

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/2

John Hicks

The Grindstone

He clattered up on Saturday while we kids were at breakfast,
the blue Cushman skirling exhaust and determination

that heaved to a stop at the kitchen door, the wooden crutch wedged
upright beside him. Grandma told us he'd been in the Great War.

The single polished boot led my attention to the pin-folded cloth
that sealed off the story of the leg he left in France. He never spoke.

But, sometimes as he chopped at weeds in short, angry strokes,
he grunted through his teeth at something in the ground.

He worked steadily—his blue bandana and water from the hose
his only pause—till Grandma came out and told him to stop for the day;

to put the tools away; to come collect his pay. When he removed his hat,
he would knock and step back, a deference of pale skin capping the tan line

across his forehead. We liked to watch him sharpen the tools
in the garden shed. Hoe, shovel, sickle screamed in sparks,

lighting his face as he fed them to the spinning stone of the grinder,
turning them into a shiny cutting edge.

He couldn't have made much money, but it must have been enough for gas,
and for the cork-stoppered pint that one morning slipped from his jacket,

as he laid it on the ground beside the bed of poppies he always tended first.
He weeded them by hand, getting down on his knee. When he finished,

hand over hand, he climbed the mast of his cane until he stood erect—
pausing for a moment before picking up the tools and starting to work.

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The Pose

Trooper Meditating Beside a Grave

Winslow Homer, ca. 1865, Oil on Canvas

The Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska

What the artist sees: The living and the dead, a portrait
in gray and brown and black; a Union private in a forest,
the grave before him a simple prop. The soldier

wears a cavalry dress uniform in the casual pose
of someone who wasn't there. Holds as if
for Mister Brady—where you have to stand,

and wait for the impact, the slow push
of light into darkness. Cavalry cannot live
among trees. Caught among these pines,

they would have been easy targets.
Against the light, even sound dies.
In this small frame, board crosses mark

where three fell. This large one facing the private,
leans away from him. His eyes, shaded by his cap,
are locked as though on a name that paint denies us.

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Vietnam Veterans Memorial

Washington, DC

I'm at The Wall in the gray and brown
of a Washington winter, looking for a name.
Doug and I were draftees; met in Infantry Basic.

Youngest in my squad, at first you struggled. I sometimes
carried your pack, others your rifle and gear. But you hung on;
built up; found your feet; became one of us.

In March, after four months of training, you were ordered
to Viet Nam. I went to Virginia for Engineering School.
"Luck of the draw," you said. I saw you again.

You stared out from the black and white of Life Magazine.
Hamburger Hill. 23 May 1969. Still eighteen. Now all this
is locked in black granite with those who fell with you.

I kneel to touch your name.
The pose of someone who wasn't there.