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Coming as the Sound of Words

by Joseph M. Ditta

The three boys dashed along the path, the sun mottling their pale bodies through the trees, making them flash and fade, until they neared the bank of the pond. Then they were fully in the sun. Stark, all three leaped into the icy, clear water, hitting knees first. They sank and spluttered up, shouting and laughing. The water was so cold they scrambled onto the bank again almost immediately, rolling over the tall grass, laughing and shouting. Then one of them got up and ran back along the path to where they left their clothes and gear. The others crept to their feet and followed, running, still laughing, their teeth chattering, pushing one another. When they were dressed again, they trod the path back to the pond and then got serious, walking its perimeter, looking for a place to set up camp.

They were the three Js, as their parents called them—Joel, James, and John—carefree, bone skinny, and recently released from school. What made them inseparable was their shared ambitionlessness and social inferiority. Each reinforced the other in laziness, however, and each came to the others' defense against their parents' accusations of good-for-nothingness. In their boniness they were awkward and shy, and when they were separated, they suffered more than usual from the jeers of the unkind, especially in school.

They were tramping the bank of a spring-fed pool called Duck Pond in the rolling Appalachian highlands upstate New York. Their village, New Damascus, was nestled in the crotch where two mountains joined. It was a tiny village with only one road, the main east-west county road, which was the only contact the villagers had with the wider world, and which was called Main Street for the half-mile stretch through what the people euphemistically referred to as their "business district."

Duck Pond was a good-sized body of water for those heavily forested hills, being almost ten acres in surface, though that surface meandered and shot fingers here and there into the trees as though the pond were probing for something it lost in the long-ago glacial melt. A few very narrow run-off springs trickled away, carrying leaves and motes of forest debris, bubbling over stones so rounded by time and the caress of water as to be perfect spheres.

One such finger offered the boys a challenge—at its end the ground was marshy and covered with plants with large heart-shaped and kidney-shaped leaves, ferns still unfurling, and roots of small and midsize hemlocks and larch. Across the narrow finger of water lay a fallen pine, its branches long since denuded and the bark along most of its trunk weathered away. They decided to scramble across on the tree, but carrying their gear on their backs made them clumsy, and they all tumbled together with a shout into the knee-deep water.

They waded out and slogged back to the main body of the pond where they built a fire to dry their boots and jeans. The trees nearby were thinned by a great black walnut whose limbs dominated the space around, creating a clearing large enough to pitch their tent. They decided to look no further and lined their boots beside the fire and kept their legs near as they could stand

the heat.

They felt lazy and fine and had the whole day ahead to fish and explore, the evening to sit around the fire and, hopefully, cook some fish, and most of the next day before having to trek out and head home.

Not far from Duck Pond was the forest home of an eccentric old man named Patrick Owens. About a half hour tramp in the other direction, along the path the three boys had run down to leap into the pond, was his old white-faded farm house, whose roof was shaded by an ancient oak; around it huddled a lofty barn, a few rickety apple bins, a couple of mangy, gray old dogs, numerous cats, two goats and a ram, a worn old Ford pickup of 1950s vintage, a once yellow and green John Deere tractor from the same era, a brindled cow, chickens, ducks, geese, one ancient chestnut mare, a privy, and a huge mound of stones wrestled out of the fields and orchard with great labor when the old man was young and had a family and a future to establish—all surrounded by forest and visited by a dirt road that wound up the hillside through the trees from the small village of New Damascus.

The boys knew of the old man, of course, and of his proximity. What they didn't know was that the old man knew of them. Very little transpired in his neighborhood he didn't know about. People, especially young people, liked to camp at the pond, as well they may—it was perfect for a weekend in the woods: clean, pure water, good fishing, dense forest, easy access, and, because of the altitude and the open sky above Duck Pond, one of the finest views of the night sky the forest wilderness had to offer. When campers explored the area, it was in his own best interests to look after his own.

