The Few Who Find

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Abstract

The air is heavy in the small room. It mingles with the floating dust and draws small beads of sweat to the face of the child squatting beside the low bed...
On cold, dark mornings
people intently passing
overlook the day.

Faint morning cobwebs
lie wetly on summer grass,
sparkling in the sun.

Zen illuminates,
all nature—man—together feel
the deep light: Haiku!

The Few
Who Find
by Larry Edson
Int. Design, Grad.

“For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that
leads to life, and those who find it are few.”
Matthew 7:14

THE AIR is heavy in the small room. It mingles with the
floating dust and draws small beads of sweat to the face
of the child squatting beside the low bed. The “Breed” turns
suddenly in a restless sleep, clawing at his body beneath the
rough blanket, and is still. Rest, young brave—it is not yet light—rest.

The child hums tunelessly, a simple rhythm, over and over, again and again. Little fingers trace patterns on the rug; pretty patterns of red and gray and black. The fingers follow the design, and pause where it disappears beneath the curve of the naked buttocks.

"Papa's dead. Papa's dead." The breed stirs, and half awake, listens to the child's absent murmurings. He sees her face, then she is gone; lost in the patterned rug, lost in the half-light and heavy air, lost, lost in the fog of sleep.

"Papa's dead. Papa's dead." The sweat makes rivulets on the squatting form. Rivers course the length of her face and fall onto streams on her belly; but there are no tears.

"Papa's dead." The dim light flickers through the half open door, and lies in a path for the child to follow. Beyond the door a woman sobs. The odor of wilted flowers hangs heavy in the air.

The little one hangs at her mother's skirt, until the oldest daughter takes her in her arms—"See the pretty beads—hear them rattle. . . there, there. . ."—and sets her again on the floor.

The light grows steady with the rising sun, but still the lantern burns. The woman sobs silently. "The black shawl goes there, in the drawer. Hand me the books, child." She takes the dying flowers, placing them carefully between the pages, and closes the heavy cover.

The sun beat mercilessly from the cloudless Dakota sky, sending sparks of silver across the surface of the river moving sluggishly between the mud banks. The copper-skinned boy stood naked at the water's edge, stretching his young body to full height before plunging silently into the depths. The cool water closed over his shoulders as he shoved forward slowly, breaking the surface into expanding ripples, that moved out toward the low hanging trees along the river's edge. His breath came evenly; relaxed and smooth like the surface of the water, and the steady pull of his arms drawing him further into the current.

The smooth skin of his chest sparkled under the breaking surface as he rolled onto his back; letting the water hold him in its caressing bouyancy. His mind dozed, basking in the
effortless suspension. A motor hummed somewhere downstream, and he smiled at the metallic whine that carried through the water.

The far-off hills moving past seemed to float above the tree-tops, and he realized he was being carried with the current. He tensed his strong muscles, arching his back. With a great heave, he disappeared under the surface to come up again a few feet away, laughing and spitting a long stream into the air. With strong strokes, he started back to shore.

"Jon . . . Jon." The girlish voice floated across the water as the bright colored skirt and brown legs appeared under the low branches on the bank.

His cupped hands forced the water under him, and he dove again, swimming under the surface until his feet touched the sandy bottom. "What da'ya want?" He snapped his head back sharply, and ran his hands over the long black hair, squeezing out the water.

"Jon! Ma says to get up to the house. There's a man come to get some parts."

The water became suddenly thick and heavy, pulling at his chest and dragging on his legs as he tried to walk closer to shore. "Can't she get it for him?"

"No, says it has to be taken off one of the wrecks."

"O.K.," he answered resignedly, "You go on ahead and I'll come up."

"Oh, come on and walk with me," she teased. Her dark eyes flashed as she grabbed his jeans from the bushes and waved them at him.

"Hey, leave those alone and get out of here." He stood there, the water slapping around his waist and shook a threatening fist at the tall, slender girl on the shore. She broke into a gale of laughter. "You got nothin' I ain't seen before," she mocked. Flinging the jeans onto the bushes, she disappeared in the direction of the house.

Smart kid! He worked his way to shore and brushed the water from his gleaming skin. She was too smart for fourteen. It wasn't just her talk that bothered him. He'd seen her primping in the mirror, and heard the rough laughter from the cars that brought her home at night. Pa hadn't liked it much, but now. . . .

He pulled the clothes roughly over his wet body, and cleared the incline of the bank in two short leaps. Working
his way through the tangled wrecks that filled the yard, he
saw old Ben Thompson talking through the screen door of
the shanty. As he approached, he heard his mother's voice
from within the house, "It's gonna be harder now, with Pa
gone."

"I'm sorry for you," Ben said. He tugged nervously at his
collar, revealing the whiteness of his skin below the line of
his sunburned neck. "Couldn't make it to the funeral. Had
to run up north to see about a car deal. . . had to be settled."
He looked relieved as Jon stepped onto the sagging porch.

"Hiya Bree. . .er, Jon."

