR SKIS TO SAY
IN ANXIOUS WONDER "THEY MOVE", BUT MOVE IN RIGID JERKS
AND THEIR LEGS ARE LIKE A PILE OF BLOCKS CARRIED AJAR
AND YOU WATCH FOR THE INEVITABLE FATALISTIC FALL. THE SUDDEN UNFREEZING
AND ITS SLOSHING COLLAPSE.

THE NOISELESS TRUMPETS OF THE MIND PROCLAIM
THE CONTESTANTS FOR FAVOURITE OF THE ADVENTUROUS ELIZABETHAN COURT
YOU CAN TELL THEM EVEN AS THEY WALK
BEFORE THEY PULL SILVER SATIN MUSCLES MOVING IN THIN OIL
CROUCH AS PANTHER AND AFTER THE QUICK-BEATED ENIGMA OF A MOMENT
THRUST LIKE A SPEAR EVENLY DRIVEN.

PORTRAIT OF A MARINE

PATRICK ANDERSON

ONE EVENING CAROLINE SAYS THAT A BOY IS COMING TO DINNER AND WILL GO WITH US TO THE PARTY AFTERWARD. I TAKE IN THAT HE IS A BOY, ONE OF CAROLINE'S OLD HIGH SCHOOL CROWD, I SUPPOSE, AND THAT HE IS NERVOUS (SHE TELLS ME THAT), AND RATHER LESSIMMEDIATELY THAT HE IS BACK WOUNDED FROM THE PACIFIC. I SEEM TO BE EXPECTING A NERVOUS BOY, MAYBE WITH A STAMMER AND GLASSES, WHO WILL COME TO DINNER AND GO ON WITH US AFTERWARDS TO THE PARTY. I AM A BIT DIM ABOUT THE DINNER PART. I HAVE TO BE REMINDED THAT HE IS COMING TO DINNER. WHEN I HEAR IT AGAIN, I AM GLAD, GLAD. FOR IT MEANS COMPANY; HE WILL BE INTERESTED.

I SKULK IN THE BREAKFAST NOOK WHEN HIS STEPS SOUND ON THE PORCH. BUT HE DOES NOT WAIT, HE IS IN THE DOORWAY, THE ROOM, HE IS EVERYWHERE. I AM SHAKING HIS HAND. HE IS CALLING THE RATHER FIERCE MR. Dreiband "POP"! "WELL, GEE, I'M GLAD TO SEE YOU, POP. I SAW YOU IN CHURCH, POP, BUT I JUST COULDN'T GET OVER TO SAY HELLO. I JUST COULDN'T MAKE IT. HOW'S THE GOOD OLD CHURCH COMING ALONG? GUESS AFTER THE WAR I'LL HAVE TO GET IN THERE AND PITCH. WHY, MRS. Dreiband , HOW'S MRS. Dreiband doing THESE DAYS? OUT ON SAIPAN I OFTEN SAID TO MYSELF I WISH I WAS BACK IN DEAR OLD Norristown EATING ONE OF MRS. Dreiband's DEELICIOUS PIES." HIS ARM IS ROUND CAROLINE'S WAIST, HE IS SLAPPING HER FATHER ON HIS INVIOLATE BACK AND MR. D. IS FLUSHED BUT GRINNING. THEN, AS THE FAMILY STARTS TO LAY THE TABLE, HE AND I ARE ALONE IN THE FRONT ROOM.

