

A Small Death

I HAVE remarked that I was born in the central plains, compacted out of glacial dust and winter cold. I see animal faces as readily as though I sat with my mother's one blighted gift in a Cro-Magnon cave. The religious forms of the present leave me unmoved. My eye is round, open, and undomesticated as an owl's in a primeval forest—a world that for me has never truly departed. The boy who watched the gold crosses of his childhood swept up by a man with a scythe would scarcely hope too much for what lay forward.

In one of those golden Octobers that fell between the wars, I made a journey somewhere in southern Kansas. The friend who went with me was Claude Hibbard, a paleontologist who died only a year or so ago after an intense and devoted career given to the life of the past. Claude had got word of a farmer who had found an enormous long-horned bison skull in a gravel pit. The man had it hanging out in the weather under the eaves of his barn.

The skull proved to be a beautiful example of one of the least-known bisons, the horns having the sweep of one's extended arms. The names change in the taxonomists' reports but the size of the great beast never; he belongs to the Middle Ice. The farmer coveted the skull as a barn decoration, little realiz-

ing that it would slowly flake away in the winter rain and snow. It was our errand to try and secure the bones for the museum of the university.

We found our man in the field. Claude bore the brunt of the negotiations, for he was not only a native Kansan himself but came of a farming family. The farmer was reluctant. He was harvesting corn and we followed the wagon, automatically tossing up the ears as the talk progressed in slow country fashion. We went up one row and down another, serving as an unpaid labor force.

Claude knew what he was doing. I slung in ears of corn and an occasional word. So did Claude, but his remarks were all of crops and farms and weather. The golden afternoon waned to its close, a blue frost was rising. "That skull," said Claude finally, "'t isn't right it should be wasted here. If you gave it to the Museum you could have your name on it, 'donated by,' or 'on permanent loan.' Here it'll just go to pieces. It needs to be treated. It's been a long time in that gravel bank." It had, too. The gravel bed in which the skull had been miraculously preserved had been deposited long before the last great ice advance.

"Well," said the weatherbeaten farmer, "I dunno." We threw the ears of another row into the high-sided wagon while he meditated reluctantly. "I reckon," he said, "if my name—"

"It'll be in the books," said Claude. "Let's just get this last corn row. Might as well before dark."

So that was the way it ended, but not for me. The curtain of time had lifted an instant in that slow smoky autumn. I could almost see the great herds from which this giant came. Across them swirled the blizzards of my childhood in which I used to get out alone because no one could find me thirty feet away.

As we left, the leaves in the wood were red and coming down. It was, I think, the last time I saw Claude, though his professional papers came faithfully to me for many years. He was trying, no doubt, his own keys to the past. As for me, I have come to think I am moving in an endless extension of that single

Kansas autumn. I am treading deeper and deeper into leaves and silence. I see more faces watching, non-human faces. Ironically, I who profess no religion find the whole of my life a religious pilgrimage. The origins of this hunger are as mysterious as the reasons why we, who are last year's dust and rain, have risen from that dust to look about with the devised crystal of a raindrop before we subside once more into snow and whirling vapor. But, however that one autumn may still color my memory, life is complex; it changes, and my world was destined to change with it.

The change was mixed with many things in my life—a growing disillusionment with some aspects of scientific values, personal problems, abrasive administrators, humanity itself. In short, the war had finally come to Kansas and transformed the pleasant, sleepy little town of Lawrence overnight.

When the first Polish towns were burning, some of my students had laughed, far on there in the isolationist mid-country, and called the newsreels "propaganda," in the disillusionment that still lingered after the first World War. Then came Pearl Harbor. A giant powder factory arose in the environs of Lawrence and hundreds of people poured in from the backwoods of the Ozarks and Oklahoma. Almost overnight Lawrence became a boom town in which prices rose, people began to distrust each other, and desperate workers trudged the streets seeking shelter. From wary isolationism a few students turned to militant patriotism in a way sometimes reminiscent of the excesses of the first World War. As was true of most universities, training programs for enlisted men under discipline soon emerged.

My unmarried friends quickly disappeared, either called up in the reserves or in the draft. As a physical anthropologist by training, with a background in anatomy and biology, I was shifted as essential into the pre-medical program. We taught enlisted young reservists almost around the clock. Summer school was no longer a matter of choice, and I labored on through at-

tacks of violent asthmatic hay fever which afflicted me in that climate. I had to refurbish forgotten knowledge, and my fellow anatomists, including Dr. Henry Tracy, the grey wise head of the department, could not have been kinder.

My troubles, however, were endless. I was the last of a line that had volunteered and fought in almost every war since the War for Independence. Yet here I was confronted with an utterly impossible situation. My mother, I had come to know, was committable without the care and attention of my aunt. All this had been certified and was on record. Both women were totally dependent upon my support. Moreover, my wife came home one day from the doctor's office to report a diagnosed illness which necessitated surgery. We had to borrow money. Still I fretted, although by now four million men were under arms and the landing in Europe was drawing near. Perhaps it was foolish of me, in retrospect, but I was still young and there was a family tradition. I wanted to go. This impulse was to be suddenly augmented.

