

THE BEAUTIES OF THIS EARTH

Mark Powell

In his first spring after the war, Walt Berger went home, home to see the old man, and home to rest. He had a bottle of Jim Beam between his thighs and his discharge papers in his seabag. He sipped the coffee and topped it off with Jim Beam, and by the time he hit I-40, he was thinking of Leigh Ann, but was still sober enough to miss her exit north of Sevierville. He knew the old man was waiting.

Back home, he drove down Main Street, catching the first red light by the new Kawasaki dealership. ATVs, motorcycles, jet-skis, three-wheelers. The place was usually populated by men in caps and jeans, guys in Dickies and bib overalls with long goatees flowering down their throats, heads shaved and bolts driven through their noses. Berger had seen one with a series of three or four silver hoops embedded in his eyebrow, looked like a grizzly catfish with a beard of five-pound test lines. The place was quiet this morning, however, and he watched a giant American flag unfold itself in the breeze, then collapse down onto the pole.

Three blocks down, he passed the Otasco his granddaddy had managed for better than forty years. Town had changed in the last decade, he could see that. With the rich second-homers laying waste to the mountains came stores selling lawn sculptures and blown glass ornaments, solar lights to line walkways, paintings that looked like an infant had slung his peas and carrots against the wall. There was a store that sold nothing but flags, a thousand different flags bearings pineapples and watermelons and UT and ETSU logos. The Otasco had closed right after Home Depot opened on the bypass. There was no diner left, but a place selling humus wraps. There were Mexican restaurants and three pizza joints, but nowhere besides Hardees to get a decent cup of coffee. A single feed and seed store down near the abandoned railroad tracks. The big fifty-pound bags stacked and plastic-wrapped on pallets. Dog food. Fish food. Sweet feed. He remembered climbing the loading dock as a boy, standing inside the high hangar-like expanse, going with the old man to buy feed or grass seed for whatever his granddaddy was working on at the time.

His granddaddy had been a Marine, joining in January of '42 when he was seventeen years old. By the time he was twenty he had made four amphibious assaults, suffered two Purple Hearts, and earned the Navy

Cross. His granny was dead now, and all that was left besides the old man was a cousin living in Charlotte, working for a bank and running for the board of the PTA. His granddaddy, alone for years, drank too much and talked about the way they had died along the cliffs on Okinawa. Then he would pass out to dreams of Jesus Christ wading ashore at Guadalcanal, whisper in his sleep about Tarawa and Siapan, about dead SeaBees and the nights sleeping in the cool insect mud. Now and then, he would drag out a box of photographs, gruff children in Marine fatigues, the blush of a three-day beard on a skinny nineteen year old as he shouldered his rifle across on some faraway moonscape.

The beagles bellowed and twisted around Berger's feet when he stepped out of his truck at home. He stood in the living room and imagined his granddaddy waking from his dreams. Christ wading ashore through the early mist off Siapan. His granddaddy's feet would be socked, and he would rise from the musty blankets of the couch to walk out onto the porch, testing the weather and his joints. It would be early, not yet daylight though moonlight might move cloud shadow across the open fields, the pasture land cropped as close as a shaved skull.

Berger saw his granddaddy running one foot forward until his sock caught against the head of an eight-penny nail, half-dreaming. Christ coming ashore at Siapan. Guadalcanal. Tarawa. The old man in the rocker, the thread of his sock pulling free of the nailhead just as a car goes up the road, pushing its lone head lamp so that the world is lit singly, a tree, a parked tractor, a pale footlight pushing a vapor of night fog. The highway ghost-lit and then not.

Berger knew well these solitary offices. The things his granddaddy never said.

Okinawa. Them cliffs above Okinawa, son. It got ugly there.

Berger had waited all his life for war.

He was on the porch when his granddaddy came home. The walls were lined with canning, kraut and green beans, corn and chow-chow, and the room smelled of dirt, cool and metallic. It was almost dusk, and the old man squinted when he looked at him.

"I figured on you flying down," he said. "Been quicker."

"Hey, papa."

"Seen your truck pass the store today. You go over and see Leigh Ann?"

Berger shook his head. "Not yet."