HE SITS DOWN AT THE PIANO, STRUMMING A TUNE. I SIT DOWN TOO AND STARE AT THE CHRISTMAS TREE AND WONDER WHAT ON EARTH TO SAY. I FOLD MY HANDS IN FRONT OF ME. THE TUNE GOES ON AND I WONDER HOW I CAN SIT BACK AND SAY NOTHING, BUT I DO. HE IGNORES ME COMPLETELY. I HADN'T EXPECTED THIS KIND OF NERVOUSNESS, THIS ALMOST INSULTING EASE AND FAMILIARITY WITH A FAMILY HE CAN SCARCELY HAVE KNOWN, EVEN BEFORE THE WAR. I DO NOT REALISE YET THAT HE IS ALSO SLIGHTLY DRUNK. BUT I AM ACUTELY AWARE OF HIS SLICK GOOD LOOKS, THE BAD-COMPLEXIONED CAJOLING KID'S FACE WITH ITS CONFIDENT AND RESTLESS CHARM, AND I AM HURT BY HIS BEING SO WINNING AND MASTERFUL WHERE I AM TONGUE-TIED AND RESERVED. HE REEKS OF THE WAR. NOT OF THE POLITICAL WAR OR EVEN THE STRATEGICAL WAR BUT, AND THIS IS WHAT IS FRIGHTENING, OF WAR ITSELF-- OF THE KIDS' AND AMATEURS' WAR WHICH IS ITS OWN TOTALITY AND, HAVING NO PROGRESSION OR MEANING, HAS SIMPLY SEIZED HIM AND CHANGED HIM AND DRIVEN HIM TO PENICILLIN THREE TIMES A WEEK AND DRINK AND RELIGION WHENEVER HE CAN GET IT. HE IS THE PRODUCT OF STARK EXPERIENCE, THE VICTIM OF CRUDE STATISTICAL OBJECTIVITY. THE NEUROTIC CONFLICT BETWEEN HIS PRIDE IN THE MARINES AND THE CONFIRMATION OF HIS MANHOOD WHICH THE WAR HAS BROUGHT ON THE ONE HAND, AND HIS EXPERIENCES OF DEATH AND TERROR ON THE OTHER, HAS GIVEN HIM HIS OBSESSION AND HIS BREAKNECK SENTIMENTAL MANNER WHICH RESULTS IN A FETISHISM TOWARDS EVERYTHING CONNECTED WITH HIS HOME-TOWN. THE TURKEY IS "THE GRANDEST OLD TURKEY YOU EVER SAW", THE GRANDFATHER CLOCK IN THE FRONT PARLOR "THE CUTEST DARNED OLD CLOCK IN THE WHOLE OF MORRISTOWN".

HE TALKS INCESSANTLY THROUGHOUT DINNER AND I FEEL PROGRESSIVELY MORE ISOLATED, CIVILIAN, SILENT AND BRITISH. WHEN I DO AT LAST MAKE A REMARK, INDICATING PURPOSELY SOMETHING OF MY CANADIAN BACKGROUND, HE ANSWERS ME WITH A "I GUESS YOU BRITISH ARE CHANGING A LOT NOW THAT WE AMERICANS ARE COMING OVER." HE MENTIONS THAT HE ONCE WON A PRIZE FOR A DESCRIPTIVE ALLEGORY. I PRICK UP MY EARS. YES, HE HAS AN AMBITION TO BE A WRITER-- AS WELL AS A PREACHER, OF WHICH WE HEAR A GOOD DEAL. BUT WHEN I TRY TO TAKE HIM UP ON THIS, HE IS OFF AGAIN ON HIS REMINISCENCES AND MR. D., WITH THE MIDDLE-AGED MAN'S CURIOSITY ABOUT WAR, IS GOING AFTER HIM, NERVOUSLY AVID FOR FACTS AND BLOOD.

AWKWARD IMPASSE. FOR NATURALLY I RISE TO HIS OCCASION. HE IS FROM THE FRONTS, WOUNDED, VIVID WITH AUTHENTICITY. EVEN HAD I NO GENUINE INTEREST, I SHOULD FEEL BOUND AS A CIVILIAN AND A WRITER TO BRING OUT MY WHOLE APPARATUS OF SYMPATHETIC OBSERVATION FOR HIM. THEN, TOO, OF THE PEOPLE IN THE ROOM I AM THE ONE MOST INTERESTED IN PSYCHIATRY. BEYOND THAT THERE ARE ALL THE OBSCURER SYMPATHIES CALLED OUT BY THE YOUNG AND BY THIS FACE AND PERSONALITY SO CHILDISH AND YET SO MASTERFUL, WHICH IS AT ONCE SOMETHING TO BE DOMINATED AND CHANGED, AND SOMETHING TO BE SUBMITTED TO. IF ONLY HE COULD REALISE THAT I UNDERSTOOD HIM, UNDERSTOOD HIM SO DESOLATINGLY WELL THAT I WOULD BE THE MASTER, NEEDED HIS UNDERSTANDING SO FERVENTLY THAT THE RELATIONSHIP WOULD REASSERT ITSELF ON HIS SIDE. BUT HE DOES NOT, PROBABLY THE LAST THING HE THINKS OF IS THAT, TO USE HIS OWN WORD, HE IS "PSYCHO", AND SO I FEEL A MOUNTING HOSTILITY TOWARDS THE YOUNG MARINE. IN OTHER CIRCUMSTANCES I SHOULD LOVE TO PUT HIM IN HIS PLACE. BUT OBVIOUSLY I CANNOT SNUB A MAN WHO IS TALKING ABOUT THE WAR.

