

Death's Noisy Herald

by gerard varni

The bastards will howl. That much Baxter Bright knows. At the moment, though, he's more concerned with getting there. Driving is difficult. His arm movement is limited; turning his head to look for other cars is simply impossible. That's because he's wrapped from neck to waist in foam rubber.

He'd gone to a sporting-goods store and bought one of those mats you put under a sleeping bag. Eight feet long, two inches thick. It wraps around him twice. Of course, he had to cut arm holes, and it took about a half roll of duct tape to secure the thing.

He fully expects to be taunted. And why not? He resembles nothing so much as a human hot dog — a walking, talking Hebrew National. But he's desperate, and he consoles himself with the old saw that desperate men do desperate things. Something like that. He isn't about to miss the game. Poker, once a week, for a couple of years now. Fairly high stakes. Six guys, thousand-dollar buy in, twenty-dollar minimum bet. On a good night, the winner walks with three grand.

Last week, he wore a musty, old ski sweater and a down jacket, until he couldn't stand it anymore because of the heat, which gave him a rash. And even with all that gear on, everyone could still hear the thing. His heart, that is. Actually, it's a valve, a mechanical heart valve. And when it really gets going, it emits a moaning, whistling sound, like wind rushing through trees.

Six months ago, when he'd had the surgery, nobody warned him about the noise. He woke up in the hospital room the day after the operation, nobody around, and heard an odd sound. *Drip, drip, drip,*

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like a leaky pipe. He actually struggled out of the damn bed and looked around for it. He was hooked up to a heart monitor, and he imagined the thing shorting out from the flood. When he couldn't find anything, he fell back down on the bed, out of breath. And the noise was even louder. Then it came to him. The only plumbing problem was inside his chest.

When he's relaxed only he can hear it, something like *thrum swish click, thrum swish click, thrum swish click*. As his pulse quickens, though, the volume and pitch increase, becoming an annoying trill, which ultimately yields to a loud, sibilant cry. He's about six-foot-four, pretty good-sized, not fat or anything, just big. The doctor told him the valve they had to use was a little larger than normal.

"That's why it's a bit louder," the doc said.

"You're god-damned right," Baxter sputtered. "I can take my pulse without touching my body."

The doctor laughed. "Listen, think of it this way. As long as you hear it, you're not dead."

So there he is months later at the poker game, and he'd already told the guys about looking for leaks in the hospital and waking up groggy some nights, rolling out of bed to shut the window because it sounded like it was raining. Anyway, they know the thing makes noise. And they know it irks him, so they don't give him too much shit. When the heart is beating at its normal rhythm — 72 bpm — it's hard for other people to hear the noise, unless they're really paying attention. The thing is, though, when the son-of-a-bitch winds up, the whirring comes loud and fast, sounding like a hundred tiny sleigh bells. Clearly audible over normal conversation. So the first time he finds himself staring at a good hand, he gets excited, which, of course, agitates the valve. But he can't help it. There's five

hundred stinking dollars in the pot.

Then, across the table, Tom frowns, cocks his head and says, "What the fuck is that noise?"

"It's Bax," says Pete. "Sounds like it's coming out of his ears."

Suddenly, they all get it, stare down at their cards, and the room becomes even quieter.

"Whose bet?" Baxter stammers, looking at a flopped full-boat, kings full of deuces.

"Yours," says Pete.

"Three hundred," he says, tossing it into the pot. The heart sounds like some sort of industrial turbine. The guys glance at each other, but they all call the bet. He lays down the boat, enough to beat Tom's flush, and rakes the pot toward him. It is the last decent hand he wins that night. From then on, every time they hear the valve begin to croon, they throw in their cards. Of course, nobody says anything; but then nobody has to. They may as well have dealt his cards face-up.

The worst time is when he's lying on his side in bed. With one ear buried in the pillow, the noise is almost intolerable, something akin to a leaf-blower yowling outside the window. Lying there, with the terrible screech emanating from his chest, blaring from his open mouth, he thinks about jet planes and jack hammers and nuclear explosions. He doesn't have quiet thoughts.