Joel, James, and John tumbled off the tree aslant with a great shout, and the water boiled in their laughing horse-play. Not more than ten feet away, standing beside a tree in his gray bib overalls and straw hat, Patrick Owens watched them, shaking his head. He stood still, and, as he expected, they never noticed. Soon they had tramped off, but he could hear where they built their fire. “Good,” he said to himself, “at least I know where they'll be, for now.” He left no trace of his having been there, and the boys were none the wiser. They sat back and lazed, hands behind their heads, talking about whether they should try fishing first, exploring, or doing something else.

“What else is there to do?” James said, “Don't go looking for work, guys; there's plenty of time for that. I plan to doze at the bank, my fishing rod in my hands.”

The others laughed. “Hell, doze on a day like this? I'm gonna hike in the woods. Joel's coming with me. You fish, James.”

“I haven't made up my mind what I'm gonna do. Maybe I'll try drying first,” Joel said.

Whereupon, they all three lapsed into silence, staring at the few drifting clouds. As the fire began to settle into embers and cool air return to their wet jeans, John got up and fetched his hatchet to chop some more dead wood from the forest.

“We should have built the fire closer to the pond so we could fish and dry at the same time,” he said, returning with his arms full.

“Hell with drying,” James said.

He got up and pulled his tackle out of his pack. “We should pitch the tent, too. The sooner we set up the sooner we can relax.”

The fire flaring again, they all got busy. The tent sprang up and in quick order their sleeping bags were unrolled and laid out on the tent floor, their food tied up to a limb of the walnut, a pot and pan, fishing rods and tackle boxes laid out beside the fire, and a hole dug for a latrine. They put more wood on the fire. Joel, always the first to think of food, looked longingly at the bag hanging from the walnut. Lunch time was approaching and he was hungry, so he proposed they sit beside the fire long enough to down a sandwich and then take off to explore.

There was a place not far from the pond where a huge slant of granite punched up from the forest floor, making a sort of castle heights upon which they could climb and on top of which the forest had thrown a crown of spruce and hemlock. From those trees one could look out upon the mountainside and the forest canopy. Joel and John planned to make for this place, James electing to stay behind and fish.

He walked the bank for an hour, trying first the shaded areas close in for bass with his frog rig. Carefully dropping the small life-like bright-green thing just off the bank ten or twelve feet in front of him, he had two strikes and bagged them both. Finding his way blocked now by one of the pond’s long probing fingers which, like the one they crossed earlier in the day, shallowed into marsh and heavy brush, he decided to replace the frog with a fly and try for trout, returning the way he had come. Fishing was his one true passion. He knew the afternoon was not the best time to fish and felt extremely lucky to have bagged the two bass. Early evening was the time, when the sun fell behind the mountain, shading the whole pond at once. Then, the sky still bright blue, the fish would be feeding fine and he’d catch enough to fill all their bellies. So, after half a dozen unsuccessful casts, he quit, taking his pole apart and snapping it, along with the tackle box, securely to the canvas catch bag, which he reslung over his shoulder. In ten minutes he was back in camp.

He tended to the fish, filleting them and tossing the carcasses into the woods. He looked at the pan sitting in the grass beside the fire. “Should I?” He wasn’t hungry. He put the four fillets in a ziplock bag and dropped the bag over the bank into the cold water. “That’ll keep ‘em till tonight,” he thought.

Looking around at the tent and the pond, he wondered if he shouldn’t try to find John and Joel. He entered the woods and walked in the direction they had taken, stopping once in a while to listen. But the still light and silence of the woods lured him elsewhere, and after an hour of directionless wandering, he came out of the trees where the ground leveled, at the edge of one of Patrick Owen’s fields. It was not a large field; having to be wrested from a grudging forest, the old man’s plowed fields were all meager. This field, however, was divided into sections, each of which was devoted to a different vegetable—cabbage, beets, carrots, snap beans, and potatoes. Looking over the field, he saw where he could walk between the sections to cross to the compound on the other side. Away to the east was the orchard, to the west, another field, devoted to corn. He could see the goats and ram, the cow, and the horse grazing in a small fenced pasture, but there was no sign of the old man. He had a reputation in New Damascus for being unsocial, coming to town only when he needed to. And when he did come, he did his business,

said his thank yous, and returned to his farm.