Breed stared at him coldly, as old Ben's face flushed a
deeper red. He knew what they said behind his back; "Half
Breed" they called him, and snorted with dirty laughter.
"What d'ya need?" Breed stepped from the porch and started
through the tall grass towards the cars.

"A '54 Chev' generator," Ben said quickly as he tagged
along behind.

Stopping at the first car, Breed took a tool kit from the
trunk and walked back toward the river. He had to look for
the particular model. Many of the cars were as old as he, and
of little use for anything except junk. He'd worked around
them off and on till his sixteenth birthday, two months ago.
Then Pa had made him quit school. "Need you around the
place," he'd said, "Ain't no damn good gonna come from
schoolin'. I never had much, and I get along all right." And
it was final. He'd have done it before if it weren't for the
"eighth grade rule," and even that wasn't enforced until Mr.
Jameson came.

Breed remembered the day he'd first seen Jameson. He'd
gone from house to house sayin' that from now on, the
Indians were gonna go to school. Pa had fumed and sputter-
ted, yellin' that he was white, and good as anybody. No
damn truant officer was gonna think different. His kids would
do what he said, and that didn't include schoolin'. Mr. Jame-
son had just looked at him with those patient blue eyes of
his and said he'd bring the sheriff if necessary.

And he had, too. They came one night when Breed was
in bed. He didn't remember what was said. There was a lot
of yellin' and shoutin', and Pa threatened to shoot either of
'em if they stepped on the place again; but the next day he went to school.

Breed walked between a row of cars and turned down the next alley-way. He stopped next to a battered Chevy and opened the hood. Inside, the engine was covered with grease and dirt in heavy layers over the intricate system of tubes and bolts. Selecting a large wrench from the chest, he hooked it on the front mount and pulled. The wrench caught, then tore loose, crashing his knuckles against the wheel-well. Breed cursed under his breath, but tried a smaller size.

His long fingers curled around the handle and pulled with uneven strokes. He hated the wrecks! The accumulation of dirt, and the drying, corrosive action of the weather had worked at the car’s parts, seeping into the tiny crevices to mould the machinery into a nearly solid mass that groaned and strained to remain whole under the force of the tool.

Ben stood watching anxiously. His hands fidgeted nervously with the collar where it lay against his downward turned chin.

"Sorry about your Pa, kid."

Breed said nothing, but kept working.

"Hear they got the other man in jail... picked him up north of here... had the cuts on his fists to prove it."

Breed shot him a cold glance. "I don't want to hear," he thought to himself, "Just leave it alone."

"Funny how these things happen. A little booze, a friendly argument—then BOOM." Ben smashed his fist into an open palm, and leaned his head far into the engine cavity. "Your Pa was a good man, though; a good man."

Breed stopped his labor and stared hard into Ben’s red face. A bead of sweat dropped into the fine hairs of his eyelid and he lifted the wrench high, wiping it away with his forearm.

Ben retracted his head, startled, then breathed easily when he saw the cause of the movement. He remained silent for some time, rubbing the short growth of whiskers below his ear, before trying again—this time on safer grounds.

"Spose you’ll be running the place now, huh?" He took it for granted. Funny, the whiskers seemed longer on one
side. "Not meanin' to be disrespectful to the dead, but... you'll probably get along just as well anyway."

Damn fool! Damn old fool! Who did he think he was, talkin' like that. Breed yanked hard at the final turn on the rear mount, and threw the wrench angrily into the box. He gripped with all his strength and tore the generator loose from the engine.

Ben backed away hastily, and seemed to inspect an ancient Chrysler nearby.

"Close the hood and grab the tools," Breed growled over his shoulder, turning away.

As he made his way through the tall grass toward the clearing, Breed's anger turned to disgust. His arms were covered with filth to the elbows, and the T-shirt, still wet from the swim, was covered with spots of grease. This was what he'd quit school for. This was what had interrupted his swim.

He walked in long steady strides past the house, and placed the generator roughly in the box of the new pick-up truck in the drive.

"How much d'ya want?" Ben stopped, panting, at the edge of the porch. He set the tools down and dug quickly into his pockets, eager to finish the deal.

"Settle it up with Ma." Breed stepped through the screen door and across the large, outer room. "You wanta take care of the old man?" He disappeared into the room where he and the baby slept. His mother wrinkled her brow in disapproval and hurried out to Ben, standing beyond the screen.

The dim light through the vine-covered window of the small room made spots that danced across the wall in the slight breeze. Breed poured water from the large enamel pitcher into the cracked bowl, splashing small droplets to the gay patterned rug on the floor. He ripped off his T-shirt and lathered his arms with the coarse soap.

A feeling of guilt crossed his chest, and was gone. "Christ, she knows more about it than I do anyway." The disgust returned as he scrubbed, and with it came the bitterness. "She can't expect me to stay here... maybe till they get back on their feet from the expenses, but... . . ."