There are more tranquil alternatives. Organic valves, for instance, harvested from pigs and cows, are far quieter. A porcine valve is effectively silent. After all, it's real tissue. Problem is, they only last about eight years. So a relatively young valve recipient might

require three or more replacement surgeries — complete with chest-slicing scalpels, bone saws and rib spreaders. After his cardiologist had presented Baxter with these facts (the bit about the bone saws and rib spreaders was particularly convincing), he agreed to the artificial valve.

When he was a child, eight or nine, Baxter contracted rheumatic fever. It didn't seem so bad at the time. Hell, it liberated him from Sister Mary Joseph's third-grade gulag for a month. But, apparently, it was the genesis of his current condition. The virus produces calcium deposits, which accumulate and harden in heart valves, causing the muscle to pump blood less efficiently. Eventually, the put-upon organ begins to sputter, causing weakness, fainting, and other unsettling symptoms — like the augury of imminent death.

Baxter experienced all of these one day while walking toward his car in the YMCA parking lot after his usual workout. First, he had trouble catching his breath. Then, he was suffused with an eerie warmth, followed by intense dizziness, as he fell to his knees and his vision sped away down a dark tunnel. The next thing he recall is staring up at a heaving cleavage. An amply endowed young woman in a spandex outfit was bent over him, slapping his cheek and breathlessly intoning, “Are you alright? Sir? Are you alright?”

Two weeks later — after a flurry of EKGs and sonograms, thallium stress tests and 24-hour Holter monitors — he was wandering around his hospital room like a hallucinogenic plumber searching for leaks.

He pulls the car over to the cur in from of Tom's place, a smallish, well-kept house with a surfeit of overgrown bushes encroaching on windows that are covered with wrought-iron bars. He yanks the key from the ignition, inhales and exhales deeply. He has a wad of money in the front pocket of his Levi's. He's prepared for their ridicule. He knows the valve is well into its gruesome little

symphony, because he feels his heart dancing in his chest. With the thick foam wrap, however, it is at least a subdued composition.

Next, his knuckles rap the door. He breathes heavily, waits. Tom answers, looks him up and down with a slightly raised eyebrow.

“Hey, Bax. Thought you'd skipped out on us.”

Baxter makes his way through the front door, awkwardly, swinging from side to side the way a refrigerator does when it's moved. He sees the rest of the guys sitting at the table, counting chips, drinking beer. They look up, see him, glance over at Tom who's still holding the door open. Nobody says anything at first, there's just silence; but he senses a collective “What the fuck?” hanging in the air. Then, Pete, who is apparently in mid-chug when Baxter walks in, can't control himself any longer and erupts with a deep gagging sound, which precipitates a gusher of beer from his mouth and nostrils. He's choking, and stuff is still dripping out of his face when the rest of the crowd loses it. Since they seem to be at least as amused by Pete's nose geyser as they are by the six-foot-four-inch, foam-wrapped goon in the doorway, Baxter laughs a bit, too.

There aren't many questions at first. After all, everyone knows why he's resorted to such disturbing measures. So the cards start to slide.

“Jacks or better, trips to win.” Pete deals, after having mopped up his yeasty face.

Baxter sits ruler-straight in his chair, primarily because that's the only option. He pulls his cards toward him and watches sadly as one slips from his grasp and flutters to the floor. He looks down at it, ace of hearts; of course it's landed face-up. He leans to the left, makes a vain attempt to bend over and snag the damn thing. But his arm

doesn't move past forty-five degrees in relation to the side of his body. So when he cambers down, he overshoots the card by a foot. It's an awkward moment, but the guys want to let him do this himself. They don't even look down, don't want to see the card.

Finally, after a humiliating minute of bouncing and grunting and failing to even touch the wayward card, he gives up and says, "Okay, everyone, it's a freakin' ace of hearts and I can't fucking reach it because I'm wearing a fucking hot-dog costume so you bastards won't hear my fucking valve when I get a good hand and get all excited. There, it's all out in the fucking open. Now, Tom, would you please be kind enough to fetch my fucking ace of hearts? Thank you."

As the evening wears on, his sense of indignity increases. Dealing is out of the question, of course, and he experiences the same thermal discomfort that he'd encountered with the sweater and down jacket. Worse still, after the first dozen hands or so, he hasn't been dealt anything decent anyway. The valve purrs along, *thrum swish click*.