His granddaddy sat down and exhaled, motioned at Berger's glass eye.

"You're granny would be glad of it, that it come out like it did. She would have," he said. "But I ain't gonna sit here and lie to you, son."

They ate Hungry Man dinners heated in the microwave, then watched the last innings of the Braves-Dodgers game.

“I can take you on at the store if you like,” his granddaddy said. He cut his country fried steak with his pocket knife. “Could use the help.” He chewed, swallowed.

“I’m moving on, papa.”

“That the plan, is it?”

“That’s the plan, yessir.”

In the morning Berger came out of his old room dressed in jeans and Tony Lama boots. His granddaddy was sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee, looking ancient and veined.

“Getting on?” he asked.

“Soon enough.”

“You ain’t going over to see her?”

“I don’t know,” Berger said, though he did.

He left his granddaddy’s and drove up Picket Post Road to Main Street, past the café, a squat block building ringed with pickups and sedans, past the new Arbys and the antique stores where old women stood on the sidewalk leaning on push-brooms and squinting against the morning sun that was just beginning to peak over the rust red buildings on the facing street. He took 441 and this time didn’t miss the turn.

His house—her house, now—was in a subdivision south of Knoxville, a broad two-story of vinyl siding and new brick. They had hardly moved in before Berger had been deployed, and he saw now that in the intervening months she had done little or nothing in the way of upkeep. The driveway was still gravel, washboarded from over a year of rain and too much hard driving, ruts where tires had spun and slipped betraying her carelessness, betraying those late nights, Berger imagined, drinking margaritas with her boyfriend before driving home buzzed and foggy-headed. The yard was all mud and scattered straw, matted and rotting, up to an apron of dull yellowing grass: the sod Berger had laid just days before shipping out.

He had never understood but did now. Sitting in the driveway and looking at the house that rose from the ground like a tombstone, he understood the house was about *her* future, *her* plans. What happened at Balad had only given her an excuse, cover and commiseration from circles of sympathetic friends drinking Mai Tais in some crowded living room while HBO blared from the tube.

“I don’t want the house in Fayetteville,” she’d told him over the phone when he was in Walter Reed. They were officially separated by then, divorce in the offing, and he knew she had read a copy of the letter he had left,

the one that began *What you see before you is the body of Captain Waltas Berger*. He knew, too, that she knew what his granddaddy understood, what everyone understood: that at the moment to which his life had narrowed, the cold barrel at his temple, he had flinched.

“Take it,” she told him. “I don’t want it. Just leave me the new house. Don’t contest anything, and I promise you can see Billy now and then.” Walt had stood there in the corridor wearing his paper gown and watching the one-legged men wheel by, giving little nods as they passed. He had made the down payment with his reenlistment money. “Are you there? Walt?”

“I’m here.”

“Well?”

“I don’t want it either. The house.”

“Fine then. We’ll sell it.”

“I want to see my son again, Leigh Ann.”

Her sigh like wind singing along high-tension lines. “Just don’t contest anything then and you can see him. Jesus—” It all seemed to amaze her. “Can you imagine if you actually did contest this? Be smart, Walt. Don’t make this any worse.”

He pulled beside her beige Civic and cut the engine. Beside him sat a Volvo wagon, a deep hunter green, and all-wheel drive, something sensible and middle class. The car belonged to her new boyfriend, Vance something. A schoolteacher, middle school math, if Berger remembered correctly. She had wasted no time moving from Fayetteville, finding a new job, a new body for the bed, a little heft to impress the mattress, someone to crawl onto when the urge struck.

Berger noticed the Christmas wreath was still up, withered and tacked to the front door, closer now to next Christmas than last. No lights were on in the house, though he imagined Billy was downstairs watching cartoons over a bowl of Cocoa-Puffs. They would have heard him grinding up the drive—he would have to tell her either to get it paved or smooth the goddamn thing out, one or the other—but maybe he could have a few minutes with his son. Last time they had spoken had been on the phone, three weeks prior. His son talking about feeding the beta fish whose tank sat beneath the far window in his first grade classroom. *That’s good, son. I’m proud. Now put your mamma on, all right.* She had sold the house in Fayetteville and had a check for him.

