

Tom Sheehan

Fred Rippon's Mushroom House

"WHAT THE GOOD JESUS!" Pete Tura yelled and disappeared, and as he said it again, his voice muffled, his mouth most likely closed by horse manure, a whole nine yards of it, the bottom of the collection box hanging from the second floor of the Hood's Milk Company horse barn in West Lynn let go, taking my pal with it. I last saw one arm, not waving good-bye, probably trying to keep the pitchfork from doing him damage. Possibly he had tried to throw it behind him. That innocent weapon of deadly tines was not in sight as I peered down into the mixture of black clutter and hay still settling down with a metronomic slowness you could count.

In my throat came this heart of mine, bursting, threatening, making echoes of its own, surrealistic at best. Sounds of soft thumping rose up, of giant corduroys rubbing each other or horsehide and emery at toil, at once a bodily bang, a whoosh of air coming back with a smell I can recall yet, but no scream at first. Again I looked down at the pile, like a miniature pyramid of horseshit, in the bed of the truck, an old Chevie stake body. Oh, fair, fair oh Pete, the new Egyptian, entombed; then he sounded out, he was down there, grunting, cursing in a closed mouth emphasis his surprise, his anxiety, his pissed-off frame of mind. Would he tell some girl tonight, I wondered, where he had been today? I saw the handle of the pitchfork extending from the pointed pile, motionless, obviously not having gored my pal. Pistol Pete, safe but cruddy.

Dark-eyed, pimple-faced but still a ladies' man to hear him tell it, Pete was facing Navy service in a few months. He had driven the truck from Fred Rippon's mushroom house on the edge of Lily Pond in Saugus for the weekly collection of horse manure from a scattered half dozen horse barns. Whiting's, McLean's, Hood's, The Creamery, lined our route for the morning. The afternoon ride would take us to a long, narrow fence-lined field in West Peabody where a pile of manure, now fifty yards long, five feet high, ten feet wide, waited new deposit.

It was 1943, the war on in newsreels at the State Theater and in onion-skin letters from brothers out there where it was happening. Milk was still being delivered by horse-drawn wagon, and mushrooms were dependent upon the humus horse remnants and stall hay for successful spawning of the button type that Fred Rippon raised in the old icehouse. Once the mushroom house was Monteith's Icehouse where ice off Lily Pond, at the tale end of winter, would stand thirty feet high in cut blocks amid a mix of insulating sawdust. A steam boiler, ahuffing and apuffing, kept the temperature at 120 degrees Fahrenheit during mushroom crop growth. Now, they tell me, the whole process of raising mushrooms is computer-controlled, down to the critically required degree of heat and per cent of humidity.

The bottom box-wide doors of the contraption had been unpinned and dropped open, and the week's collection usually, from its own plug at wet gravity, dropped without hesitation to the truck bed aligned under it, stake sides made taller by the insertion of high boarding. This morning

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/2

the box load hadn't dropped. We tamped at the stubborn mass, jabbed it, forked it, and levered it with pitchforks angled against the edge of floor. We were grunts at grunt labor, straining muscles, trying not to breathe too deeply, but working in unison. Mule-stubborn, the horse manure would not find release, perhaps clutching unknown edges or frozen against the sides of the metal box eight feet wide, eight feet deep, eight feet high, angled steel holding the box below and grasping it from above. During the week the barn sweepers cleaned the stalls and dropped wheelbarrows of manure into the box. Contracted for free, we took the detritus, a weekly chore for some select Saugus boys wanting cash on the barrelhead for a day's work, and generally on a Saturday of school weeks. Between the pleasant rides from one barn to the next, a routine of stories, cold Coca Cola or Royal Crown or Moxie from bottles filling in the passage, waving to girls, whistling, singing, was some stinking hard work that left its residue odor upon the person.

Coming into Saugus Center one or more voices could be heard, from the steps of the Rathole Pool Hall or the front of the Slop Shop Diner or the doorway of McCarrier's Package Store, sometimes in unison, always at a higher than ordinary octave. "Hey, guys," they'd yell, "there go the shit kickers!" And with that yell there was lots of hand waving and pointing us out to general citizenry.

Pete, unfazed generally, now and then would yell out his window, "Go play with yourself, pal. I got *cash* in *my* pants!"