The old man, however, was in the barn, tending to his cider press, unalerted by his sleeping dogs to the presence of a stranger on his place. When James reached the compound, one of the dogs opened its eyes and, finding a stranger approaching, instead of leaping up barking, shrunk away in whining dismay, waking its companion. James held out a hand, and the two old dogs approached, tails wagging, and sniffed and sat on their haunches, offering their heads to be patted, and James obliged.

“Where’s the old man?” he said calmly to the animals.

At the sound of James’ voice, the old man stood up, stiff, bristling, and angry, thinking it the height of brazenness that those boys should intrude upon him. He looked out the window of the barn and saw James walking toward the open doors. He stayed where he was, concealed by the stall where he kept the cow in winter. James entered and the old man watched him silently. He saw the boy cross to where he kept his supply of kerosene for his evening lamplight. Outside, on the east side of the barn, were two fifty-five gallon drums on their sides, resting in cradles the old man had built from scraps of iron scavenged in town. Inside, where the boy had gone, was an old book case, and on its shelves were whiskey and brandy bottles, each one a full measure of kerosene for one of his lamps. The old man saw James reach up and snatch one of these bottles, then look around guiltily. In a moment, the boy was gone. The old man scratched his head and said, “Damn!” He waited a few moments, then left the barn himself. He saw the boy crossing the field and, still scratching his head, watched him disappear into the woods.

“Now, what d’ya think a that, Patrick, old man?” he said to himself. He turned back to the barn, a sense of sinking in his gut, for he felt no good would come of the boy’s pilfering. What did he think he was going to do with that kerosene? Set the woods afire? Shaking his head, he went back to work on the press. But he couldn’t get the incident out of his head. He kept seeing the boy snatch the bottle and look around guiltily, and always, when he reimagined the moment, he had that feeling. After a while, it hit him. The boy must have thought he was stealing brandy! Why else that thieving, sly, guilty look? He laughed. “Wal,” he thought, “they’re in for a saprise when they uncork that bottle. Ha!” he laughed. “That’ll teach ‘em.” But the moment wouldn’t leave him. What if they drink that stuff? Could they be that stupid? He rose and leaned on the press, thinking, “Did they know what ker’sene wuz? Did they know what brandy wuz? What ef?”

James made his way back to the pond, holding the bottle like a prize won at the county fair. It had been more than an hour since he wandered off, and he hoped the others had returned so he could tell the story of how he raided the old man’s barn. He crossed the path and approached the pond from the other side of the narrow finger across which the pine slanted. Spotting the walnut, he broke out of the trees just behind the tent. He could hear Joel and John talking and saw them sitting by the rebuilt fire, rummaging through their tackle boxes and fixing their lines. He snuck up with a shout and the two leaped and laughed, throwing kindling at him they had collected for the fire.

“Look what I got,” he said excitedly, holding up the bottle.

“What the hell is that?” Joel shouted.

“Fire water,” John said.

“Where? How?” they both exclaimed, leaping to their knees.

James told the story, and they responded with appropriate exclamations, “No, shit! Damn, man! The dogs just licked your fingers?” James’ description of the hoard of booze the old man had in his barn left them agape with wonder.

“So, the old man’s an alchy, hey?”

“What else does he have to do?”

“Up here all alone.”

“No shit, you just walked in and took it?”

“Why’d you take only one?”

“Wanna go back for more? We could hide it up here and come back when we want to get soused.”

“Nah, he’s sure to be around. He’d catch us and. . .”

They fell silent, filling the hiatus with images of what the unsociable old man would do to them. Cringing, they decided to accept what fortune had granted and not push their luck.

“Let’s get some fishing in,” James said, stowing the bottle in the tent. “Later, we’ll have dinner, and then toast the gods for a beautiful day and a better night.”

“Yea, man, a night of many moons,” Joel responded. Finishing with his rod, he strode to the bank, baited the hook with a grub gathered from the forest floor, cast out his line, and sat down in the grass. Soon, he was joined by the others. Instead of sitting with his friends, however, James walked the bank, casting for trout, and later put the frog back on and hit a few more bass. They were all three lucky, reeling in between them enough bullheads, sunnies, bass, and trout to make a feast.

