

What We Had To Do

by Brendan McKennedy

The fragments pulled smoke streamers down the sky, lit in our grass, caught in our tree limbs—smoldering ornaments, ashes, white light. We rushed out with blankets and fire extinguishers.

Enough was enough.

We met in the church basement. We didn't argue this time. In low voices, with grim faces, we planned. We prayed. We got to work, finished in a week the scaffolding we'd started to build a month before and had deserted when the threat seemed to have abated. And then, on Monday night in our beds, we turned our backs to our wives, who held their questions in their chests, under hands that they clasped and wrung white, and we stared out our windows, where one more time, precarious and jagged, the broken moon rose.

~

In the morning we took coffee but no food. Each of us left the house with a ladder under arm, joined a stream of ladder-bearing neighbors in the street. We gathered beneath the scaffolds in the churchyard and we drew numbers. The highest numbers climbed up first. Once in position, we began handing up the pails. We didn't talk much at all. The act of speaking seemed to anchor us in this moment, which we wanted only to coast over and beyond.

The old folks and the littlest children watched from a distance, a ring of faces, little moons themselves gazing up at us, their fathers their sons, as we passed the emptied buckets up and the heavy buckets back down, hand to hand, the milky load sloshing onto our shoulders and hair, into our eyes. We blinked hard, and with little puffs blew from our lips the glowing spray, fummy and sour. From below, the weeping of the old folks and the children was as soft to us as the mere memory of sound.

The dismantled moon was not cold in our hands, but warm, smooth beneath its shell as baby flesh. The musk of its damp,

stringy innards filled us with sorrow. We gritted our teeth. Squinted.

The women, girls, and the boys too young to work on the ladders took the buckets from the work zone and emptied them onto tarpaulins in our back yards. The piled pulp glistening and tumescent in the afternoon sun. From the old books in the church library we knew what could be done with the luminous offal.

Preserved, mixed with liquor, it could be made into a tonic for menstrual cramps, fever, delirium. It could be reduced in cauldrons for use as pottery clay. Though difficult to work with, baked in a kiln it grew tough and elastic. For a short time it could of course be used as a lantern element, though in six months or so its light would abruptly and irreversibly extinguish. It could not be poured into sewers or waterways, or buried; alone, in decay, it would poison our drinking water, cause hallucination, widespread hysteria, birth defects and cancer. Our scientists would study the pulp, as well as the hard rind fragments, for the cause of its deterioration in the sky, and to find new applications for the remains. There was so much of it. In our homes, the women strained it through cheesecloth.

Exposed to oxygen, it developed an odor of ammonia. Faint at first but clinging, the smell embittered the air within our houses and would not, we would learn, ever quite come out. Already the women threw open doors and windows, and in the cool unlit evening, and all through the night, they listened to the squeak and clank of our pail handles, the creak of ladder rungs beneath our boots, and even from that distance the queasy sucking sound of the moon's dense inner flesh pulled away by our fingers.

We worked through the night. Our shoulders burned, our feet cramped. Hands legs necks ached. No one asked to rest. We wanted to be done with it. In the increasing dark, from our vantage in the sky, we could see the white mounds of pulp in our back yards, piling up, taller and wider, but we could not worry about that now. It was too much to think about.

The last fragment of moon rind, a wicked luminescent trapezoid, convex, wide as a man's arm-span, sharp at the edges as a flint

spearhead, we wrapped in a blanket and pulled down. And so the moon was wholly snuffed at last. Up on the ladders we paused for a moment, let our shoulders slump and with long breaths took in the new sky. In the sudden blackness the stars seemed to blink awake, an array of millions, and then to widen, like shock-stricken eyes.

That last fragment, once it had been studied by our scientists, we would lock in a chest beneath the church altar, to be brought out and held above the congregation each year on Christmas Eve, at the weddings of important families, and—when we men, who had worked all this night to dismantle it, died, many of us young and of mysterious ailments—at our funerals.

~

We finished and came down from the ladders, an hour yet before sun-up, and we found the neighborhood lit like a baseball park, the awakened stars crowded out by a haze of illumination that rose from the backyards all up and down our streets. And as we walked home, the piled-up moon pulp's smell infected the air all around us like a nervous sweat, like cat spray. Traces of the white glow we found everywhere on our bodies—beneath our fingernails, in the cracks of our hands. The treads of our soles. In the corners of our mouths, or clinging to our chest hair.

We undressed in our mud-rooms and garages, stuffed those clothes into trash bags. We showered. Tried to cry in the shower, and failed. Tried to think of anything else but the mess that lay ahead of us for weeks, months, and the emptiness of the sky to follow. Failed. We slid into beds, naked, as the sunlight poured into the flat void of sky. Buried our faces in our pillows against the growing stench and the daylight. Pretended not to hear our wives, sighing in our bedroom doorways, saying our names gently and lighting on the edges of our beds, laying one weightless hand on our covered hips, as we bit down hard on our tongues, and spasms seized our chests. And we could not wring out our worry, or rid our clenching hands of the memory of that warm, tingling pulp, the sensation of tearing it away, the ooze between our fingers, the wet heart of this thing we'd known all our lives—until its recent

unexplained and terrorizing disintegration—by the solemn,
implacable gaze of its outer shell, which we'd observed,
photographed, of which we'd drawn pictures and dreamed weird
dreams, and beneath which we'd walked home a thousand nights,
holding the hands of our mothers, and then our girlfriends and then
our wives and then our children, as had our fathers, and their
fathers, and their fathers, and theirs.

