

Asleep on His Helmet

by Con Chapman

The Ides of August, the first day of football.
He has come earliest of all
in the hope that someday
he would be a hero of the fall.

It was too soon for that this season, he knew that,
but he appeared first on the grass outside the stadium
with his gear; helmet, shoulder pads, pants and all.

It was early and dark;
the stadium was on the edge of the park, next to
the practice field where the month before a revival
tent echoed with a preacher's cries to heal
the lame, the halt and the blind.



He laid down his things and thought of heroes two, three years ahead of him. One, All-State, would play that year before more people in a stadium sixty miles away than lived in his small town.

That man's little brother, a senior but not of the same caliber, was captain that year. He wore a jacket with just a letter—no honors, bars or stars; by this conspicuous reserve he hoped to show the others it didn't matter what you did last year, only who you hit in the here and now, and how hard. Does a general need medals to command?

The boy lay down, his head on his helmet for a Spartan pillow,
closed his eyes and thought back to the day earlier in the summer
when the seniors had called to ask if he wanted to
make some money bucking hay.

He couldn't refuse, it was a challenge;
could he keep up with the older boys all day,
doing the hot, hard and dirty work
for two cents a bale?

He didn't even have a pair of work gloves when they called. His mother said to take his father's handball gloves, a vestige of their life in the city of booze and shoes before they moved to the country; those would do for the day, she'd get him a pair for tomorrow. He found them in the garage just as the others pulled up in their flat-bed truck, joking and laughing at the sophomore, 150 pounds dripping wet. "You ready?" the driver said with a smirk. "Yeah," he said, all got-up confidence. "You don't look like it," the other boy said. He didn't know what to say, and just stood there for a minute, wondering what he was missing. "Get in, you dipshit," one of them yelled and thus began a day that was in his mind a fair approximation of what he thought hell would be like.

He couldn't drive yet, and he couldn't keep up with the bucking—the truck bed was too high for him—so they put him to work stacking in the back. He was new and the walls of bales he made were uneven, unsteady.

They had to stop the truck more than once to build them back up again.

He worked as hard as he could and in the barn loft he began to get the rhythm of the work, hauling bales across the floor, stacking them before another came up through the chute.

By the end of the day he'd found his place, junior man on the crew at the age of fifteen. When they dropped him off one of the older boys yelled "See you tomorrow—same time," and it wasn't until they'd driven away that he allowed himself a grimace of pain, clutching his hands where the baling twine had cut through his gloves into his tender skin.

He lay down in the cool grass, his stomach and feet cramping from the loss of water. They told him the next day to take salt pills. "They'll crimp your sex life," an older boy said, "but your hand won't miss you—much."

Each night for a week he had gone to bed, sore and tired,
as tired as he was now, lying against his helmet.
He was woken by a kick to the foot, and opened his eyes
to see the seniors, his hay-bucking bosses, standing over him:
"Are you ready to play some football?" one said,
"or are you gonna sleep all day?"

From "Town Folk and Country People."

