

The Hole Between Them

by gerard varni

"There is a fatality, a feeling so irresistible and inevitable that it has the force of doom, which almost invariably compels human beings to linger around and haunt, ghostlike, the spot where some great and marked event has given the color to their lifetime; and still the more irresistibly, the darker the tinge that saddens it."

--Nathaniel Hawthorne

The boy raced down the path, bare feet slapping rhythmically against dry ground, raising puffs of dust that hung in the air for an instant, still and still moving, before dissipating into a chalky haze. He moved with ferocious grace, the eloquent symmetry of swirling arms and sinewed legs concealing his true speed. He seemed to be fleeing a predator. And essentially he was, fleeing the spent moments and dust-fouled air -- the mortal backwash -- that lingered in his wake.

He glided through clean air, beyond the silence of before and the stillness of to come, toward the springboard at the end of the path. Without breaking stride he reached the board, stomped on it with both feet, and left the ground, legs bent, knees pulled close to his chest. After two precise revolutions, he uncoiled, threw back his head, stabbed his arms to the side as if crucified, and landed flawlessly -- feet together, legs locked -- in the bottom of the hole.

The hole was eight feet long, four feet wide, and six feet deep. Exactly. The boy's father had dug it using several different types of shovels -- including an exotic Swedish ice shovel with a carbon shaft and a titanium head -- to mete out the precise gradations. He finished the job with a shiny kitchen spatula, whose edge had been whetted to a surgical sharpness. Then, in order to stave off erosion, the father stapled tightly woven nylon netting to the sides. It was an exquisite hole.

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The father was equally as virtuous in constructing the wooden springboard. He'd milled the 2x4s himself, chose an unblemished sheet of plywood and soaked it in water until he was able to impart a subtle but faultless convexity. He fashioned the springs from rusted shock absorbers, spending hours removing the filth and corrosion with a towel soaked in dimethylsulfoxide, a powerful industrial solvent that the father and the boy's mother also valued for its medicinal qualities. They applied it topically as a remedy for their various ailments, which, taken together, included Diverticulosis, Candida, Diabetes and spider veins.

The path that led to the hole was equal in length to 22 of the boy's full strides. The hole was 10 feet beyond the springboard. The proximity of each to the other was fundamental. When the boy was added to the matrix, it became organic. Surely, without the hole there would have been no path; nor would there have been a springboard. And, likewise, in the absence of the path and the springboard the hole would have been unthinkable. Without the boy, though, and for that matter the father and the mother, well . . . clearly the connections are evident.

The field where the father dug the hole was on the cusp of an alluvial valley. Once a vineyard, it had long lain fallow, the generative vines burned and plowed under. It was bordered on the north by snuff-colored foothills, scruffy lumps that seemed to hesitate before finally slouching toward an unremarkable mountain range. Opposite the foothills, on the field's southern edge, was a stand of old eucalyptus trees, each one a gnarled sentry with bark like burnt skin peeling from its trunk.

Every day just after sunrise the father, the mother and the boy emerged single file from the dark line of trees -- the mother first, the father in the rear, the boy in between. The boy would make perhaps a hundred passes before sundown. To an outsider, the routine would have seemed merely quotidian -- sprint, leap, land -- with no perceptible deviation in form from one endeavor to the next. But to the three, it was this equivalency, this sameness that endowed the ritual with its numinous quality. They were loath to alter the pattern,

fearful of retribution from some unseen power. This suspicion imbued the act with a religious quality, made it somehow sacrificial. For what is religion other than fear of invisible power?

With her head wrapped in a blood-red scarf, so that from the rear it looked like an overripe tomato perched on her shoulders, the mother stood behind the boy as he prepared for each run. She watched him rock gently back and forth, listened for the deliberate exhalations of his breath, beheld the slight twitch of sinew in legs that might have been hewn from tropical wood. She sensed the small beginnings of motion even before the furious in-suck of breath that signaled the renewal of the sacrifice. And all the while, she caressed the smooth river stone she'd had since the boy was born. Each time the boy left, with the dust rising and mingling around her, she uttered the same soft incantation: "Be well, boy."

The father waited on the opposite side of the hole. He watched the boy, a spare figure sketched darkly against the pale canvas of the riverbed that twisted away from the field and crept into the dry hills. The father, whose worn denim overalls hung on a reedy frame, had a rawboned face and black hair that shone like onyx but wanted washing. In his hand, he held a ladder, which he'd built, too, and no less lovingly than the hole or the springboard. It was simple, five feet long, constructed entirely of hand-milled wood. The ladder.

