

Saint Katherine Review



Volume 1 Number 4

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A journal of poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction and reviews.

Inquiry Seeking Wisdom

CHAD HOLLEY

Hunt Your Babies in the Cane

My friend Zeke Barry lived up the street from me in Enchanted Hills, and for several years his mother had given me a ride to school in the mornings. Zeke and I were in the same grade, his sister Wendy in the one ahead, and Mrs. Barry had an office job at our town's biggest bank. So at twenty minutes after seven, in all weathers, Mrs. Barry's long, butter-colored Oldsmobile would pull up in our driveway and sit and wait for me. (None of our mothers were honkers.) The low morning sky seemed always to cast an impenetrable glare over the windshield, so that I could make out nothing, nobody, in the car as I walked around to my rear passenger-side door, opened it, and climbed into the backseat beside Zeke. Wendy never once, to my recollection, turned around from her place in the front seat and spoke to me, but this seemed a reluctance born more of modesty than of rudeness. Of course, Zeke and I hardly spoke, not at this fragile hour, not in front of his mother and sister. Mrs. Barry alone spoke, with a polite half-turn of her shoulders, a distinctly bovine rolling of her eyes toward Zeke and me in the backseat: Good-morning, Lee. Good-morning, I said. And we were off. It did happen at times that I would open the Barrys' car door and slide in beside Zeke to discover that the passenger seat in front of me was empty—no head there, no shoulders, no curls of soft brown hair about the headrest—and I had noticed the effect this had on the remainder of the ride, the energy it sucked out of it. By the time I was in the seventh grade, I felt left behind with the expendables on such mornings, and rather resented their company.

What had Wendy Barry done to encourage me? Little, in fact. She was a friendly person, with none of the sourness one ought to expect from a pal's year-older sister, but the only bit of flirtation she had ever indulged me was a single, spirited game of chase through the Activities Building of their First Baptist

Church, during one of their Saturday afternoon lock-ins, when I had been in the sixth grade and she in the seventh. It was one of those spectacular, pre-adolescent frenzies that involved long hallways, a couple of stairwells, and a gaggle of other kids, but rising to something in the occasion that surprised us both, I think, I had eyes and legs and lungs only for her, and in the manner of her flight, in her flapping and shrieking, she made evident that she sensed this and did not mind, which drove me on, against the burning in my legs and lungs, the thickening and rattling of the saliva in my throat, until at last Wendy led us—she and I alone now, flying—down the carpeted, gallery-like corridor overlooking the building's indoor basketball court, and at the end of that corridor, with but two strides between us, she went slamming—*blam!*—through the girls' bathroom door. I braked instinctively. I had not seen this coming. And before I could decide what I would do, I heard my name come booming up through the building at a depth and timbre I have never forgotten—*Leeeee!*—and I looked down, upon the basketball court, to find Wendy Barry's father, a stout man with a graying cannonball for a head, sitting in a metal folding chair, behind a spread-open newspaper, eyeing me sternly over the tops of his reading glasses. I can hardly say that but for this moment I would have made a different kind of citizen. But it did give me, ever after, a certain empathy with those against whom the shepherds of the earth practice all their vigilance. For my part, I was suddenly and utterly appalled by my clumsiness, my complete and pathetically simple circumscription. And I turned that afternoon, without a word, and gave them that bathroom door.

How the following year I asked Wendy Barry to Go with me still embarrasses me. It is one of those things I have done—oh, that list—that I suppose I had hoped was beneath me. Sitting in the tropical, fan-blown heat of seventh grade Pre-Algebra, I told myself that when the bell rang I would get up from my desk, wade out amid the flow of faces in the hallway, find

Wendy Barry, and without the faintest warm-up to the subject blurt: Hey, baby, Go with me. The salutation, the racy use of the imperative, they were without question the influence of one Arthur Fonzarelli, but they are what I settled on, and they are what, when the bell had rung and I had drifted up alongside Wendy Barry in the hallway as planned, I delivered.