It gets dark faster in the mountains than anywhere else, the darkness coming with a suddenness that can catch you unprepared if you don’t live there. The boys were prepared. They kept the fire going, and when the shadows deepened, they stowed away their tackle and rods and began to fillet the catch. They were skillful and quick and in no time produced a pan of floured and seasoned fillets. This they put on the fire. Then they raided the food bag, long ago retrieved from the walnut limb, and added bread rolls, tomatoes, pickles, onion slices, potato chips, and condiments of various sorts to their meal. They feasted.

Sitting cross-legged beside the fire, stars already pebbling the sky, James solemnly raised the bottle to the stars and made a ceremonious, mock prayer to “all the gods who care about guys camping in the forests of the world.” Joel and John bowed their heads, more than half meaning the prayer to persuade the gods to allow them to have an evening of serious merry-making. Whereupon, James, unscrewing the cap, tipped back and took a

slug. It was a mighty slug, meant to start his eyes popping and multiply his perception of the stars. He sat upright, swallowing, gulp after gulp, then, getting a breath of air, sniffed at the bottle's rim and held the bottle in front of him, looking at its label in the firelight.

"Man," he said, "that's smooth brandy."

"Gimme the bottle, James, let me have it!" John demanded.

"It don't smell so good, though," James said, passing the bottle to John, who took it, tossed back his head, and gulped in the same heroic manner as James.

"God," he said, "smooth ain't the word for it. It goes down like gas." Wiping his mouth, he passed the bottle to Joel, who sniffed it cautiously.

"I don't like the smell of it," he complained. "It doesn't smell like any booze I ever smelled before."

"You a boozer, Joel?" John said.

"When was the last time you had brandy?" James said.

"I never had any," Joel confessed.

"Drink up and we'll sing to the moon," James urged.

He put the bottle to his lips, began to raise it, but stopped before any touched his mouth.

"I don't know, guys. I think this isn't booze. It doesn't smell like any booze I ever smelled."

"Where have you been sniffing booze, Joel?" John said. They both laughed at their reluctant friend, urging him to get even with them or get behind.

But Joel wouldn't sip the stuff, insisting it wasn't booze. They began to talk about what it might be if it wasn't booze. Pesticide? Solvent? The alarming thought that they had drunk something they didn't know made James and John become nervous, and when the stars stayed looking like stars and the only change they could detect was in their own confidence, they began to imagine symptoms: bellyache, nausea, headache, blindness. James got the sickest, after they all became convinced it wasn't brandy, and fell on his back with a moan. He was really sick, but worse, he was sick scared. He was certain he was dying.

"What're we gonna do?" he moaned over and over.

John moaned beside him. He, too, was lying on his back. They were helpless. Joel tossed the bottle into the fire, which flared and raged with a suddenness that terrified him. He pulled James and John to a safe distance, and neither of them seemed to be aware of what had happened. His terror multiplied. Convinced his friends were dying and not knowing what to do, he ran around the fire, shouting, "What'm I gonna do? What'm I gonna do?" starting to cry. Wiping tears from his cheeks with the palms of his hands,

standing beside his friends, he considered what he should do. But he was confused and divided about any course of action. He knew he needed to get help, but that would take forever, and they would be dead before the help came. But he didn't know what to do to help them himself. He was wiping the tears away when he saw a shadowed figure emerge from the trees and come towards him with speed and deliberation. With a thrill of fear, he thought the gods to whom they had prayed a few moments ago had come to claim their guilty lives.

"Mek 'em throw up," the shadowed figure said.

"What?" Joel asked, astonished.

"Ya boys're dumber than my goats," the man said.

"Mr. Owens?" Joel said, relieved in ten different ways. "They've been poisoned. What am I gonna do? What can we do," he said hopefully.

"Mek 'em throw up. They'll be all right arter that. Come on and help."