He would lower it into the hole after each landing, as it was difficult for the boy to climb out on his own. The boy scaled the ladder slowly, methodically, right foot first, four steps and out. He would turn, then, to his father and the two would exchange a look, explicit but wordless. As the boy traveled back along the path, and when the father was certain he was beyond earshot, he would mutter, "Well done, boy."

The boy had never taken lessons, never been taught the acrobatic feats he transacted so effortlessly. The skills sprang from a place deep within, beyond imagination even. Though at one time he had perceived the motions only in his mind, they had become involuntary, as natural as the blood coursing through his veins. The twisting and turning, the layouts and somersaults, the rapturous

sensation of soaring, even the ineluctable melancholy of landing -- together, they counterbalanced the bleakness of gravity. They had become his necessary angels.

Day after day from dawn until dusk, and season upon season, the boy and his father and mother came to the withering field. It was an urge so irresistible that it had the force of doom. In the cold morning, with the sun low in the eastern sky, the mother would squint and raise her veiny hand against the light. This way, she could track the boy's ghostlike visage through the roiling dust until, for those few sacred moments, he flew like an obedient Icarus, soaring well but not too close to the flesh-dissolving sun. And as he reached the apex of his flight -- the exquisite image of his writhing body splayed against the sun -- she was suffused with despair.

Slipping into the ground as if swallowed, the boy would thrust his arms skyward, not in a gesture of victory or even gratitude but rather submission, in keeping with the covenant of the act. Upon seeing the hands like two dark stubs rise above the hole, the mother would let out her breath with a staccato rasp and loosen her grip on the stone.

In the evening, it was the father who regarded the figure of the boy, although against a far different tableau. The sun was a deep claret, spent and misshapen, with all the fury of a sigh. It was then, in the ochre light and with the boy striding away, that the father felt weak, almost forsaken, as a person must in that awful moment before the plane hits the ground.

One evening, after yet another flawless leap and immersion, the father found himself scrutinizing the setting sun. Swollen and crosscut by a long thin cloud, it looked like a wet wound wrapped with gauze. Yet he knew the cloud was powerless to stanch the flow of light, anemic though it was. Only the slowly turning Earth could snuff that flame. And only the Earth could ignite it once again.

Then the father heard the somber thump of bare feet against dirt and shifted his gaze to a gliding form that moved as smoothly as poured liquid. The boy's head was a still point around which flowed atoms of unseen energy. He ran toward the springboard, with its

stamped image of two dark feet -- an effigy of accreted dust and perspiration. He surged off his left foot, hit the board, occluding the dirty footprints, then rose up spinning like a flipped coin. After three faultless somersaults, he released his legs and untwisted his body into knife-edge form before disappearing into the hole.

The father heard the sharp crack and instinctively hunched down. He thought the noise was a rifle report. He looked around, scanning the field for a hunter. But there was no one, and nothing to hunt. Then, he heard a low moaning coming from the hole. He stood up, ladder in hand, and walked to the edge. The boy was slumped against the back, clutching his left leg above the thigh as if he were trying to strangle it.

The leg was bent at an odd angle, and just above the knee the father could see a shard of bone poking through the skin. It was smooth and shimmered like the tip of an iceberg. The shattered femur must have perforated an artery, for blood streamed from the wound and a viscous pool accumulated around the boy.

The ladder slipped from the father's hand. The boy was shivering, and he wept, although the sound was barely audible; the father did not believe the tears were from the pain but rather the anguish of having succumbed at last. The boy lifted his head, looked up to the father through wet eyes, tried to communicate his sorrow. Neither spoke. The father beheld the sobbing boy -- crumpled and bleeding in the ditch -- and the wordless thing that passed between them was love. The boy acquiesced, then. He leaned back against the cool dirt, let his hands fall away, and watched the dark chroma seep from his wound.

The father stepped back, turning as he leaned down to pick up the shovel. He looked beyond the hole, down the path to the place where the mother stood. She was no longer watching. Her hand hung limply at her side and she stared at the stone that had slipped into the dirt. Even if she'd been crying -- and perhaps she was -- the distance between them was too great for the father to hear.

He thrust the shovel into the earth, measured a uniform scoop of dirt and, without looking, threw it behind him into the hole. He

added another on top of that. And another. There was no sound but the falling dirt. It took him three hours to fill the hole, and by then it was dark. He laid the shovel down beside the ladder and walked away, paralleling the path but careful not to step on it. He encountered the mother halfway. Guided by the listless moonlight, they quit the field single-file: the mother first, the father several paces behind, and a hole in between them.