In the dead of winter he had initially taken me to the field in West Peabody, up the Newburyport Turnpike, westerly on Lake Street, perhaps the day at 25 degrees, though the Saturday sun bright as a bottle top in the sky. I was thirteen, the newest hire, rippling with young muscles ready for trying on hard labor, yearning for coin in my pockets. Of the pile of manure there had been stories. It would steam no matter the temperature when worked on. You could strip to the waist in mid-winter toiling in the middle of it. Steam poured from it like an engine off the Saugus Linden Branch, not as black but as impure, in odor, in fetid thickness that rippled in the nose strong as a summer outhouse.

Pete was no harbinger of fairy tales. "There are times, will be times, Tom, when you'll bust your ass working, but the pay is good. You can jingle your pockets at night. Even take my kid sister to the movies like you did the night we sicced the dog on you and he chased you all the way home. Shit, we laughed all night at that." Pete roared with laughter as he drove the old Chevie truck up the Newburyport Turnpike.

I had never been there before, and Pete had said it flung itself, that pile, down the length of a field. It was as much as 150 feet long, he said; could be somewhat longer, spread its blackness ten to twelve feet wide, and loomed four to five feet high at a glance. And black as Hades, he said, black as Hades. It had a dark crust frozen over the length of it in winter that some days had to be chopped open, broken apart, with axes before it could be tossed into a spreader machine and fed other vermin- or pest-chasing materials, such as peroxide. "Some pests, like flies, can ruin a whole crop," he told me, holding the wheel with one hand, sitting back like a teacher in class.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/2

As he often did, he paused and looked me in the eye, and I knew that was a signal for one of his worldly observations. "You don't have to know all that, but it takes a special will to work on it." Pause again. "I shit you none," he guffawed, "and it makes demands!" And he could laugh at it all in that special way he had, possibly the art of suddenly putting unimportant things aside. Then, after a long moment of silence, he reflected more on the pile, as if he had spent time on its introduction, weighing all the possibilities, measuring portent or promise, and said, "All that heat being held in just for us, just for that mid-winter steam bath. It seems like it's always waiting for us."

He said "us" collectively, and with some warmth. I liked that association and I suspected he was thinking about soon leaving it all behind. Many of our pals, neighborhood guys, slightly older, heroes before donning a uniform, were leaving us. In a hazy kind of celebration we'd learn ourselves only a few years later, Korea becoming a new word in our lexicon, we saw them off.

There was a whole gang of us, mostly from the nearby neighborhoods. Some of us off the farms that still greened part of the town, and off both sides of the river shoe-lacing through our end of Saugus. We desperately wanted a few bucks in our pockets, or to bring it home to parents, the lessons of the Depression still etched on our souls. Oh, the names. Stan and Kenny and Lonnie and Donald Green, of which Stan had his own mushroom house later on. Smiling Everett "Dingle" (last name lost forever but who could laugh from one end of the day to the other). Pete and Lennie and Charlie and Joe Tura who lived over against the edge of Vinegar Hill and who had a sister named Mildred. Don Ryder who became a pretty fair boxer I was in the ring with once and who was in Korea with me later on and wounded and walked with a limp and later saw poet friend Dan'l Shanahan in Alaska addressing a letter to me and asked is that Tom Sheehan from Saugus? Charlie McMillan from the edge of the pond. Ussed Hashem from across the river opposite the First Iron Works of America and who was universally liked and had a great smile of white teeth in a dark face. Reliable George Cronin (who went in the Navy with Ussed and his own brother Larry and they had lost their cousin Joe Berrett in Burma, a young, bruising giant of a kid I'll remember forever, with great wrists and who could throw a football about the length of Stackpole Field). Everett Jiggys Woods and Wally Woods (whose brother Dick had a power boat on the pond and a blue, propeller-driven iceboat that went like hell across the pond after telling skaters to clear the ice) and future brother-in-law Alfred Trahan who married their sister Tessie. Charlie Lawrence with whom I had a long bout in Ryder's garage ring. A kid named Manuel also off the edge of the pond who had dark eyes and a nice serious face and who one day just disappeared out of my life like some of the others did, including tall and likable Bobby Lightizer. Bobby stepped out his front door one morning when I was walking the mile to school to tell me there was no school because it was 17 degrees below zero and hustled back inside.