“Keep it,” he told her.

“All right then. I will.”

“Put it away for Billy.”

“You don’t have to tell me how to raise my child,” she said. “Things

are good for him right now. We don't have to fuck him up just because we fucked everything else up."

"You, Leigh Ann. I don't know who else you're talking about."

"Jesus—"

"I don't know who else you're talking about fucking things up besides yourself. This is what you wanted."

"I gotta go, Walt."

"I just want you to damn well remember that."

"Walt." This was her schoolteacher voice, the voice of the weary public servant, put-upon but patient. "You know I'm not the one who stood around while they murdered some poor kid."

He said nothing.

"I'm sorry you made me say that," she said.

Berger walked up the front steps to what should have been his house and moved along the windows, cupping his hands to the glass to see inside. No Billy. No one in the living room. The TV was off. No one in the kitchen. By the step sat several ceramic turtles, green and glassy-backed, and he flipped one after another before finding a dull brass key taped to a pale underbelly.

Inside, the house was still as silent prayer. He stood in the foyer looking up at the stairs, dust drifting through a span of light then collecting along the wooden balustrade like drifts of snow. He had hardly lived here long enough to know the place, a few long weekends driving over to check on progress, to bitch at the contractor or argue with Leigh Ann for cheaper bathroom fixtures. Hardware it was called, like it was something beside trinkets to impress the kind of people Berger despised, the safe ones, moderately wealthy and healthily fat, the ones who talked about their dental and whole life policies, the ones with model trains or ping-pong tables in their basements, the weekend joggers and internet pussies.

He walked into the kitchen.

The counters were empty, wiped clean and flashing spirals of silvered moisture. Plates and silverware stacked in the sink, a glass holding a thimble full of diluted red wine—little tremors feathering the surface—balanced atop the pile. Several glasses were cloudy with grainy solutions, one holding a spoon made grotesque, large and misshapen in the opaque liquid. He looked out the window to the eight-foot basketball goal that sat unevenly, the ball beyond it, faded orange and marooned in ankle-deep weeds the color of mustard. His breath spread on the window, silver and expanding, then retreated, faintly, erasing itself like a fingerprint. A little

suction cupped thermometer. A potted cactus the size of a child's thumb. Taking stock of things, filing away images to pore over later so that he didn't hear her come in but somehow knew she was there. He was looking at the vague reflection of his face one moment then her figure the next. She stood leaning against the door in socks and a long flannel shirt that hung just above her knees.

"I didn't know you still had a key," she said.

He held up the brass key he'd found. "I don't. You should hide this better."

"Mostly I don't count on people snooping around."

"Well, you should. Married to a son of a bitch like me."

Her arms were crossed, and when she exhaled her body seemed to cave, shoulders collapsing forward, breasts sagging so that they rested on her pale forearms. He could see the hairline cracks fissuring out from her mouth and eyes.

"What are you doing here, Walt?" It was less question than exasperation, already tired, already ready to leave it, to walk. "You want some coffee?" she asked.

He turned back to the window.

"Yard looks like shit."

She opened the cabinet then shut it. "Move," she said, and filled the pot with water. "I don't know why you're here. I thought all this was done. I thought you were in Georgia or something."

"You don't know why I'm here?"

"That's what I just said."

"That statement makes absolutely no sense to me, Leigh Ann. Absolutely none."

She looked at him, those liquid brown eyes he remembered rolling over him once, their first date, taking a canoe down the Pigeon River in the middle of a terrible drought, the way she'd looked at him after they'd dragged the boat over tiny rocks scattered along the riverbed and were drifting in the warm waning light, the sun sinking slowly over the mountains.

"Jesus Christ, Walt. I wish you'd just get on."

He shook his head. "What is it you want here, Leigh Ann?"

"Please, Walt."

"In this house. With him. Just answer me. Why do you want this?"

She poured the water into the filter. "Why do I want this? Because someone had to. Someone had to make a life while you were off jumping out of airplanes and running all over the world. What can I tell you? That I didn't

want my son raised by an absent father living out his adolescent fantasies while squatting in some goddamn third world jungle?”

“I squatted in those jungles for you. Every fucking one of them.”

