

Excerpts from a Work In Progress

Unpublished fragment written for Walter Abish's Class by Eli Gottlieb in 1981.

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The gun, when he pointed it, seemed To summon himself to its contours. His fled being regathered on the smooth stock and barrel of the gun. It was a BB gun. It spit a tiny ball a long distance. The metaphysics thrilled him. From here to there. A spuft and a smell of oil and space was crossed.

This particular morning he woke warmed by his secret. Falling asleep the night before he had thought for the first time of shooting a small bird. A small reddish bird such as flew easily about the backyard and nested in the tall trees. A delicate bird which rose like a note from the lawn to his mother's feeder by the kitchen window.

Was he gross?

The bird itself, called STARLING, twittering, fluttering for balance, dabbling its wings. He slowly extended the gun from the window, sighting along its length while he waited for the trembling to leave his shoulders. This sickness was excitement. But the bird was soon centered in the notched sights. His finger squeezed the trigger smoothly, continuously. In a moment of miserable joy he thought: Me. And the bird fell dead.

Who was he as he crossed the lawn? He touched the bird experimentally where it lay curled on a bed of leaves. It was still warm, its chest beaded with a single drop of blood. This, he thought, is the way I am. This is one of the things I do. He rolled it over with his toe, examining it with fresh interest.

I made this.

Occasionally he lay in bed and his whole life was a round shape that he looked at. His whole world was spread roundish about him. It seemed nearly as if he could pick and choose from this shaped array of incidents and history that made his world. His mother and father were deployed in a sector –haloo!– his weird brother in another, his school, his body, his various pursuits in others. Because of this, there was perfection in those moments of falling asleep. Then the sphere he lived in was a little like the sphere of the heavens lately described by his teacher, Miss Williams: a darkish place into which someone had chunked a zillion stars.

Wind blew. It ruffled the tail-feathers of the dead bird. It dried the tears he'd suddenly, unaccountably begun to shed. The gun dangled loose from his hand. He listened to the wind. It made a noise inside his own body.

At a point in time of which this is one example, his father sits grandly at a desk, on a phone. Secretaries scurry in and out of his office, which has high ceilings. The

sourly virile odor of cigar smoke is in the air, and no doubt permeates the plush carpet. It is a large office, at one end of which, still on the phone, he coughs harshly and peers through the slatted blinds. Immediately outside his window, like music, is a view that would be instantly perceived with familiarity around the world. Scraggling grass and a dead tree holding the intersection of two barely used roads speak a kind of language. Some a telephone lines. A shed.

His father leans back in his chair and sighs. "You poor dumb bastard," he says fondly, but then stops. His eyes go wide, then wider still. "Yeah?" he shouts, "yeah? Huh!" He slams down the phone.

Simultaneous with this is the motion described by his son's body as it comes down off its toes and begins to pace excitedly about the room. The room is an attic room. It is a long, low space whose sharply angled roof sections make it imperative that the pacer move along an exact axis, forward and back. This he does, thinking hard to himself.

A half mile below, in a tiny valley, he has been observing football practice through a telescope. It is a long green telescope. Also the band is rehearsing on an adjacent field but he is not interested. He scrunches up his eye, stands back up on his toes. He focuses on the players moving slowly against one another at that distance. In swirls of dust they run plays and maneuvers, drilling, sprinting to and fro.

All of this he notes quietly and in secret in a small book. He keeps track of starting times and of water breaks. He notes meticulously the nature of accidents insofar as he can perceive them. Ruled on a separate page he keeps an attendance record for the team, to whom he refers only by their numbers.

He knows their names.

They know his name.

He keeps the book with unfailing diligence and feels in his own being their every advance and setback. Over the course of the season he has become deeply involved in the seeming decline of quarterback #7 whose hard spiral has degenerated into a high wobbly pass that is often intercepted.

(He is reached, now, by the threshing of the snare drums, and on a burst of wind, the brass)

However, he holds out real hope for the player's recovery. Will he last the season? He makes a tiny check in a box of his notebook and sighs.