They are all memorable, but of all the memories, I can see them most vividly at the pile of manure at Lake Street in West Peabody. Summer would be down on the top of us, or winter coming up out of the pile, the steam bathing us stripped to the waist and red as tissue paper. Or we'd be shoveling it into the back of one of Rippon's trucks or stomping it out

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/2

of one of the milk company's huge collection boxes on the second floor of huge barns. Some days we carried into the mushroom house hundreds and hundreds of baskets of manure, the *substrate* I learned later on it was properly called, that the elite button mushrooms were to grow in. That and a top inch of sterilized loam we also hustled into place. Vermin and disease could raise hell with a mushroom crop. A crop could die. That happened too.



Life and hope and loss went on all around us, even as we spent our energies, thirteen and fourteen year old bodies coming of age, coming with inordinate demands being made on them, coming with the flow of grown-up mysteries, coming with hair in the crotch and strange misty mornings that somehow started to rule our lives, or put credence into them.

One of those days the telegram from the War Department about Joe Berrett came. Fire Chief George Drew, in perhaps a draw of the cards, had ended up with the awful assignment of walking up front walks all around town to tell parents their sons had been wounded or killed in action against the enemy. How he must have dreaded those trips, yet he wore his white hat with the shiny black visor, and a single medal on his chest, and gold buttons down the front of his jacket. Joe's was one of those telegrams that sent a silence down a street of Saugus until the whispers gathered to a small storm in Saugus Center.

One of the parents the chief visited, a coal man working in his yard after delivering coal all day, probably the soft coke the war had imposed on us, in all his black clutter and instant grief, chased Chief Drew down the street with a coal shovel, screaming at the top of his voice that his son was not dead. And later there was silence in the neighborhood one could weigh by the pound. I can feel it yet, cool and strangling and touching behind the eyes.

The coal man's old truck, a megalithic machine, the monster chain having ripped out some of its guts, inert, gone to deep rust, finally disappeared one summer into the soft flank of Rumney's Marsh. That's the East Saugus wetlands area forever ferrous in taste, the way iodine and salt and iron inevitably come about as one odor and the always singular flavor. The truck was a Reo, the son's name was Adam; my early casualties, along with Joe Berrett, that never let go. Not ever.

Yet mushrooms and horse shit continued to play a role for us. We'd have stripped the mushroom house in our work, or one section of the house, of all the mushroom beds, breaking down the beds built earlier seven-beds high and each one about four feet wide. The planks and boards would be taken outside the house, cleaned, steamed and sterilized before being taken back into the house, and piled up for the next bed construction. We'd set the first bed, then fill it with the warm compost, then set the second bed and fill, until we reached the top one.

The process consisted of preparing the manure or substrate compost in the beds, adding spawn (you might call it seed) to it with a sterilized loam over the top of the manure about an inch thick. It had to be taken care of then for a number of weeks under the most suitable environmental conditions, until the mushroom crop was ready for harvest. The

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/2

growing period oftentimes took eight or more weeks, with the cultivation completely independent of weather or seasonal changes. Temperature and humidity had to be carefully controlled for ultimate growth and reaping.

Our growing medium or compost was, as I've said, milk wagon horse manure. It did not come off the streets the way some gardeners in those days would walk out with a bucket and shovel to scoop up the droppings for small gardens. Weekly we cycled it out of the barns and added it to the pile, until the compost was ripe. Mushrooms, for your information, do not contain chlorophyll and do not need sunlight for their nutrients. Their nutrients come from the organic matter in the compost, in this case the richness of treated horse manure. And they do not grow from seeds, but from microscopic spores, which are fungi, grown from mature mushrooms. After a matter of a couple of weeks, the spawn shows it has grown throughout the treated manure and looks like a thinly-veined network of white lace, called mycelium, and is actually the roots of the coming mushrooms. The beds, now covered by this veining, are topped with a layer of sterilized or pasteurized soil or loam which acts as a reservoir for moisture. The mycelium grows up through this last layer and forms white pins, which grow sometimes twice their size in 24 hours, until the button mushrooms are ready for the knife, and the neat five-pound basket, and the market.

The walls of the mushroom house, the old Monteith Icehouse, of course, were nearly two feet thick and were filled with an almost orange sawdust, providing the best known insulation for the time. It always makes me think of two closely related things; Sawyer's Icehouse at the other end of Lily Pond, where I worked one and only one winter, and my return from Korea where I had gone in my turn at departure, as you'll see.

