

The Roundhouse

Louise Erdrich

Small trees had attacked my parents' house at the foundation. They were just seedlings with one or two rigid, healthy leaves. Nevertheless, the stalky shoots had managed to squeeze through knife cracks in the decorative brown shingles covering the cement blocks. They had grown into the unseen wall and it was difficult to pry them loose. My father wiped his palm across his forehead and damned their toughness. I was using a rusted old dandelion fork with a splintered handle; he wielded a long, slim iron fireplace poker that was probably doing more harm than good. As my father prodded away blindly at the places where he sensed roots might have penetrated, he was surely making convenient holes in the mortar for next year's seedlings.

Whenever I succeeded in working loose a tiny tree, I placed it like a trophy beside me on the narrow sidewalk that surrounded the house. There were ash shoots, elm, maple, box elder, even a good-sized catalpa, which my father placed in an ice cream bucket and watered, thinking that he might find a place to replant it. I thought it was a wonder the treelets had persisted through a North Dakota winter. They'd had water perhaps, but only feeble light and few crumbs of earth. Yet each seed had managed to sink the hasp of a root deep and a probing tendril outward.

My father stood, stretching his sore back. That's enough, he said, though he was usually a perfectionist.

The Provence's of Night

William Gay

The dozer took the first cut out of the clay bank below Hixson's old place promptly at seven o'clock and by nine the sun was well up in an absolutely cloudless sky and it hung over the ravaged earth like a malediction.

The superintendent walked over to a white flatbed truck and leaned his numbered grade pole against it. He filled a Pepsi-Cola bottle with ice water from a cooler on the truckbed and drank. He took out a red bandana and mopped his face and throat. Behind him the scraped bottomland stretched as far as the eye could see like a dead wasteland, a land no one would have. A blue pall of smoke shifted over it and no tree grew, no flower. A bird would not even fly over it.

A swamper named Risner came up carrying a widemouth Mason jar. Its surface was impacted with earth and Risner was mopping at it with the tail of his shirt.

"What'd you find, Risner?"

"Dozer cut it out on that slope younder, Risner said. Likely it's money. These old folks always used to bury their money in fruit jars."

"The old people never had any excess money to put up in fruit jars, the superintendent said. Likely you've found you a antique jar of green beans."

Risner was holding the jar beneath the cooler's spout and running water over it.

"You'll want that water long about three o'clock," the superintendent said.

Risner was mopping the jar with his shirt again. The shirt came away muddy. He was squinting into the jar then the wet jar seemed to slip in his hands and shattered between his work boots.

"What the hell is that?" the superintendent said.

In the splintered glass of this transparent crypt lay diminutive human bones of a marvelous delicacy. Bones fragile and fluted as a bird's, tiny skull with eyeholes black and blind, thin as paper, brittle as parchment. Scattered as if cast in a necromancer's divination, as if there might be pattern to them, order.

"It looks like there was somebody in there," Risner said lamely.

Winter's Bone

Daniel Woodrell

Ree Dolly stood at break of day on her cold front steps and smelled coming flurries and saw meat. Meat hung from trees across the creek. The carcasses hung pale of flesh with a fatty gleam from low limbs of saplings in the side yards. Three halt haggard houses formed a kneeling rank on the far creekside and each had two or more skinned torsos dangling by rope from sagged limbs, venison left to the weather for two nights and three days so the early blossoming of decay might round the flavor, sweeten that meat to the bone.

Snow clouds had replaced the horizon, capped the valley darkly, and chafing wind blew so the hung meat twirled from jiggling branches. Ree, brunette and sixteen, with milk skin and abrupt green eyes, stood bare-armed in a fluttering yellowed dress, face to the wind, her cheeks reddening as if smacked and dsmacked again. She stood tall in combat boots, scarce at the waist but plenty through the arms and shoulders, a body made for loping after needs. She smelled the frosty wet in the looming clouds, thought of her shadowed kitchen and lean cupboard, looked to the scant woodpile, shuddered. The coming weather meant wash hung outside would freeze into planks, so she'd have to stretch clothesline across the kitchen above the woodstove, and the puny stack of wood split for the potbelly would not last long enough to dry much except Mom's underthings and maybe a few T-shirts for the boys. Ree knew there was no gas for the chain saw, so she'd be swinging the ax out back while winter blew into the valley and fell around her.

William Virgil Davis

In the Salzkammergut

I stood in the small square, confused,
wondering which way to turn, how to

return to where I was what seemed
like only a moment ago.

I had never been there before.
It was dusk and a light rain was falling.
A train had just left the station
and was quickly disappearing

in the distance, between the trees
on the steep hillside and the small stream
in the valley below, a wisp of smoke
trailing off behind it

over the column of moving cars.
The small shops in the square were closed
and shuttered. No one was anywhere
there. The scene

stopped and held fixed
as in a picture postcard,
but now I wonder if, back then,
I might have imagined myself

as I am now, so many years later,
sitting alone in a room,
watching soft rain from a window,
and thinking back to that time and place.

r. t. smith

Tree of Life

Atop Timber Ridge,
so close to the wire fence
it might as well be a post,
the honey locust
is scheming to leaf,
and its thorns already impale
the gray shrike's lifeless
ornaments—goldfinch, wren,
luna moth and a brace
of swifts—a week's fare
or more. I let myself imagine
the fence's twisted strands
a harp with no barbs,

the tree festooned with lively birds,
all for rapture's tapestry
or a bride's keepsake counterpane—
Tree of Life, a blessing, a promise.

But out here on the windy ridge
that image won't last.
An oriole may be next
or a young lark driven
onto one spike and writhing,
a dead redwing shedding feathers.
The cunning hunter studies hedge
and bramble to entice another victim
toward a grisly end with the tireless
shrike's repertoire of lethal song.

I know better than to judge
the assassin bird's instincts.
Pulp sweet in the pod entices
every species until
a feast is cached mid-air.

Still it's a tempting wish—
to scrape bristled sticks together
and conjure a finch's voice
or other sorcery the dead
could follow back to life,
ascend as a tapestry
soon invisible high in the late
winter air. The coverts are flicking,
cold sunlight silvering their eyes,
all saying to the shadow of death,
Not yet, as the bride circles the altar
and—amid birdsong, harp and locust scent—
lifts her sacred veil.