He got on one knee beside the moaning boy he recognized as the thief, lifted him to a sitting position and, telling him to shut up, braced him with his knee, forced open his mouth, and stuck his finger in, pushing until the boy began to heave. Then he did it again, and again, and again.

"Thar," the old man said, "Ya'll live, much to the world's misfortune."

Then he went to work on the other. He gave them water from the pond, fresh and icy cold, and they began to shiver and revive.

"Ya warn't goin ta die," he told them. "Cept in y'r own heads. But ya would've bin more put out than y've ever bin before, I don't doubt."

"You came just in time," Joel said. "I didn't know what to do. I was going to hike out to get help."

"I wouldn't've let ya du that."

"Wouldn't have let me?"

"Not'n the dark. Ya'd've gotten lost, sartin, or worse. And I'd've hev ta gone arter ya."

"But. . ."

"Yes. But. I've bin spyin on ya, ya see. I've bin ere for an hour, at least, waitin ta see if ya were fool enough ta do what I thought ya might."

"You watched? You didn't stop them? What. . .Why on earth. . .?"

"It wuz ker'sene. Ya dunno what that is, now, do ya? Ah, wal. Why should ya? 'Don't smell so good,'" he chuckled at James. "I should wonder."

The smell of the vomit was making the two boys sick all over again, so they all

left the fireside and went beside the tent. But it was not much better there.

“Ya got a shov’l?” the old man asked. “Better ta bury that stuff. Or ya can come ta my place for the night. May be better if ya did. I can keep an eye on ya that way. Better ya come,” he urged. “The wauk’ll du ya good.”

Along the way, Joel, walking beside the old man, asked again why he let them drink the kerosene, knowing what would happen.

“The object,” he replied, “wuz to let some daylight into ‘em, so’d they’d know a few things.”

It was a memorable walk. The forest was very dark and they couldn’t see the path. Without the old man, they would have gotten lost. His voice was both a comfort and a guide.

“I knew by the look’n his face what’e thought’e stole from my barn. I said ta myself, ‘They’re goin ta hev a time of it out thar. I’ll jest let ‘em du what they will and see what comes.’ I’m glad to see one of ya, anyway, has some sense. That wuz a saprise, a good one, for sure.”

“You shouldn’t have let them,” Joel said, falling behind the old man on the path, and, flattered by the compliment, thought about how their camping weekend had been spoiled and about whether James and John would want to do anything tomorrow, feeling sick as they do.

“Wal,” the old man’s voice intoned, floating bodiless in the darkness ahead, “people ain’t so different from everthin else, ya know. Bushes and trees, for example. Take bushes and trees. They send out ruuts and branches at the same time, needin ta be siled one way in order to get more life t’other, jest like boys. It’s all necess’ry.”

They followed, listening, concentrating on the voice, comforted and afraid at the same time, afraid of getting separated from the voice and from each other. So the ones behind kept reaching out to touch the ones ahead, and Joel kept his senses tuned to the old man, almost feeling his heat on the path in front of him. And to keep them true behind him, the old man continued to talk, more in reverie to himself than explicitly to the boys:

“Course, I’m old and y’re young. In th’order of things, ya pay no heed ta people like me, and people like me, why, we pay no heed ta people like you. It didn’t always us’d ta be like that. But thar’s nothin wrong with it. It’s the way things are, and neither me nor you is goin ta change it. Not in my time. But Time, think of Time as ya wauk in the darkness. I know more ‘bout Time than you do, y’r not bein acquainted with it yet. But tonight ya had a glimpse of Time. I want ta tell ‘bout it, so ya don’t forget, but mostly so ya know.”

His voice drifted through the darkness, and they were warmed, as though it radiated a life-substance that renewed them. John in the rear heard it as intimately as Joel in front, and, reaching out to James’ shoulder, touched him for surety. And James did the same to Joel. And Joel reached into the spaces vacated in front of him by the old man and felt his just-departed presence. And in this manner the old man’s words, washing, as all uttered words do, into the eternal well of lost things, came forward again to walk behind him.

“Listen ta the frogs,” he said. “The croakin and the trillin. That ar sound is old, older than all human things.”