To which Wendy gawked rather sweetly, said, Oh, my gosh, and though she did not necessarily hasten her step, she did not stop walking. Soon afterward we parted.

She made me wait until school let out that afternoon. She sent the answer through her best friend, who found me in the gym, standing in my bus line. She said yes.

And though I'd come straight to the Barrys' upon getting home from school that afternoon, I had not heard from her since. She was down the dim, carpeted hallway, in her bedroom, with the door closed. I was sitting in the Barrys' living room, watching a PG war movie on HBO with Zeke, who, alternately peeved and bored with us beyond what I could understand, refused to make any more inquiries on my behalf. She ain't talking, he said on returning from his only such errand, watch how far he throws this hand grenade. Likely I would have admitted being partly responsible for a certain vagueness in my and Wendy's new arrangement. I would have certainly admitted that her coming out and joining me on the living room sofa was only going to present me with new and more urgent quandaries. But I couldn't take this anymore, these hushed, lamplit rooms, the chattering television, the ear-splitting aria of awkwardness, confusion, tension.

I said, Let's go outside.

In the yard about the Barrys' house the air was thrumming with bugs and heat, the day was more intelligible. Here I knew what I was about. We shot a squirrel out of the top of a pine tree with a .410 Zeke brought out of the house with us for that purpose. I had some misgivings, but he said his dad had told him

it was okay—the squirrels had been tearing up their birdfeeders—and besides it was an admirable shot. (I always respected Zeke a bit more for the ease and accuracy of that shot, as he was not much of an athlete and ran funny.) The immediately-dead squirrel made its way down through the limbs and pine needles like a prop in a skit and whumped on the grass at our feet. Pine needles rained down softly after. We picked up the squirrel and studied it, still quite warm and loose-jointed inside its fur, and on the whole rather less disfigured by the little shotgun than we expected. We discarded it.

We had not come outside to hunt squirrels generally, but the activity seemed to have chosen us, so we peered into the tops of the other pine trees in the Barrys' yard, staked out the live oak in front. No squirrels. Principles of group survival, particularly among the animal kingdom, being what they are.

We retired the shotgun and set a medium-size gasoline fire on the concrete patio behind the house. We threw newspaper on it to keep it going, but then orange and black newspaper ghosts began to rise up out of the flames and float off into other yards, into the shrubs and carports of other houses, which seemed dangerous. We stomped the flames flat, scuffed the thin embers over the scorched concrete.

We descended the viny ravine behind the Barrys' house, and found half a can of black spray paint buried in the kudzu. We uncapped the can, sprayed it empty, and began to slam it against the trunks of trees to get at the little ball that we could hear rolling and plinking around inside. It had become an object of intense speculation. What did it look like? How big was it? What was it made of? How did they get it in there? And how come you never heard anybody talk about them, I mean, they were sort of an obvious thing, weren't they, all those millions of cans of spray paint out there and a little secret ball of some kind clattering around in every one?

Aerosol paint cans, turns out, are tough. We took ours back up to Zeke's house, to the woodpile off the back patio. Zeke

went around the front of the house, to the tool closet in the carport, and came back with his father's axe. We took turns with it, but the paint can just kept spinning and skittering around on the surface of the chop stump.

I said, Get down there and hold it.

He said, You get down there and hold it.

It was his house.

I knelt in the chips. I reached out on the stump and put a hand on the can. I thought better of this. What we had here was one stubborn paint can. I reached out with both hands and took hold of the can like I was measuring how long it was. Let her rip, I said, and brought my chin down onto the stump, for the excellent view.

I do not remember hearing Zeke offer any warning. I do not remember being aware that he had even lifted the axe. I remember only the sudden, dark veil, the rolling away from the stump, the staggering about, the screaming, and the slow, dazed inference, upon re-opening my eyes, that I probably looked like Zeke did. Which is to say, black. For an empty paint can, the magnitude of local discoloration was astonishing.

