

One Old, One Young

Jeffrey N. Johnson

On the frayed bench seat of the rust-toned pickup
shit-stained by cattle en route to the slaughterhouse.
Little more than silence between them, this father
and son among forest and fields. The boy is soft-
skinned and pale, jeans ripped at the knee, fine hair
flailing his eyes. The father is leathered and burnt,
sweat-stained cap hiding his brow. He reaches over
and grasps the boy through the hole in his jeans,
"Gotcha!" he says and mashes the pedal. The boy
grins and squirms. The V8 gurgles up the hill.

But the child longs for more than this, some bit of guidance
beyond playful indulgence. It's all work and chores,
hay and feed, plow and till, plant and harvest. Vacation
for others may be a trip to the shore, but they would
spend the week rebuilding the fence on the north perimeter.
Tell me something of the world, the boy laments in the
silence of the cab. What have you seen? Why is this road
here? Who built it and where were they going? What lies
over the hill we never cross? What is the best way to meet
a girl, and while we're at it, what is the nature of man?

Unknown to the father are the wants of the son, so he is
content to pass the time in labor. Unknown to the son
was how his father had fought to come home and do this very
simple thing—to ride in a truck and squeeze his son's knee

on a day as green as clover. But God, how he paid for his survival! He was one of only a few of an entire platoon trucked out of action that day, his misshapen frame bouncing on the bench on a bombed out road, uniform ground with mud and human remains, his buddies dead or maimed, boxed or shattered and sent home in one foul way or another.

And all those pitiful souls in the camps. He'd once put down a dog in that kind of shape, saying a prayer and centering a .22 caliber to the back of its head, but no bone-thin dog ever looked him in the eyes and moaned in a Slavic accent, "Please help me." Words didn't mean much after that, certainly less than action after the action he had seen. He was now content to spend his weekends on the farm and watch the cows graze and grow and know they would one day fill his children's bellies.

I was that boy and I recall now a series of coaster hills breaking out of the forest into a slight valley bottom where golden hay was baled and the water hole by the tracks once cleansed my father and the rest of the youth in this town. But the young are now old and the old have now passed, and I want to reach out to myself and grab him by the arm, Stand down now boy and wizen! Stand down and pay heed to your elder on the bench of the truck and celebrate the herd, for those who go to the slaughter shall not die in vain.

Jeffrey N. Johnson's writing has appeared in *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Gargoyle*, *South Carolina Review*, and *Wisconsin Review*. He was awarded the Andrew Lytle Fiction Prize by *The Sewanee Review*, and an Ippy Award for his story collection, *OTHER FINE GIFTS*. His father served in the 35th Infantry Division under General Patton, and his mother served in the United States Marine Corps.