At one point, he glimpses his reflection in a window. From this angle, he doesn't see a hot dog so much as an overgrown hors d'oeuvre, his head a cocktail olive perched atop something doughy. Suddenly, he is struck by the utter absurdity of the situation. And it's no longer comical; he is overcome by a vivid sensation of dread. He senses a trickle of perspiration singing down his chest, thinks of his heart and the thin veil that separates life and death. The valve seems ambiguous. Miraculous, certainly, but foreign, a pathogen boring away inside his chest. Shaken, he gets up between hands and walks out. Waddles, actually. Doesn't say a word, not thanks, not fuck you all for having healthy hearts, nothing. Just shimmies through the door and closes it quietly behind him.

He drives home, walks immediately to the kitchen, takes out a knife and begins tearing through the tape and foam rubber, trailing the shredded remnants of his masquerade into the bedroom. He staggers into bed exhausted, angry, hopeless. Eventually, he falls asleep to the metronomic rhythm of the valve.

He dreams. It is the moment of his death. He is weak, confused; he concentrates on gathering his breath and all his senses. With each inhalation, particles of light descend into his heart, illuminating a path he must take. He can no longer see, nor taste, nor speak. He is becoming something entirely other, withdrawing into the heart. He cannot think, nor touch. Beyond knowing, he encounters the heart, which has become merely a point of light, and by that light he departs through the apertures of his body. All the vital breaths, and thus his life, depart with him, opening outward into the air, forming a hole like the center of a wheel. He passes through this opening, moving up toward the sun. All that exists unfolds before him; and the sun, too, opens up a luminous hole through which he passes, still and still moving, up toward the stars, toward an existence free from grief, beyond the world of fear and desire. And in the morning, his eyes tick open in perfect cadence with the clicking of the valve.

It is made from a hard, polished, black material called pyrolitic carbon. The valve. It is round, with two half-moon-shaped leaflets forming its center. These leaflets pivot shut with each heartbeat to close the orifice and control blood flow. On the outside of the ring-like valve, there is a sewing cuff made of Teflon and Dacron, through which the surgeon runs the thread that connects the device to human tissue.

He knows all this because he's seen a valve, studied it. Before the surgery, the cardiologist gave him one to take home. He lived with it for a couple days, opening and closing the leaflets, holding it up to the light and peering through the cuff. He held it under the faucet in

the kitchen, moved it in and out of the stream, observed as the water worked the leaflets. He imagined it inside his chest, opening and closing a thousand time each day. But the noise, that he didn't contemplate.

In the days following the last poker game and the dream, he finds himself being swept aimlessly from one disparate moment to the next, seeking external distractions — movies, food, booze, work. He's a technical writer for a software company; monotonous work, twisting the tortured language of engineers into the dull prose of user's manuals. But now he throws himself into it with a sense of mission and renewed vigor. It's a way of suppressing valve thoughts for eight solid hours at a stretch. He doesn't work in silence, though, as he once had. It's no longer an ally. Yes, he still cocoons himself inside a windowless office where the air is still and warm, almost stifling. But now he has an MP3 player and ear buds, and he does his writing while listening to Blind Boy Fuller and Tom Waits and Mozart's *Requiem* at considerable volume.

After work, he goes to a bar and throws down a few beers, shoots a little pool, flirts with the women, knowing full well he can never take them home to his soundless apartment. He'd made that mistake once. She was a regular, small and sleek, with wild red hair and a sensuous South Carolina drawl. The guys at the bar called her "wing-nut." They had fantasies of planting her atop their supine bodies and giving her a good spin.

One night, she comes home with Baxter; and she isn't shy about why. As soon as they get through the door, she is tugging at his clothes while her tongue flicks away at his ear. They stumble into the bedroom, fall onto the bed, kissing urgently and roughly. And then she is naked, on top of him, grasping behind for his cock. His heart throbs warm and hard in his chest, and the valve wails like a warning siren. She, breathless and still searching, says, "Do you hear that noise? What is it?" And he as to tell her that it's him. She's

nice about it, actually. She giggles and says, "How cool." Then she lowers her head to his chest and begins humming at the same pitch. But it's over for him. He shrinks like a warm popsicle. He thanks her for her understanding, says that she's wonderful, really, but he's tired. When he shuts the door behind her, he leans against it and kicks the jamb as hard as he can, again and again, until the blood shows through his socks.