At Sawyer's Icehouse: Where it was always horses, dragging ice to the wooden ramp obeying chugs of the gasoline engine, their traces often slack as the ice slid on ice and thundered slowly and resolutely from hard shore to hard shore. Up the ramp the ice cakes lumbered, six feet of Arctic beauty before the huge saw found the blue and silver-red signals sitting just under cover and waiting to flash once more before sawdust poured down on their frantic coloring. I have no hard memory of the men who steamed their labors on the hard pond, who swore and drank coffee from bottles whiskey belonged in, who went gloveless and carefree and irreverent to winter. Of their faces I have no memory, or names, or how they spent their money downtown, or where they trod for stitches when the angry saw went haywire. I only know they poled ice floes and huge cakes with an indifferent touch, that they argued long hours against the cold, the wind, and the incessant need and desperate need for sleep, that at zero degrees they mopped brows with red kerchiefs large as sails.

They were the reverse itinerants who came not for fruit but for ice drop. They appeared one Saturday in December and began to take away pieces of our pond, huge rectangular chunks they hitched up to horses shrouded wholly in steam, their wide mouths rimmed by thick lips often white with frost around the red tongues. The ice harvesters wore soft felt hats, brimmed, jackets so odd you could not find a mate, but boots with horsehide laces, wide belts, and looked westward where the sun would set part ways through the afternoon. In latest July, ever, you could find December deep in the icehouse under the waves of orange sawdust still wet with some of their sweat. It was a cool hideaway to puff the stub of a ciga-

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/2

rette, touch a first glorious breast, play hide and seek for hours as winter sprawled under our feet cold and foreboding and nearly two floors high inside redan walls two feet thick. Mostly I remember the eyes of a horse that plunged through the ice, like great dishes of fear, wide and frightened and full of the utmost knowledge. His front hooves slashed away at the ragged rim of ice, but could not lift him out, or leather traces or ropes or sixty feet of chain, and when he went down, like a boat plunging, huge bubbles burst on the surface and a December afternoon became quiet. We stood transfixed, as if frozen in the gray of that day, the itinerant workers, other horses at rest, my shod friends, as Lily Pond began its disappearance under the edge of yesterday.



But those days were our own glory days at Rippon's Mushroom House, working hard, sweating, being part of a force, the group effort, and having cash put into our hands at the end of the day. Part of that force moved off and away from us at regular intervals, bound for army fatigues or sailor blue or marine or flyer's gear.

And younger replacements came as we moved manure from the milk wagon barns to the field for the compost pile and mixing of peroxide to kill vermin and pests. Finally, after many turnings and aeration, we trucked it to the mushroom house where we filled and hauled and carried hundreds and hundreds of baskets of it inside.

In summer weather, the day of labor behind us, we'd often go fully clothed into Lily Pond off the remnants of the ice ramps, where ice floes once were hustled into the old icehouse. There'd be hollering and noise and snapping of wet clothes in an attempt to rid them of the day's odors, and an eventual move back into sopping dungarees and sneakers for the walk home.

Now and then we'd catch sight of a girl or two peeking at us from behind bushes and we'd vie to get their names. Some of us might have paid for that information. But we paraded like soldiers afterward, a day's work done, our spirits high, and we marched joined, confederated, clubbed by our choice at labor. The shit kickers at payday, dropping coin onto the kitchen table, pitching in while our older brothers were out there in all that noise we only heard in the newsreels of the State Theater, or when a silence on one of our streets could suddenly, after the fire chief got out of his car in front of some friend's house, thunder down into the center of town. In June of 1952, after a year in Korea, I came home and was separated from the Army. The next month, at ten o'clock on the night before the Fourth of July, the mushroom house caught fire. Flames roared through the sides and came up through the roof as all that wall-packed sawdust exploded like canon shot.

When the roof imploded and a huge ball of fire and smoke shot into the sky, gutters and roof tops in Lynnhurst more than half a mile away caught fire. I sat on the peak of my parents' home watching the flames carry away lots of memories that have just started to come back. And I wonder about Bobby Lightizer and Manuel and Donny Ryder and where they are and what they are doing, and some of those other warm and memorable shit kickers who have passed on but are here remembered, for this moment at least.