“Keep your voice down, please.”

“Why?” he asked. He motioned up with his head. “So we won’t wake him. What’s his name? Vance, isn’t it.”

“He’s trying to stay out of this,” she said quieter.

From upstairs came the sound of footsteps, water rushing through pipes.

“Is that him?” Berger’s eyes were still cast up at the ceiling.

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“The new me.”

She shook her head. “No,” she said. That’s just the point: he’s not you.” She took two cups from the sink and rinsed them, shook out the water and filled each with coffee.

“You can’t get him to do anything about the yard? Sow some grass or something.”

“Drink some coffee, Walt,” she said. “And then leave.”

He took the cup and sniffed it. “He won’t come down?”

“He wants to respect my privacy.”

“He’s afraid of me. Afraid I’ll tear his fat head off.”

She looked up from the cup she held with both hands, sleeves having slid almost to her fingertips. “Would you?”

He turned back to the window. He was watching the leaves trembling with the breeze, their undersides translucent and veined. One floated free to drift down, swirling for a moment before coming to rest in the mud yard amid the bits of straw that stirred with the wind, a quiet rustle he imagined but could not hear.

“Billy’s at your mother’s I take it,” he said.

That exasperation in her voice again, beneath the tongue, behind the teeth, veiled poorly as she spoke slowly, as if to a child: “We stayed out later than I planned. He was already over there. He’s fine.”

“Does Vance sleep over when Billy’s home?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes, yes.”

“Fuck, Leigh Ann.”

“You know I still have a life, Walt. I *want* to have a life, at least.”

“That’s the idea is it, a life.”

“Generally. Yeah.”

He turned from the window. She had approached him but shrank back now, pressing the small of her back against the island centered in the

kitchen. From the window fell clear light, eerily transparent light he felt moving along the bare nape of his neck.

“You know we’re still married,” he said.

“Walt.”

“Technically,” he said. “In the eyes of the state of North Carolina we are still technically married, Leigh Ann.”

She shook her head slowly and with great attendance. “Oh, Walt,” she said. “Poor Walt.”

He tossed his coffee into the sink and set his cup there.

“Well, how about you tell Mister Vance I said good morning, why don’t you. Tell him I hope he enjoys sleeping under the roof I’m still fucking paying for.”

She followed him out of the kitchen into the foyer. “Don’t you go over there, Walt. She knows not to let you see him.”

He spun on her and she jumped back, a little wave of coffee splashing from her cup onto the hardwood floor in the narrowing space between them.

“Not to let me see my own son, you mean?”

“That’s exactly right,” she said. “At least—”

“At least what, Leigh Ann?” He was yelling now. “At least fucking what?”

Her voice like that whisper of knowing: “At least not until things are better. All right?”

He threw his head into his hands. “Fuck,” he said. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“Walt—”

“Fuck, Leigh Ann.”

A voice floated down from upstairs. “Everything OK, honey?”

Berger’s eyes flared and Leigh Ann looked at him, shaking her head, willing him to silence there in the laddered sun splitting the blinds.

“You tell him—”

She cut him off. “Fine. Everything’s fine. Come out here,” she said to Berger, hustling him onto the porch where the Christmas wreath still hung.

“My fucking house, Leigh Ann.”

“Please.”

“My fucking house.”

She pulled her shirt tighter around her. “Please, Walt. Just go.”

They stood for a moment. The wind gusted and a shudder of leaves showered across the yard, catching against the gutter then sailing free to cyclone down at their feet.

“Please,” she said.

He stood there shaking his head. “Yard looks like shit,” he said.

“I know.”

“Just get him to sow some grass or something, all right? Looks just awful. You want to impress the neighbors and this won't impress anybody.”

“I know. Please just go, Walt.”

*

It was dusk by the time he got back to his granddaddy's.

He took a bottle of J&B and walked onto the porch where moths batted around the porch light. The beagles slept around his feet. He swallowed as much J&B as possible, and then took another drink, not stopping until he felt it hammering through his brain and he was back again.