We tore the ball out of the wrecked can and looked at it—in the light of day it was just a smeary plastic ball, the size of a penny gumball—and we slung it pattering down through the leaves of the ravine behind Zeke's house. We had stopped moving around in that careful way you do when suddenly coated in a foreign substance, but among other inconveniences our hands were slicked to the point that it was hard to hold things, and I for one was needing to resume normal manual activities, like tugging at my crotch.

Gasoline cuts paint. We still had a whole coffee can of good gasoline. So we poured gas over our hands and arms, splashed it in our faces, rubbed it in our necks like aftershave. We damped each other's hair with it and picked out the gummy, bug-like beads. We cleaned the head of his daddy's axe, wiped down the handle, sloshed gas across the surface of the chop stump. We

and our vicinity were now a pallid gray and the air about us was thick with squiggly lines.

I said, Wonder if Wendy's come out yet.

He said, I doubt it.

We went back inside to see. The tv was still on, but no one was watching it. The rooms were still quiet and lamplit. The air was still thick with squiggly lines.

Told you, he said.

We stood around the fireplace in their living room for a few minutes lighting matches and throwing them at each other.

Then I said, Come on, and started back outside.

Zeke said, Where we going?

I said, First we need a shovel.

There was an empty lot down the street, beside my house. It was thickly wooded and caney. Inside the wood and cane, in a sanctum-like clearing, stood a rotted-treehouse tree. It had a three-days-dead possum lashed to the trunk with a nylon rope, high enough that the neighborhood dogs couldn't get to it.

There is so much I want to say about this possum that my heart aches with the effort, and I hardly know where to begin. I have recalled it, revisited it more often than most of the people I have known. It is often overlooked that a considerable portion of one's life is lived in the dreams and memories of other people. Let's say, then, that I speak here of a rather old possum, in peculiarly good health.

My father shot it in our backyard, wholesome gunfire being a not infrequent occurrence in the neighborhood. Our dog Lady had cornered it against the wooden fence near our trashcans, and my father didn't want Lady getting in a fight with it and getting rabies. So he chose a little twenty-two rifle out of our gun cabinet, shot the possum, and pitched it over the fence, into the high, thick greenery of the empty lot.

It was not hard to find. It lay grimacing in a cloud of loud flies amid the cane. I carried it by the cord tail up to the clearing

and laid it out on the dirt floor. I was in the seventh grade now and knew I was on shaky ground, but I petted it on the fur and spoke to it. Nothing looney, just a simple, but odd-feeling, Hey, possum. And somehow, saying the words out loud like that made the possum lying there on the ground seem very still and dead, and the moment all around me there in the clearing very big and tingly, and I marveled at the size of the moment, and responding to some throbbing compulsion in it, I felt a sudden, terrible, achy desire to expand to meet it, to take the whole of it inside me, to not leave any of it remaining outside me, and at the same time a distressing sense that I could not, that by some cruel, indefatigable math it was impossible, a moment was not containable. I thought I might cry, and I was willing, but though I waited no tears came, and I wondered if this was because I was in the seventh grade now. I tied the possum up on the tree to leave it.

And I saw something.

From the now exposed underbelly of the dead possum, there was hanging a little gray string. It seemed the kind of thing you might not ought to pull on.

I pulled four little wet-looking dead baby possums out of the one hanging on the tree. They made the air in the clearing ring with a high-pitched silence, and I sat on the dirt and twigs and studied them awhile. But even as a grown man I wouldn't know what to do with such a gift as I felt had been bestowed on me, and I think I ended by pitching them gently over into the cane.

