

Ornithology

by Jack Swenson

I crawled up the hill in my old Ford and found a parking spot in a pool of mush by a huge snowdrift.

I didn't bother to knock. I hung my coat on the stair rail and kept my Rooskie fur hat on. Somebody handed me a Grain Belt. "Mange takk," I said.

I sat on a couch and talked with a priest about Bertrand Russell. I told him I wasn't a believer, and he told me he wasn't sure what he believed. He told me the story about the priest who died and went to Heaven, and when he got there, he opened his eyes, looked around and said, "My God! It really is true!"

Harpo was there with his wife. Harpo's girlfriend came up behind the couch where I was sitting, and I ran my hand up her leg underneath her dress.

Later I cornered her in the kitchen. "What has Harpo got that I haven't got?" I asked. She didn't answer.

Somebody started a poker game on the coffee table in front of the fireplace. I drank whiskey until I drew a full house and mistook it for two pair and lost the hand; then I quit playing.

I went outside and pissed in a snow bank. I remembered when the previous tenant had flooded the back yard and made an ice rink and invited the entire cast of the Ice Follies to a party at the house. Those were the good, old days, I thought.

Actually, it was just two years before, but a lot had happened since. Frank was dead, for one thing. Only twenty-nine years old when he had the heart attack.

And the year before that we had gone to the moon! We're going to the moon in ten years, JFK had said, and by God, we did!

I walked back inside, tripped on the top step, and almost killed myself. Dr. Wilder was in the kitchen leaning against a counter drinking coffee. He said he heard that I quit my job and was leaving soon to go to school in California. "I thought you were the fair haired boy at the newspaper," he said. I told him I didn't want to do ads anymore. I wanted to be a real writer. He wished me good luck.

I sat down on one of the love seats flanking the fireplace and looked into the fire. I thought I saw my future there. Heat and light. Fame and fortune. Somebody behind me barked with laughter.

When I was a kid I learned that you pay for your sins. Even if you were good, it didn't matter, because you were somehow responsible for things that went back generations. Evil deeds. Sins of omission or commission.

Harpo was passed out on the floor. Somebody had propped him up, put a bucket on his head, and with a wooden spoon was tapping out the beat of a jazz tune that was playing on the stereo.