He starts going to concerts, seeks out bands he's never heard of purely for their sonic prowess. Groups like Sexy Death Soda, The Faggot Punks, and Dog Party, who play long, searing sets. And afterward, he walks out with the discordant notes ricocheting inside his head like frenzied atoms. The roar lasts for hours, inundating his senses until long after he goes to bed and begins the dream of dying.

This new lifestyle, though, his immersion in tumult and din, begins to diminish him both physically and mentally. He is chronically exhausted. And there are times when he is so anxious to the point of panic. He goes to the doctor, who prescribes Xanax for the anxiety, saying it will also help him sleep. Soon, he's eating Xanax like candy-corn. Still, he sleeps fitfully and often wakes in the morning disoriented and slick with sweat. He drinks more, eats less. And then one day at work, he feels his heart skip a beat. He tears the ear buds off and waits. It happens again. He can feel it in his throat, the disrupted rhythm, and he is quickly enveloped by a sickening sense of warmth and dread. When it flutters again, he panics and the valve clicks even faster. And louder.

He begins to doubt his sanity, visits a psychiatrist, who teaches him to meditate, to concentrate on his breathing until he is calm. Insisting that breath is the bridge to consciousness, the psychiatrist tells him, "Now, as you slowly inhale, say to yourself, 'I am breathing in a long breath, and thus I teach myself to breathe in.' And as you exhale, again slowly, think, 'I am breathing out a long breath, and

thus I teach myself to breathe out.' "

The breathing technique is an ancient Buddhist sutra. The psychiatrist calls it *mindfulness*, says it is a miracle by which human being can master and restore themselves.

"Whenever a crisis arises, you must resolve to maintain self control and keep a calm heart. And you can do this through mindfulness, by living in the moment of each breath."

Baxter overcomes the cynical urge to label this advice mystical bullshit. He is desperate. So he tries it, practices meditating, taking long, purposeful breaths, and following the rhythms of his pulse until he is pervaded by a sensation of peace. He does this for a month and, to his utter amazement, discovers that it helps. Soon, he is able to work without music; he cuts back on the booze, sleeps better. He even summons the courage to rejoin the poker game. Which is where it all falls apart again.

The details are insignificant, yet entirely axiomatic. The struggle begins with his first good hand, two pair — bullets over kings. Despite his resolute meditative efforts, Baxter's valve noise suddenly ratchets from a barely audible *thrum swish click* to an eye-averting roar. Only this time the biological concerto is augmented by the sound of his ludicrous heavy breathing. He loses his concentration, and instead of simply breathing in and out slowly, he begins sucking and blowing with a disturbing fervor. Soon, he is lightheaded and dark spots whirl counterclockwise through his field of vision; the sensation of looming unconsciousness washes over him like a soporific. He drops his cards, still gasping and heaving, propelling himself into hypoxia. Pete yells for someone to call 911.

The, Baxter is vaguely aware of chairs being pushed back wildly and tumbling over, beer bottles crashing, a cacophony of strange noises sweeping him toward darkness. Oddly, though, in his barely

conscious state, flailing like a lunatic unhinged, he is suffused with a violent desire for life.

The next day, after an embarrassing junket to the emergency room, he's back at his cardiologist's office. All the tests are normal, the doctor tells him, nothing wrong with his heart or the valve.

"It was a panic attack," he says. "Classic symptoms. You get yourself all worked up, adrenaline kicks in, your body's fight-or-flight mechanism goes into overdrive. It's a primal response to overwhelming fear. Now you know what *Homo erectus* felt like when a saber-tooth tiger wandered into the cave."

Is he taking the anticoagulant? Yes, Baxter tells him. That's good. Drinking alcohol? Again, yes. "Not good," he snorts. "The combination of the alcohol and the anticoagulant could very well precipitate this sort of an attack." In fact, the doctor tells Baxter, he's sure of it.

"How are you sleeping?" he asks, scribbling something onto his chart.