One day I learned, in some way now forgotten, that there was a need for men capable of staffing military government in the islands of the Pacific being slowly overrun by the island-hopping technique of the Pacific war. Such an assignment would have solved the salary problem. My training and teaching in social anthropology seemed to offer some hope.

I was given a physical. My eyes were not up to the military standard for a professional officer. I argued a little with the doctor. "This is governmental activity," I protested. "There is a supposed vital need. I can see enough with glasses. I've been doing all that this job would require for almost six years. If a belated shell comes along, what difference will glasses or non-glasses make?"

"Now the ears," he said imperturbably. I sat in a makeshift booth and heard, with my left ear, the faint ticking of a watch held some distance away. Then my right ear was tested. Sud-

denly I realized that, though it was not badly off, I was not sure of the ticking. Something was slightly wrong. I thought of the forgotten episode of my first year in graduate school. The other routine procedures followed.

In a week or so I received my rejection. I have often wondered in the years since, as I have come to know a little more about military intelligence, whether it was actually the minor physical defects or the existing affidavits about my mother that made the difference. Later, I was to know men who seemed never to have encountered the troubles that beset me. The university was, of course, struggling to maintain its staff.

In elaborating this background, however, I have neglected a dog whose plight actually affected me more than the turmoil that swept around me. It was a small death in that war now long since done. I do not know why I remember it with such pain, but yes, yes I do. I remember it with an uncertain guilt, just as I remember my last glimpse of the desperately running mongrel beside the train in the cruel days of the Depression. As it chanced, I was assisting one of my medical superiors in a cadaver dissection. He was a kind and able teacher, but a researcher hardened to the bitter necessities of his profession. He took the notion that a living demonstration of the venous flow through certain of the abdominal veins would be desirable. "Come with me to the animal house," he said. "We'll get a dog for the purpose." I followed him reluctantly.

We entered. My colleague was humane. He carried a hypodermic, but whatever dog he selected would be dead in an hour. Now dogs kept penned together, I rapidly began to see, were like men in a concentration camp, who one after the other see that something unspeakable is going to happen to them. As we entered this place of doleful barks and howlings, a brisk-footed, intelligent-looking mongrel of big terrier affinities began to trot rapidly about. I stood white-gowned in the background trying to be professional, while my stomach twisted.

My medical friend (and he was and is my friend and is infinitely kind to patients) cornered the dog. The dog, judging from his restless reactions, had seen all this happen before. Perhaps because I stood in the background, perhaps because in some intuitive way he read my eyes, perhaps—oh, who knows what goes on among the miserable of the world?—he started to approach me. At that instant my associate seized him. The hypodermic shot home. A few more paces and it was over. The dog staggered, dropped, and was asleep. The dose was kindly intended to be a lethal one. He would be totally unconscious throughout the demonstration. He would never wake again. We carried him away to the dissecting room. My professional friend performed his task. A few, a very few, out of that large class, crowded around closely enough to see.

The light was pushing toward evening. The dog was going; this had been his last day. He was gone. The medical students attended to their cadavers and filed out. I still stood by the window trying to see the last sun for him. I had been commanded. I knew that, even if I had not been in the animal house, the same thing would have happened that day or another. But he had looked at me with that unutterable expression. "I do not know why I am here. Save me. I have seen other dogs fall and be carried away. Why do you do this? Why?"

He did not struggle, he did not bite, even when seized. Man was a god. It had been bred into this creature's bones never to harm the gods. They were immortal and when they touched one kindly it was an ecstasy whose creation their generations had never understood, because for them there was only one single generation, their own.

I mentioned my feelings once, years later, to a friendly physician. I was a scientist. I was groping for some way to explain. "My friend," he said, "this is necessary. You are imagining things. Dogs don't think like that. You merely thought he was looking at you. You are not in medicine. You do not know the

necessity of these things." He, too, was a good man, but I remembered persistently the indifferent class that had gained little from that experiment. I would venture that not one of them remembers it now in his gleaming office. And the dog might have had just one more day, one more day, even in the animal house. One more day of life, of sentience.

I shook my head wearily. There is a man, a very great experimentalist, who has said that to extend ethics to animals is unutterable folly. Man cannot do this and learn, learn even to save himself. Each one of us alive has inevitably, unknowingly taken something from other lives. I thought of my steeled professional friend. I thought, though I did not say it to my concerned acquaintance, that the experiment I had witnessed in my judgment was needless.

Just one more day, those beseeching eyes continued to haunt me. They do still. I have stood since in some of the cleanest, most hygienic laboratories in the world. I have also watched dirty, homeless dogs or cats trot on to what must have been for most of them starvation, disease, or death by accident. I have never called a humane society because I, too, am an ex-wanderer who would have begged for one more hour of light, however dismal. Rarely among those many thousands have I been able to protect, save, or help. This day I have recounted is gone from the minds of everyone. As for me, I have sought refuge in the depersonalized bones of past eras on the watersheds of the world.