HIS TALK IS GENUINE; IT MUST BE GENUINE. YET IT SOUNDS EXACTLY AS THOUGH IT CAME OUT OF THE MOVIES. IT IS FULL OF CORN, FROM THE "JAPS ARE NOT HUMAN" ANGLE TO THE LECHEROUS HARDSWEARING SERGEANT WHO INSISTS ON BEING READ TO FROM "THE BOOK" ON SUNDAYS AND THE "THERE ARE NO ATHEISTS IN THE TRENCHES" THEORY. BUT IT IS FASCINATING ENOUGH. ON THE PACIFIC ISLANDS THEY HUNT FOR SOUVENIRS, STEAL THEM, SHOOT FOR THEM. "THE MARINES WILL ALWAYS KILL THE JAP WITH THE BEST SOUVENIRS ON HIM FIRST. THEN LIKE AS NOT THEY'LL WRASTLE EACH OTHER AND FORGET ALL ABOUT THE JAPS. BOY, THEY'RE SOUVENIR CRAZY. I HAD SOME SWELL KIND OF JEWELS, WE CALL THEM CAT'S EYES, I'D PICKED UP ON THE BEACH. I SEWED 'EM UP IN MY PANTS BUT WHEN I LANDED IN HOSPITAL THEY WAS STOLEN. I WAS CRAZY NOT TO HIDE THEM REAL GOOD. SO I LOOKED AROUND AND GOT MYSELF A JAP FLAG. MOST EVERYTHING ELSE WAS LOCKED UP." AND WHAT DO THEY THINK ABOUT? "SOME GUYS SAY THEY'RE JUST CRAZY TO HEAR A KID CRYING. IT'S FUNNY WHAT ONE THINKS OF OUT THERE. I WANTED TO HEAR NOTHIN' MORE THAN THE RATTLE OF A GOOD OLD TROLLEY CAR... AND ORGAN MUSIC. I WANTED TO HEAR ORGAN MUSIC REAL BAD. SO WHEN WE LANDED IN SAN FRANCISCO A BUDDY AND I WENT STRAIGHT TO A LITTLE OLE CHURCH. THE PARSON WAS HAVING SOME KIND OF A MEETING TELLING A BUNCH OF GIRLS ABOUT WHERE THEIR FELLOWS WERE. BUT WHEN HE SAW US MARINES HE ASKED US TO COME UP FRONT AND WHERE WE WERE FROM AND WE TOLD HIM HOW WE'D LIKE TO HEAR REAL CHURCH MUSIC. SO THEY PLAYED THE ORGAN AND THEN IF THE PREACHER DIDN'T BREAK OUT THE COMMUNION GEAR AND WE ALL HAD COMMUNION... FRISCO IS A TERRIBLE PLACE FOR SPENDING YOUR MONEY. SOME OF THE GUYS MAKE OR LOSE AS MUCH AS TWO THOUSAND DOLLARS IN A BLACKJACK GAME ON BOARD SHIP. BUT THE GIRLS GET IT. I SPENT AS MUCH AS A HUNDRED AND FIFTY BUCKS ON A GIRL IN A SINGLE EVENING. JEWELRY AND CLOTHES. BOY, WHEN YOU FIRST SEE A WHITE GIRL IT'S FUNNY. WHEN THE NURSE CAME IN AT PEARL HARBOR THE WHOLE BUNCH OF US COULDN'T SAY A WORD FOR ABOUT FIFTEEN MINUTES. SHE WAS TOO BEAUTIFUL. YET THAT GIRL WAS THE HOMELIEST ONE IN THE LOT!"