Baxter ignores the question. "Listen, doc, I want to do it over. What I mean is . . . I mean the valve, the noise, I can't live with it. It's gonna kill me. I want an organic valve, the cow or the pig. Anything that doesn't make the god-damn noise."

The doctor stops writing, looks up as if Baxter had just told him he wanted a sex change. His glasses slip from the bridge of his nose, and he grabs wildly to snare them. The chart falls to the ground. "You're kidding, right?" he chuckles. Baxter shakes his head, looks away. "So you're really not kidding? Are you fucking crazy?"

"Pretty damn close, if you want to know the truth."

"It's out of the question," the doctor stammers. "You don't need it. The valve you have now is working perfectly. Consider yourself lucky. A lot of poor slobbs don't make it *this* far."

Then Baxter is up off the chair, in the doctor's face, close enough to smell his sterile breath. He starts pleading, frantic: "Before the surgery, you said an organic valve was an alternative. You told me it wouldn't last as long, but you didn't say it would be quieter. You didn't tell me about the noise *this* would make." He stabs at his chest with an index finger.

"Mr. Bright . . . Baxter, there is no valid medical reason to replace your valve. I'm sorry. You're talking about elective surgery. We don't *do* elective heart surgery. Insurance companies don't *pay* for elective heart surgery. Organic valves aren't available for *elective heart surgery!*" The doctor hammers these last three words in staccato fashion, his voice rising, his face florid and moist, glasses slipping.

"What do you mean the valves aren't available? Why not?"

"You're not hearing me, Baxter. The point is you don't need it. You'll become accustomed to the sound of the valve, trust me." He puts his hand on Baxter's shoulder. "In the meantime, we can up the Xanax a bit, go to two milligrams. That'll take care of the anxiety. You'll sleep better. And by the way, cut out the booze."

He tears the hastily written prescription from the pad, gives it to Baxter, shakes his hand vigorously. There is something cryptic and unsettling about the way the doctor looks at him. Fear? Exasperation? Baxter isn't sure.

"You're going to be fine," he says in an overly indulgent tone. "I want to see you again in a month. Any problems before then, don't hesitate to call."

Baxter walks out into the bright sunlight, sneezes reflexively, and thinks he feels his heart jump and flutter. He drives to work and requests a leave of absence. Not citing any specific reason, he simply fills out the paperwork, gathers his few things — MP3, ear buds, some reference books and a container of mint tea — and leaves without waiting to hear from his supervisor. It doesn't matter. In his mind, he's begun separating reality into compartments, calculating the value of each small room in accordance with its proximity to his own distress.

Just after the surgery, he truly looked forward to living, welcomed the reprieve he'd been given with grateful anticipation. Now, however, he views the machine in his chest as little more than death's noisy herald. Extraordinary, yes, it will open and close 40 million times! Yet each cycle is an audible alert, an intimation of mortality. The dacron, the carbon, the pyrolite, all gleaming reminders that, really, he's been cheated. Whereas once he genuinely cared about the suffering and joy of others, that is all secondary now to the question of his own existence. Living and dying are now two faces of the same reality. And he feels as though he's lost the courage to endure either. He hardly knows how to live anymore, yet he is equally bewildered by the problem of how to die.

And perhaps that's it, *the problem of dying*. Maybe it isn't a problem at all. Conceivably, it's just something he has to experience more intimately. He remembers the psychiatrist asking in one of their sessions if he was afraid of death. "I'm not sure," he'd replied, "but I suppose so."

"That's not healthy, Baxter. If one doesn't know how to die, one can hardly know how to live."

That night, the dream is different. This time he is floating inside a sort of medieval stone tower. At the bottom of this dark, dank structure there is a naked corpse. He tries to look away, but he's

transfixed. The body is decomposing. It swells, distends, turns colors — first a greenish-grey, then a curious violet. It is being eaten away by worms, until only bits of flesh cling to the bones. Soon, only the white bones remain, which in turn slowly dissolve into dust. Then, he is aware of a noise, an eerie scraping. He looks up to see the roof of the tower sliding away, admitting a shaft of sunlight that illuminates the pile of dust. It rises inside the brilliant conduit of light, ascending to the level where he is floating, then continuing upward. He watches it rise toward a blue circle of sky outside the tower. But the moment it clears the top of the shelter, there is a tremendous blast of wind. And the heap of dust is carried off to a place he cannot see.

