The Brooch

Ted Kooser*
IT WAS late October and the withering effects of the wind created a seemingly ceaseless decay of not only the leaves but even of each faded building, each piece of winter wood. The windmill shrieked as if the slow rusting were painful, and the pump below jabbered dryly. Dead weeds raced aimlessly about the yard, leaving their bony twigs sticking at ridiculous angles from under rocks and in cracks of crumbling foundation blocks.

Uncle Pete was old but retained a boyish stride. He came up from the oaks behind the crib toward the barren lot, his eyes watching the sky for nothing. He was carrying a tarnished shotgun and dragging a dusty string of headless squirrels. As he stepped up on the porch he spat downwind and waited for the answering slap on the side of the unpainted house. He swung the screen door against the house with a bang and stepped inside. The squirrels fell on the linoleum and the gun clattered against the plaster by the door.

The house was a mixture of smells, the pleasant odors of baking bread and boiling apples slightly overpowered by the mustiness of age and the dankness of mildew. Aunt Laura moved through the kitchen slowly, a gaunt figure, an “American Gothic” re-creation. She walked into the parlor, the floor creaking slightly under her fragile body, flicking dust with a faded lavender handkerchief that snapped from beneath the shawl. Never a bit of dust escaped her piercing glance. Her every motion was a meticulous, mechanical snatchling like an old gray bird pecking at seed that wasn’t there. Her voice always seemed to originate from another room, perhaps a long empty hallway. It piped through her thin lips in a familiar whining falsetto, and a brooch hung from her frail cordy neck. The necklace swung
as she moved. It had been a wedding present from Pete, and it enclosed an expressionless tin-type of his jovial face. The brooch never seemed to be a part of her, and it was almost as if the picture did not want to be tied to her; but years of swinging had stained its youth and it remained the year around.

She stood above her husband, who was busily gutting the squirrels in the middle of the floor. “Think it’ll rain?” she piped.

“Might,” he said slowly, never looking up.

“What makes you think that those squirrels should be cleaned on my new floor?” she asked dryly.

“Always have.”

The gun fell in a quick arc, leaving a scar on the wall. She gritted her teeth. Pete kept pulling out the entrails. She daintly stood the gun against the wall, but it fell over with the same belligerent crash. Pete kept pulling. She remained standing over him, fidgeting with her brooch.

“Damn it, Pete!”

“What?”

“Oh!” she sighed and swept rather girlishly, out of the kitchen.

Pete, his forearms covered with clots of blood and hair, slowly worked over the squirrels. One by one they were thrown into the corner.

“Do you know what day this is?” Laura queried.

Pete paused, a lump of stained fur in one hand, his rusty knife in the other. “Nope,” he replied, still staring at the floor. “What day is it?”

“Never mind.”

“I said what the Hell day is it?” he resumed harshly, jerking an intestine with such violence that it slapped his cheek.

“Don’t you talk to me that way, Pete Noeck! It’s our anniversary.”

“You sure?” he replied, wiping his cheek with his bloody hand and getting up quietly, favoring his back.

“Don’t you ever remember nothin’?”

“I guess not,” he said as he slowly came into the kitchen. She stared silently at the boiling apples. Gingerly, he undid the clasp of the tarnished brooch and slipped it over her
shoulder and into his pocket. She stood with her back to him, timidly waiting. He stuffed his hand into his shirt pocket and pulled from it a new necklace, quite similar to the old. He slipped it around her neck and fumbled with the clasp. She reached up to aid his stumbling hands, then turned around and smiled shyly. She looked down at the brooch, opened it, and then saw the blood-stains on her shawl.

“Oh, Pete!” she sighed, but the picture in the brooch was smiling.

*Ted Kooser, Sc. & H. Soph.*

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**Regeneration**

Flailing filaments wave in pain, 
strike and cling and jolt to the same 
electric torch of intangibles, then 
this feel to fingers of paper and pen 
and sought-for words well up again. 

*James Wickliff, Sc. & H. Grad.*

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