THERE IS NOTHING IN HIS CONVERSATION ABOUT POLITICS OR EVEN THE OTHER WAR FRONTS: NOTHING ABOUT AMERICA ITSELF OR RUSSIA AND WHEN COMMUNISM IS MENTIONED HE SAYS, WITH A SUDDENLY MORE ELEGANT PHRASEOLOGY AND A KIND OF CONTEMPT, "NO CIVILISED PERSON WOULD EVER BECOME A COMMUNIST." BUT I MUSTN'T WRONG HIM. EVEN IF IT SEEMS TO CONTRADICT THE TONE AND CONTENT OF OTHER THINGS HE HAS SAID, HE WAS SOLID AND DEFINITE ABOUT GREECE. PERHAPS BECAUSE HIS ATTITUDE, BEING STATICALLY "AMERICAN" OR "AMERICAN-METHODIST-DEMOCRATIC", IS MOST SUSCEPTIBLE TO CRITICISM OF ANOTHER IMPERIALISM. "IF I THOUGHT WE WERE ONLY FIGHTING TO BE ABLE TO FOOL AROUND WITH OTHER FOLKS, I GUESS I'D GIVE UP!"

We drive over to the party. Movies are shown on a small toy machine. Mr. D. is anxious to have war ones but he is overruled by the girls and, surprisingly, the one small boy who is present. Then the marine hands round the photographs of which he is enormously proud. They were given him by a news photographer and carried home in a bandage and the point about them is that they are supposed to show the "real thing", the real explosive war. Actually they seemed to me less expressive than many others I have seen. Faces are never clear, and what is war without faces? There is a good deal of attention and explanation given to one snapshot of a man who has just been hit. Mr. D. is particularly interested. Also, are those corpses Japs or our boys? Japs, they bury them with a bulldozer. Ours rarely that way. Peggy says some of the shots would make good paintings. The marine agrees, but not with her choice, a group of men having themselves a "good old bath". In fact he smiles and that is the high point of my disliking him. I don't know whether it is because his smile is derisively male or just incomprehending: perhaps because it seems a betrayal of something essential in himself and his war.

He is talking about life on board ship. "It's funny not having any girls around and not even being allowed to pin 'em up on the bulkheads. The fellows get crazy about the ship's cat. One or other unit is always trying to corner her and lock her up in their quarters. You see great husky guys trailing up and down with a bit of paper tied on a string. Then she disappears and some other bunch have got her. It makes the boys mad. When there's an alert you'll always see someone popping up through the hatchway with the cat in his arms. On anti-aircraft watch two of the men can doze off and they like to have her with them so she walks across their faces and keeps them half awake. Those nights are real beautiful. The moonlight and the Southern Cross. Gosh, if one had a girl."

If one had a girl, a rye highball, a game of blackjack, a reading from the Book, organ music, the free enterprise of democracy, instead of cats and fuzzy-wuzzies and one's souvenirs stolen and the mortars moaning in the jungle and fungus growths and the Jap prisoners with "open cancers". Ice-cream fights rice. Television attacks feudalism. And this poor kid, whose mother died while he was away, putting his letters strangely unopened under her pillow, and whose young sister married to his distraction the cruel male sex, goes on and on with his nervous bonhomous recital. But two things unmentioned: the meaning of the war, and fear.

I catch him by the punchbowl and platters of turkey and candy, talking restlessly to a number of people of whom I, the ignored, am almost ashamed to become one.

"I wonder why my mom never opened my letters?" he asks. "She'd let no one touch them. Put them under her pillow unopened..." For once I answer. "Perhaps because they would make her too sad."

Soon afterwards the party breaks up. I shake his hand and he says, "So long, feller." Kitten from the blood-bath: defender of thousands of miles of lighted Christmas trees. The word "feller" lays on me a rough and frighteningly abstract and soldierly hand. But the marine is mine now, as I have put him down here, with sympathy and revenge.