The next day he spends a lot of time walking and thinking, planning. It's hot, and there's little wind. He's not familiar with the noises of the city on a weekday, but he welcomes the cacophony: the grinding gears of delivery trucks, the blaring taxi horns, and the omnipresent *beep beep beep* of garbage trucks in reverse. This comforting white noise washes over his senses, its narcotic effect enabling him to concentrate on the blueprint he's forming in his mind. He stops at a sporting-goods store, then moves on to a military-surplus outlet, and finally a liquor store.

He glances at his watch, sees it's almost 4:00 pm., smiles. He's gone almost the entire day without hearing the valve. He imagines what this would be like every day. Back at his apartment, he clicks the stereo on, throws open the windows, and begins unpacking his purchases. From the sporting-goods store, a knife and a box of ammunition; from the military-surplus outlet, a musty, old army-issue backpack; and from the liquor store, a bag of ice and a bottle of vodka. The ice and vodka he puts in the freezer. The knife and ammunition he drops in the backpack's front compartment. The he walks to his closet, reaches up, and pulls down a handgun, a Ruger GP 100 .357 magnum. He'd won it in a poker game years ago, but had never fired it; he'd kept it around, without bullets, just in case

he had to scare an intruder. He puts the gun in the front of the backpack with the knife and the ammo. Then he lays down for a nap. No dreams, he tells himself. He understands already.

His eyes flicker open at 10:20 pm. The apartment is dark, save for the weak red glow of the numbers on the alarm clock. The stereo is still playing and, in fact, seems louder, perhaps because the street noise has subsided. He rises groggily, slams the windows shut, punches the stereo off, then sits back down on his bed to listen. It's there, in its tamer disposition. *Thrum swish click. Thrum swish click.* He reaches for the Xanax on the nightstand, grabs two, then walks to the kitchen and takes the vodka and bag of ice out of the freezer. He cracks open the vodka, washes down the pills, then drops the bag of ice on the floor to loosen it up. He pours the ice into the main compartment of the backpack, takes another long pull on the vodka, then shoves the bottle into the ice and zips up the backpack.

One can hardly live if one doesn't know how to die, he thinks, as he walks to the car. The canvas backpack is cool against his back, exaggerating the sensation of the warm, still air. He slings the pack onto the passenger seat of his old brown Celica — a hatchback, automatic, with rear-window louvers and a spoiler. It's always been reliable. Traffic is light, and he eases onto the freeway, settles in the far right lane, throws in a CD and reaches for the vodka. He's driving east, away from the city, away from the beggars, the bosses, the doctors, the insurance bastards, the whole cluster of chaos and humiliation and fear. It will be quiet where he is going. He reaches over and nudges the volume up a bit. Tom Waits' *Frank's Wild Years*.

After two hours and 100 miles, he pulls off the freeway onto a two-lane highway that will wind through flat, scrubby farmland up into foothills, then twist across a squat range of mountains and, eventually, descend into a state-long stretch of desert. But he isn't going as far as the road will take him. When he smells manure, he pulls to the side of the road, into the dirt, near an old stand of

eucalyptus trees. He cuts the lights and reaches for the backpack, which drips ice water as he pulls it over his shoulder. He takes the vodka bottle out; it's still half full, but he takes one last gulp and throws it to the ground. He pours the water out of the backpack, looks inside, sees there is still ice left. He unzips his pants, begins to pee, swaying side to side. He's drunk, but he tells himself that at least he know he's drunk. "Can't hardly live 'til you know how to die." He says it out loud this time, belches, then zips up and trudges toward the trees.

No sense in going too far, he reasons. Not now, anyway. So he stops, kneels down, sets the backpack beside him. Suddenly, he is thinking about the two dreams — his death dreams — the luminous rising, the rotting body, the dust. And it occurs to him that there is some mystical, ineluctable quality to dreams, that all *this* is inescapable, has been since the day the birth slime oozed from his lungs.