The beachheads were finally established. The Germans' last desperate offensive toward Bastogne and the Channel ports was contained. Japan's sea empire was tottering. Men of my age and condition were freer to move again. I was proffered an administrative post and a full professorship at an Ohio college under a dean who was both a fine historian and a great man.

I spoke to Henry Tracy, the chairman in anatomy. "Eiseley,"

he said wistfully, "would you like to be a physician? There are those here who could arrange admittance to Med School for you." I was deeply moved.

"H'ie," I said, using his affectionate nickname, "I wish I might have heard those words ten years ago. But I'm thirty-seven; I have just been offered a very good post in Ohio. I have the same dependency problems. My wife must still have care. It's too late, but I am prouder of what you have just said than anything that will ever come to me."

"You will need some money to get there," he considered.

"Yes, H'ie," I said, "not much, but a little. I'll give you a paper for it. And you will come to see us. I must thank the surgeon in Kansas City as well. He gave me professional courtesy; he wouldn't have had to do it. Someone must have told him."

"Well," said Henry Tracy and stopped. He was the only man I ever knew who could see a body, even a walking body, as a three-dimensional collection of pipes, pumps, and pulleys. He would have made a fantastic plumber. Just to complicate things, he had begun his academic career as a classicist. Maybe his interior view of people had forced the change in his profession.

I shook hands with the few men with whom I had started my career. Lawrence would never go back to what it had been. The administrative staff I knew is long since gone.

Before I left Lawrence, the old anatomy building burned in the night. I was routed out of bed by an official, who told me to get up on the hill immediately and see to the bodies floating in the tanks below the floor. "You are confusing me," I said, "with another man." So, as in the hatchery days, the bridges literally burned behind me.

Years later, at a public function in another city, I stood by accident just behind one of the administrators of that day. I turned and went quietly out into the night. About what could we have conversed? The laughter, the ugly laughter under

spotlights at the spectacle of naked cadavers being piled into trucks out of the smoking ruins of a building? For the students, crude as their behavior was, it was an attempt at total evasion. "I shall never be as these are," they had tried to reassure themselves with raucous laughter. "Death is a joke. We, we, are the immortals, the golden boys and girls." Have they learned differently in the years that followed? I lift my grizzled head. They are close now upon my heels. I can hear them. I can hear the night frost split stones in deserts. Men are softer than stone, much softer.

A number of years ago, across Walnut Street from an office I once occupied, there used to be a series of dilapidated row houses occupied by elderly people, mostly men, who lived upon welfare or social security checks. Some of them were winos or city derelicts, who, on sunny days, drowsed upon university benches. It is true that they were not good to look upon and sometimes one of them would sprawl helplessly upon the sidewalk, a bottle still clutched in his hand. Sometimes what my grandmother would call the "dead wagon" would come and take one away.

The city, in time, condemned these properties so that the University might construct a dormitory on the spot. An ugly district police station that had once maintained a kind of order in that neighborhood disappeared. So did a street, the derelicts, and the houses.

Before all was quite leveled, something strange happened. A few abandoned old dogs refused to go. They were lying, in a sort of momentary local return to the stone age, behind building blocks and in depressions that sheltered them from the bitter weather. They retained instincts from a past older than ours. They had accepted desertion, since they had never been well cared for; they had accepted without question the destruction of all they had once lived amidst. They sat like wolves in

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the wreckage, nosed about, or slept. Probably the city would gather them up, and perhaps, if I walked in a certain direction I deliberately never took, I would eventually hear them barking for release in the animal rooms by the laboratories.

I crossed the street and came to them among the stones. Maybe, I thought, just maybe, if we pass, under their thick wild hides they may preserve for a time a dim memory of a visiting god who could not save himself but whose touch wrought something ineffable. From among the stones an old brown derelict crept forward and ran a wistful stroking tongue across my hand. I knelt and spoke to him gravely. Perhaps, after all, the little we knew of love may linger a few seasons in the wild pack that roams the final rubble of the cities. For a century or two the pack may lift its ears to a rockfall or sniff with lifted hair at a rain-worn garment that touches an old racial memory and sets tails to wagging expectantly. Some dim hand that they all feel but have never known will pass away imperceptibly. And when that influence is no longer felt nor remembered, then man will in truth be gone.

Still, crouched on my knees in the dust and white rock of this field where the homeless dogs lay tail to wind, I thought perhaps it might not happen, that perhaps the lightning would only seek out the most of men, and that this old brown wolf and I would lie beside yet another ruin and watch the stars come out through the bent ribs of skyscrapers.

"If you would come out of your doors and your stonework," the patient stroking tongue tried to persuade me, "we could lie here in the dust and be safe, as it was in the beginning when you, the gods, lived close to us and we came in to you around the fire."

I stroked his head gently so that he might remember me, and walked toward the station. He lifted his ears. He did not understand the gods nor why they persisted in going so far away. I felt a little lonelier from the touch of his rough tongue. Men,

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too, it seems, have a bit of common dog in their natures. But in the shelter by the stones the dogs slept and thought I would be coming back. They have an enormous, unquenchable, betrayed trust in man. I think they will still be waiting when the first wild oak bursts through the asphalt of Market Street.