They had found the boy along a service road beneath a highway overpass in Balad. Seven months into his tour. Berger was riding along with a patrol when the call came. Second Platoon had found the boy crawling around under the bridge pilings and chased him out. Now he was by the river, fifteen or so, the sergeant with his flashlight in his face and the boy down on his knees. He wouldn't stop praying. It was almost one a.m., hours after curfew, and Berger could see the pale soles of his bare feet tucked up beneath his legs as he muttered to Allah.

“Said he was headed home, didn't know how late it was,” the sergeant said. He shook his head. “It's way too late for that, sir.”

“Fucking A,” said one of the soldiers, his voice cracking.

Berger looked at the soldier who had spoken and saw that his eyes appeared to be vibrating.

“Shut up, Michaels,” said the sergeant.

The Iraqi boy kept praying, prostrate, hands extended and upturned, empty and waiting, as if they might yet be filled with the spirit. Berger could see the rings of hair that grew along the nape of his neck. He followed the boy's motion, the narrow back, the long arms that turned to delicate fingers.

“You find anything under the pilings?” Berger asked.

The sergeant shook his head.

“No, sir. Not yet.”

“That's the bridge where them fuckers killed Teddy.”

“I said to shut it, Michaels.”

Berger smelled the water, the tang of mud and diesel, the surface scummed with foam and trash, dark water, dirty sewer water like something out of a childhood nightmare. The boy kept praying.

“He was all up in under the stanchions climbing around, sir. All up in under. There’s only one thing you’re doing up there.”

“Fucking *hajjis* casing the place.”

The sergeant told Michaels to shut up.

Berger washed his hands of it, that’s what he said: I wash my hands of this, sergeant. You deal with it. Like Pilate, he thought, the decision that is no decision, and was halfway back up to the road when he heard the shot. The splash—he never heard the splash. Just kept walking.

At the inquiry, he had sat in his Class A’s, creases sharp and medals shining, looked down to see his warped face in the curve of his leathers, smell the starch in his clothes. Turned over for psychiatric evaluation. Case pending. When they sent him back to his post to collect his things, he took the pistol from behind loose paneling. The letter he had already written. He spread it before him along with his identity card and driver’s license and next of kin contact information, and wondered about the boy’s body floating down the river, catching somewhere, perhaps, in the reeds, or in some fisherman’s tangled net. Then he thought of his wife and son.

You know I’m not the one who stood around while they murdered some poor kid.

*

In the morning Berger woke early, swallowed five BC headache powders, and struck out into the woods toward Sevenmile Creek. He had heard gunshots just before first light and thought someone might have been firing at one of the black bears that rooted their way through garbage cans. The beagles were already running, so he walked alone, shafts of sunlight falling through the trees and shaping a cathedral of sorts, backlighting the purple ginger and blue bellflowers that bloomed from the decomposing remains of a nurse log. When he met the creek, he followed it downstream, morning light glimmering along its surface, until he found a small cairn of stones balanced delicately atop a rock in the center of a still pool.

It was there he picked up the first swatches of blood, following them into a laurel thicket where bedded in the cool earth he found a buck lying on its side, its back hip blasted open. A gout of blood had dried, crusting the surrounding fur and turning the dirt wine-dark. The deer breathed heavily and slowly, struggling to raise its head and turn one glassy eye on Berger before lowering it again to exhale into the dust. Berger stepped closer and saw a large Wolf Spider legging its way toward the buck’s eye.

He walked straight back to his granddaddy's house and found the old man sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee from the metal cup of a Stanley Thermos. Berger sat across from him and put his hands on the table.

"Looks like I might stay maybe a little longer than I expected," he said. His granddaddy nodded. "I reckoned you'd see her sooner or later."

Berger said nothing.

"You own it now," his granddaddy said. "If that hadn't occurred to you yet it will soon enough."

He stood, staggering his way to the cabinet, and Berger saw then he had been staring down at a wallet-sized sepia portrait of Berger's grandmother. He came back to the table with two glasses and a bottle of twelve-year old Macallan's scotch, pouring them each a glass.

"Every time I drink this I start to cry," his granddaddy said after a few minutes. "The beauties of this earth."

"The wonders," Berger said.

His granddaddy took a long swallow. "The goddamn wonders, indeed."