They listened, as the old man told them, and it seemed that they heard frogs for the first time.

“Older that sound is, even, than the first creturs. It’s the voice of the slime, out of which the first animals crept into the first dawn. And yet, Time is es thin es the cold streamlets that wander from the pond back thar. It’s this old Time that crept up in you and made ya steal that bottle of ker’sene and drink from it; and when ya hed drunk and thought ya were pizened, it’uz the thin Time ya were frightened by. The old Time lives in us. But we live in the thin Time. When we’re least arselves, we’re most the old Time. See what happened when ya let him tetch ya today? But the thin Time. That’s what we love in the night sky; it’s what we feel when we see the early sun on the leaves of trees; it’s what ya felt when ya fell off’n the tree trunk into the wahter this mornin. This time has nothin ta du with us, and most people don’t know anythin ’bout it.”

His voice guided them and they followed, silent, listening, alert, throwing images into their minds as they walked invisibly among the things of the forest: the roots of trees and the thinness of water, frogs with distended pouches trilling through the night, dark alien beings with human-like arms and legs moving in their own bodies.

The old man continued his reverie, talking about things the boys didn’t understand. But the words were like lights, and as they listened they lost all sense of time, so that when they came out of the woods, all three were surprised. Under the starry night they could see the big barn and the farm yard and the old house under the tall oak. The old man led them straight across the field. When they came near the house, the arthritic dogs rose and made a feeble ruckus, as much to express gladness for the old man’s return as to sound alarms for the unprecedented number of strangers, and, when the little group of people came close, they wagged their tails and whined and sniffed at extended hands.

Just as the old man said, the walk invigorated them. But the two who drank the kerosene had awful stomach aches, as much because they had emptied themselves as because of what they drank. Reeling from weakness, they let the old man guide them into the house. Joel, alert and filled with caution and suspicion, came up the steps and through the door last, sniffing the smells of the old man’s house. He didn’t feel comfortable about going inside. It was dark and, having no electric lights, they had to wait for the old man to light a lamp.

But the kitchen was a typical farmhouse kitchen—only ancient, as the house itself was ancient. It had an old wood-burning stove, no refrigerator, no microwave, no familiar appliances the sight of which would have given him comfort. He stood in the doorway, watching the old man in the lamplight busy himself at the stove. When he had a fire going, he closed the door and checked the flue on the large black stovepipe running up the wall. Then he lighted another lamp and went into the basement through a door next to the stove and came up with a cheese and an armful of small red apples. James and John were sitting at the table, and the old man put small plates in front of them and cut them each a wedge of cheese and peeled and sliced a couple of apples each. Then he fetched a covered pitcher from the basement and

poured them each a glass of milk.

“What du ya stand in the door for?” the old man asked Joel. “Y’ain’t hungry like y’r friends, but ya can sit,” he said, making a gesture at a chair. But when Joel hesitated, he turned his back and went to the stove, opened the door, and stoked the fire, adding another piece of wood. He put the kettle on the burner then and fetched himself a cup. “Would ya like a cup of coffee?” he asked Joel. “Or perhaps tea?”

Joel came into the kitchen cautiously, like a fish nosing a piece of bait, looking like he’d back out again as soon as he felt threatened. The old man scratched his head.

“Y’r two friends ain’t afraid,” he said, looking at them eat with a big smile. “Perhaps because they thought themselves lost only a little while ago, and no fright quite equals that’un. Ya’d better come and sit down, now, and not keep yaself in fear. Ya do more ha’m to yaself than any I could do, were I a mind.”

“I’m not afraid,” Joel said.

“Course not. Come and sit.”

He got up then and opened a cupboard and took down a jar of instant coffee.

“The wahter’ll be hot in a minute. Want some?” he asked Joel.

But the boy only shook his head.

“Why do you live here all alone,” he screwed himself up to ask, unable to keep the tone of suspicion out of his voice, “so far away from anyone in New Damascus?”

“What’s so good ’bout livin in New Damascus?” the old man replied.

“Neighbors,” James said.

“Yea, other people,” John said.

