Summer

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Abstract

The boy awoke, startled, but he didn’t know why. The muggy summer night was heavy and oppressive, almost suffocating, with its weight of heat and darkness...
The boy awoke, startled, but he didn’t know why. The muggy summer night was heavy and oppressive, almost suffocating, with its weight of heat and darkness. It was utterly still, except for the croak of a cricket which punctuated the silence.

He had been sweating heavily in his sleep and the sheet was wet beneath him. It felt cold and sent a shiver along his spine. But he wasn’t sure it was the sheet that made him shiver. He was frightened.

The night surrounded him and pressed in on him. A naked white bulb in the street light drew grotesque patterns in a bold black and white on the wall beside his bed. He lay awake listening for a long time and then he got up. He wondered later why he had, but at the time it seemed as natural as night following day. The action seemed born of some dream-like compulsion that he neither questioned nor resisted.

He stepped carefully onto the floor. There was a loose board that would creak if he stepped on it and it was important that he wake no one. Again, he didn’t know why. His own breathing sounded tumultuously loud as he stepped to the door and pulled it a quarter of the way open, quickly so that it would make no noise. Without hesitating, he slipped deliberately through the opening, leaving the door ajar, and started down the hallway to the ancient high-ceilinged staircase. The extravagantly ornate balustrade made bizarre shadows on the steps as he felt his way down them. The smooth plaster wall felt cool beneath his fingers.

At the landing he stopped and waited for his eyes to
adjust to the darkness of the room below. In a moment he could see the fireplace with its carved wood mantle, marble facing and cast-iron metal work standing majestically against the outside wall. The house had been richly built forty years before, but now it was solid and middle class, too large to be comfortable and too ornate to be beautiful.

In the huge plate glass mirror over the mantle, he could see through the vestibule and into the dining room beyond. A light in his grandmother's room threw a white rectangle onto the dining room floor. The boy knew that his grandmother seldom slept. She lived here in this downstairs room, waiting for the years to wring the last bit of life from her. She needed no sleep. Day and night, with the determined strength of the very old, she fought the relentless decay of mind and body that tortured her. A subtly frantic will to live drove her to move constantly. To move is to live. To sleep is to die.

The boy was at the foot of the stairs now. He stood by the window and pushed aside the drape to look at the sky. It was lightening now, and the dark thunderheads piled up threateningly against the pale half moon. It was very still now; even the insects were still. It was hard to breathe. It was hot.

He heard a noise, or rather sensed a movement, and froze against the wall, half hidden by the curtain. As silently as a spectre, a hunched shadow silhouetted itself against the light from the bedroom. While everyone else slept, the old lady wandered in her frenzy. There was no place she could lie, nothing she could do that would give her rest. Every cell in her body screamed for rest but there was none.

A great wave of pity or fear swept over the boy, but he couldn't tell which it was. The woman was piteous and horrifying at once. The two emotions swirled through him and he knew what he had come to do. She shuffled closer and he could hear the breath rattling dryly in and out of her lungs. She was now close enough to touch but she didn't see him. She sank into a chair and sighed, not a sigh of relief, but of hopelessness like a sigh from the lips of the damned.
Quietly the boy stepped behind her. She rocked back in her chair. He threw his arm around her neck, catching it in the crook of his elbow. If she had been able to speak, he could not have done it, but he squeezed hard, with all his strength. Suddenly it was over and he stepped back out of breath. He couldn't cry then but he wanted to. He went stealthily back up the stairs and lay quietly in his bed. He could hear the first drops of rain on the leaves of the trees.

— R. A. Upham, Sc. '58

The Tide

The tide is out,
And halfway across the bay
The silver-brown mud
Sucks its stinking mouths
At the wind.

(It is not the time for stately herons
To stand in the reedy shallows
Spearing the placid water for mirrored minnows.)

Crows flock noisily to the beach
And strut upon the mud
And glut themselves on a bloated turtle;

Above the bay an eagle beats the air
From farther horizons to her high place
Far over the stinking mud,
And feeds silent fledglings
With freshly stilled prey.