He reaches into the backpack and pulls out the gun. A glint of the half-moon's faint light catches the silver barrel. He points it toward the field, pulls the trigger once, twice. *Click, click*. That sound. So familiar. He listens to his heart, to the valve. The night is hot and windless and quiet. *Thrum swish click*. He listens, looks up, whispers it to the trees. *Thrum swish click*. He reaches into the backpack and takes a round from the box of ammunition. Then he pushes the cylinder release on the gun, holds it up and looks at the moon through the five holes. He spins the cylinder, and the moon seems to flutter like an old moving picture. *Thrum swish click*. He blows through the cylinder, spins it clockwise, then counter. He closes his eyes, places the bullet into one of the chambers, then spins it again once, twice. *Thrum swish click*. He turns the gun toward him, *thrum swish click*, points it at his chest, pulls it away, then places the barrel in his mouth. *Thrum swish click*. He waits for a moment when he is thinking of absolutely nothing in this world but dying. Then he pulls the trigger. *Click*. Fine, he thinks, dropping the

gun into the dirt. That's decided. Now for the living part. It is an urge so irresistible that it has the force of doom.

Emerging from the line of trees, he encounters a low fence and, on its opposite side, a field of tall sunflowers. Beyond the sunflowers, in the listless moonlight, he is barely able to make out a group of low, white buildings. He jumps the fence, pushes through the sunflowers, and walks toward the buildings, which resemble soup cans sliced in half lengthwise and shoved into the dirt.

As he crisscrosses shallow drainage ditches, he is aware that the stink of the place is intensifying. Doubtless, the ditches are conduits for animal waste, fertilizers and pesticides, but that thought doesn't deter him. About twenty yards from the building now, he sinks to one knee and notices for the first time that his heart is agitated, the metallic sound of the valve is different, much louder. It is snapping and whirring, emitting a high-pitched tone like the mewling of a cat. The stench is overwhelming, and he understands now that the source is a sort of pond or lagoon in front of the buildings. It must be the animals' collected waste — pure shit and piss and blood — a foul miasma deepened by the odor of nitrogen and sulfur and ammonia.

He walks toward the three white metal structures. Each has a sign appended to it: *Breeding Room*, *Growing Room*, *Finishing Room*. He walks into the building marked *Growing Room*, careful to shut the door quietly behind him. Then he pauses, lets his eyes adjust to the room's dim light, which comes from a single bulb hanging at the far end. He is almost overcome by the fetid reek of hogs. He puts the pack down carefully, leans it against a wall opposite the nearest enclosure. There's still a bit of ice left and some cold water. I'll find someone else, he thinks. Another doctor. And no need for mechanical parts.

He takes out the knife, unsheathes it. A snuffling, rooting noise permeates the room; it's loud, but imperceptible to him over the valve's snap and whirl. He steps to the enclosure, looks in at the sow. It's massive, five hundred pounds at least, much larger than he'd thought a pig could grow. It doesn't seem to mind his presence, even as he mounts the steel bars of the fence.

He leaps down on top of the hog, punches the knife into its thick, stubbled flesh as hard as he can. The animal erupts not with a squeal but with a deep, screeching howl, whipping its head around. It twists and thrashes, throws him off. He lands hard, slipping on the animal's piss and shit as he tries to get up. The pig skitters and lurches toward him, knife still protruding from its back. He lunges, gets both hands on the knife, tears it free as the pig slams him against the railing. He scrambles up several rungs, feels the enraged animal gnashing at his legs.

He sees blood spilling from the wound in the pig's back, hears the shrieking and yowling of the other animals in the room. Then he raises the knife above his head with both hands, frantic, breathing in staccato bursts. His heart is throbbing, and the whirl of the valve roars in his head. He slams the knife into the pig's shoulder, hits bone, feels his fingers slip past the hand-guard and slide down the shaft of the knife. The pig stops thrashing but continues to grunt and wail.

Baxter squats next to it, breathless, wipes his face instinctively, smearing it with an admixture of blood and filth. He feels as though he's climbed a great height, abolished every contrast between the world and himself. He looks at his tremulous, bleeding hands, then into the vacant eyes of the soughing pig. He feels sorry for the animal, and he coughs to quell a faint tickling of remorse. Still, he reasons, the two have arrived at an inescapable juncture.

"Fucking beast," he whispers, "don't you know how to die?"