“People in New Damascus say you’re a hermit,” James threw in, getting bold once the subject had been opened.

“‘Hermit’ isn’t all they say,” Joel said. “They say you’re eccentric and weird.”

“And antisocial!” John threw out with a smile, as though he were belying the charge in the act of voicing it.

“I guess I’m all those things, and more,” the old man admitted with a smile, looking at each of them in turn. “But who’s ta say that’s bad? I don’t figur y’re any less weird than me,” he said to James, “stealin ker’sene and drinkin it.”

James hung his head in shame, and John looked at him with a grin.

“We’re weird. Everybody says that about us. We’re used to it,” John

bragged.

“Who says that 'bout you?” the old man asked disbelievingly.

“Everybody,” John insisted. “In school, mostly. But even our families say we're weird. We're the weird Js.”

“Why *do* you live here alone?” Joel asked again.

“I prefer it,” the old man said. Silence filled the lamplit kitchen, and through the open windows, sounds of the night-time forest entered. The three boys felt chilled, in spite of the stove, and rubbed their arms, and knew for a fleeting moment the meaning of the distance between themselves in that kitchen and the rest of the world.

“But why?” James asked with all the puzzlement of youth discovering a mystery.

“Don't you like people?” John added, “and electricity? In New Damascus, you could have everything and wouldn't. . .”

“Wouldn't hev ta live without?” the old man finished his question. “I like people, wal enough,” he said.

He got up and poured hot water into his cup and stirred in the instant coffee. Then he sat again and continued.

“T'other day I wauked by Duck Pond. I wauk all through these ere woods, all seasons. Ta someone like you, I guess, the woods and the pond are always pooty much the same. To me, no two wauks're ever the same. No two days're ever alike, nor are any two years. I seed a fox, heard him first, makin a ruckus like a troop of soldiers trampin through the forest. So I stopped and stood beside a tree ta watch him. He led me to the pond.

“A crow had been workin on a turkle thar, had it on its back and wuz tearing into its innards through the hind legs when the fox broke through the trees. The crow took off, cawing angrily at being disturbed, and the fox nosed up and investigated but couldn't get at the turkle all clamped up. He sniffed and pawed and mouthed the shell, and finally went on his way. I came up and looked at the cretur, its head lollin, tryin to right itself.

“I seed blood and bits of intrails in the grass and seed where the crow had bin workin a meal outta that shell. Through the hole of one hind leg I could see light from t'other. A step away, the fox left its droppins before runnin on. I could see whole huckleberries in it and bits of fur and bone and the curved tooth of a mouse. I kneeled at the bank and rinsed my face and took a long drink.

“That crow was hangin 'bout, up in the top branches of an oak, watchin and waitin for me ta leave ta go back t'is interrupted meal. These're the things that happen in the thin Time that rushes by without most people knowin. On a sunny day in mid summer, lookin up under the trees, ya can see through the leaves that've hed their undersides eat'n 'way by the caterpillars. Why, the mother of God herself couldn't mek lace like that.”

The old man stopped talking and in the soft glow of the two lamps the boys were quiet. James and John had drained their glasses of the milk and nibbled the last of the cheese and apple slices. Their skepticism about living as the old man did was silenced for the moment by the images of the crow and the turtle, which struck all of them as they listened to the old man as horrible. They had shared glances with each other, and now the old man had stopped, Joel spoke what was on their minds.

“Why didn’t you turn that turtle over and save him? I would have saved him.”

Instead of defending himself, the old man, taking the question seriously, replied, “How bootiful everthin is! Think of it, now. What do ya like most ’bout goin ta the pond?”

“Being in the woods, up here.”

“Fishing in the pond.”

“I like being with them.”

“Oh,” the old man laughed. “Ya like y’r friends. But that’s pa’t of it, too, pa’t of what meks it all come out. Maybe even it’s the best pa’t. Who’m I to say?” “But I don’t think the crow eating the turtle alive is beautiful,” Joel said, adamantly.

“That’s because ya don’t see or think ’bout what ya du see.”

“Cruelty is cruel,” Joel insisted.