He dried his arms quickly and brushed at his hair with the long fingers, studying himself in the mirror. The large flat nose did not seem out of place between the high cheek
bodies. The sun had tanned his already darkened skin to a golden bronze. His dark eyes held the confusion of childhood; ready to gleam at a moment's notice, they could cloud just as quickly. Turning sideways in the mirror, he pulled in his stomach. The muscles were beginning to round; his was the body of a man.

The chest drawer opened smoothly under his grasp. He removed another T-shirt, slipped it over his head, and pulled it around his chest, smoothing it at the waist. As he started to close the drawer, he noticed the frayed edge of the familiar letter. It had slipped from its hiding place beneath the newspaper that lined the inside.

Outside, the voices rambled on in lower tones. He closed the door to the room quietly and withdrew the letter from its hiding place. In the upper left-hand corner, was a seal of a red hand clasped in friendship with a white one. Underneath, the line read, "J. C. Dow Indian School, Spearfish, South Dakota.

Breed sat on the low bed, holding the letter in his hand. He didn't need to read it, the words jumped at him through the thin binding of the envelope: "If the financial status of the prospective student renders him unable to pay the cost of tuition and board, the school will assume these costs, to be repaid at some future date." Jameson at the high-school had first given the letter to him, and he in turn to Pa.

"Charity school!" Pa had exclaimed, "As if it ain't bad enough! Ya got to be gone all day as it is—now ya wanta leave home all together, do ya—and on charity, too—bet that truant officer put you up to this, didn't he." Breed had wanted to run away from home, but fear of his father kept him—kept him working on the hated cars—kept him from that "other life" he was beginning to realize existed.

A soft knock at the door startled him. Automatically, he concealed the letter beneath his shirt. "Come in."

The door opened a crack, then swung wide and his mother entered. The dark spots under her eyes were barely evident, now. Plastic combs held the jet-black hair in knots at the back of her head, accenting the high cheek bones and slender face. "Jon, I think it's time we talked." She moved toward him and sat on the far end of the bed. "You'll be taking over the business now, and . . . ."

"Ma, I can't do it," Breed interrupted. The anger he'd
felt in the yard welled up in his chest, making him suddenly bold. "I can't spend the rest of my life here, hacking away at these old wrecks. You shouldn't ask me to."

She looked at him amazed, "Shouldn't ask you to—why, it's your duty to help out."

"Duty!" he thought, then aloud, "There's other ways of helpin'—better ways." He pulled the letter from under his shirt and thrust it at her. "I'm goin' to the school, Ma. I want an education, then I can really help you."

"You know what your father thought of that!"

"But Pa's . . ." he almost said it. "Pa's not around to help anymore."

"And that's why you should stay here," she said with finality. There was beauty, still, in her aging face. And pride—pride that she was right; that wouldn't let her see—understand. "Now, that's enough of this talk, Ben said he'd be back in awhile . . . wants something else for that Chev', but he had to check a size." She rose from the bed, and went into the outer room.

He'd started now, he couldn't let it go; just drop it. He followed her. "Don't you see, Ma? Even if I stay here awhile . . . I can't make it my life! I'll want a job somewhere else. And then . . . what'll I get without an education?"

She walked to the high stove and lifted the lid on one of the iron pots.

"After school, I could get a good job and send you money . . ." He was desperate. Some of that pride ran in his veins, too . . . he wouldn't give in. " . . . or maybe take you away."

She looked at him over her shoulder with a glance that said, "Away? What is there anyplace else?" She cleared her throat loudly, "I said that was enough."

The fourteen year-old sat at the table, before an open vanity case. The make-up looked false on her face, making her cheap as she bared her teeth, then smiled at herself, pushing at her hair. His chest grew tight, and he wanted to shout, "Stop it! Stop it!"

He ran. The screen door slammed behind him and the cracked surface of the porch post brushed close to his face. The cars became a jumble of rusted metal and bent, grotesque forms, surrounding him in their ugliness—closing in on him to block his flight.
The new pick-up rolled smoothly into the drive and came to a halt near the porch. Ben Thompson stepped out and walked toward the screen door. "Halloo, guess it must have been the coil." The woman at the door searched with her eyes among the ancient hulks of the autos, twisted and piled across the yard, and on toward the water's edge. She called over her shoulder into the room "Fetch Jon."

"Oh, never mind," Ben said quickly, struggling with the nuisance of the collar. "I know where the car is... I can easy get it myself."

The water slaps gently against the mud on the bank, and melts into a solid glare as it moves along its sluggish course. Breed makes his way carefully along the trees until he comes to the overgrown path that curves with the river out of sight. The angry confusion in his mind passes with the ebb of the river. A light-heartedness takes its place. The healing sound of the water as it ripples around the low branches guides him through the tangled growth, and the heavy foliage closes behind him, losing him in its dense cover.

Little Wonder

by Michael J. Leonard

English, Sr.

Where oh where has my little god gone?
The archives say he's behind the blue.
Page thirty-seven of Dreams and Sex
calls him the red drive comprising you.
Diligent, liquid drive:
Since you are new
and as yet unfettered,
Jesus H. All-true
and Austerity too
have finished in a dead heat
second
to you.