“Ah, crulty. I thought that might come up. I wuz spectin it.”

He rose from his chair and put more wood into the stove and refilled his cup with hot water, adding the powdered grounds and stirring, putting the spoon on a cloth towel crumpled on the counter. He thought hard how to answer the boy. Their childish sentiments were a challenge to him whose mind and feelings matured in paths they and their parents long ago abandoned.

“Wal,” he said to Joel, “ta live right and ta du right. That’s how a man should live. Ain’t that so?”

“I guess so, that’s what we’re taught,” he replied proudly.

“For a crow, it don’t mean nothin ta live right and ta du right. A crow has gotta live like a crow. A turkle has ta live like a turkle.” He looked at Joel and tried to gentle his voice so the point wouldn’t come too harshly. “Livin like a turkle *means* being eaten by crows, sometimes. The turkle want’d ta live, but bein eat’n is part of what it means ta live. There’s no crulty in it.”

He told a story then of how he had come across the carcass of a deer on one of his walks in the forest, and how he could smell it from a long way off. The deer had died, perhaps from natural causes, deep in the forest, yet there were many animals and insects that fed off it, the very smell of the thing announcing it was there. He made them see a forest rife with life, an abundance they always missed when they hiked up to the pond—the lichens and toadstools and fungi, the swarms of tadpoles, the marsh marigolds and

ferns, the fish, the birds in profuse variety, the possums and raccoons and skunks, and on and on, and he told so many stories, their imaginations ran rank.

“How hard it is ta remember!” he said, pausing a moment to ask if they wanted anything more to eat. But they were fascinated and wanted more stories, having a seeming endless appetite for them. “Everday life!” he continued. “What matters most is offen hardest ta recall. Some’s forty, fifty years ’bout I’ve lived on this ere farm and wauk’d these woods. Duck Pond’s a fine place for *you* ta play. But it’s part of *my* livin room. I don’t recall ever findin anythin in New Damascus, though, that I’d want ta store in my memory for later use—ta pray thanks ta the Lord, or ta shore me up through sufferin.”

As they imagined for themselves the things the old man told about, a sense of life was beginning to be born in them. It was a peculiar life, alien, yet one they felt a part of, however remote from the lives they lived. Their feelings opened to sympathies they didn’t know they had, and when the old man had finished his recollections and seemed empty of more to say, they immediately asked him to tell them more.

And so he spoke of the fields, and of the stones and the labor with which he and his first horse, now long gone, had plucked them from the fields. He described the old sled he harnessed to the horse and how they walked the furrows together; how he lifted the stones with incredible strain onto the sled, and how the horse strained to pull the load off the field to be dumped.

He told them of his wife and their baby and how they first made a home here and then how first his wife and then his daughter died and where their graves were, and he told them of his two goats and ram, and of the cow and the horse, and these animals came to life to them.

He described how sap from a tree flows in large clear drops when it is wounded by an ax, and how he saw the stillness of Duck Pond broken one evening when a trout leaped to catch a dragonfly.

He told them of his fields in winter spread out in floods of white light and of the unchangeableness of the seasons. He told them how the return of sparrows and robins marks the certainty of the universal spirit we are all embedded in, how the spirit lives off of spirit the way life lives off of life, and how only humans don’t know it or ignore it.

And as he spoke, he rose with the lamp that had been sitting on the table, and gently nudged them out of their chairs and led them to a bedroom upstairs. In that room there was one large bed with old quilts and yellowed sheets and one candle standing upright in a saucer. He detached the candle from its waxen base, lit it from the lamp, and secured it again in the saucer. He sat in a chair beside the bed for a while, his voice sending strange and sometimes incomprehensible images into their minds.

Their sleep seemed as a continuous dream, coming without warning, coming as the sound of words, as words floating through the gloam of a forest darkness but leading, at last, to the blinding clarity of sunlight on the glass.

His work has appeared before in SNReview, and has recently appeared in *VIA*, *Weber Studies*, *Connecticut Review*, *The Missouri Review*, and many others. Ditta teaches creative writing and American and European literatures at Dakota Wesleyan University.

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