When Zeke and I reached the empty lot, I led him into the quiet, dirt-floor room amid the vine and foliage. I showed him the possum hanging on the tree. He liked it. I could not find the babies in the cane, but we took a pair of small sticks and found two more baby possums inside the one hanging on the tree. Then we took the big dead possum down from the tree and put it together with the two new babies in a black plastic garbage bag. When we had them in the bottom we pressed on the bag to get the air out, like you do for the last two or three pieces of

a loaf of bread. The bag exhaled a warm, tart, three-days-dead-possum air into our faces.

We buried the bag of possums down the street, in John Dixon Montgomery's mother's vegetable garden. A choice motivated largely by our memory of how the Indians had shown the pilgrims how to drop little dead fishes into their seed holes and how that had led to cornucopia and Thanksgiving. It pleased us to think the possums would become the earth, the earth would become tomatoes, squash, watermelons, and okra, the tomatoes, squash, and okra would become our parents, the watermelon us. We spoke of this as we refilled the hole, over the sound of dirt pattering on black plastic garbage bag.

We dragged the shovel up the middle of the street, under a sky that was high and mild, with a cool and distant sun, and all over the neighborhood red and yellow leaves were raining from the trees. It was one of those times when the world is so exquisitely beautiful that you are convinced we are, each of us, ultimately alone. And as we started up the hill to Zeke's house I noticed, in the woods that skirted the road, the figure of Booger Daniels, the forty-year-old, sad-case recluse from over at the Witch's Pond, slipping from tree to tree, shadowing us. I watched him from the corner of my eye, and did not say anything to Zeke. First, because I believe I knew instinctively the effect such a sighting would have on the broad roaming privileges we all enjoyed, should word of it reach our parents. Second, because when I turned my face to look at him more directly, the sad creature vanished on the instant, no doubt having wheeled and fled for the safety of his dingy little house-place, on the grassy knoll overlooking the Witch's Pond.

We stomped our feet on the mat at Zeke's house and went inside. It was still quiet and lamplit. It still smelled like gas. Down the dim hallway, Wendy's door was still shut.

We ate a bag of microwave popcorn out of a china bowl. I wished my mother would buy this stuff, but my father said they had not yet figured out how to make it so that most of

the kernels popped, it was wasteful. By contrast, we ate a lot of microwave pancakes. When Zeke and I finished the popcorn, I called his attention to the large number of unpopped kernels in the bottom of our bowl. He did not appear to share my father's concern.

The phone rang. Zeke sucked his fingers clean and answered it. Yes, mam, he said finally, and handed the phone to me.

It was John Dixon's mother. She wanted to know what was in the black plastic bag she'd seen us burying in her vegetable garden, the dog had dug it up and was dragging it around the backyard and it stunk so bad she was afraid to look in it.

I said, Possums.

She said okay, well, would we please come get it.

I said we would.

We set off down the street carrying a hammer and nails.

Sure enough, John Dixon's dog had dragged the bag around their yard and ripped it up. We couldn't find the two baby possums.

We let John Dixon's dog have what was left of the garbage bag and we walked out the back of John Dixon's yard carrying the big dead possum upside-down by the tail and a hammer and nails. We followed a ribbon of worn dirt into the trees, through a rolling gray fog of desiccated briars, a graveyard of coke bottles and oil filters, dry weeds whispering between head-high banks of dead honeysuckle. The path then turned steeply down into the ravine, through loose rock and hardwoods, and half-way down we paused, amid the unbroken stillness of the trees, to hear, below us, the purling of the creek.

No boy in Enchanted Hills had a better friend in the world than that creek. We never found where the water in it came from (it passed within view of the Witch's Pond, without joining it, a mile or so upstream), and we never knew where it ended, though we walked it for whole days, with our feet never leaving the water, and the water never leaving the old, mold-smelling

woods. For hours we would splash along its gravel shallows, remove our shoes and shirts to slither on its marbled clay banks, put them back on to wade out into the dark, neck-deep pools, daring ourselves to draw near the mouth of some low den in the far bank, where a brown foam hung in the black roots and a flotsam of rotting sticks gently rose and rocked with our every underwater stride. We had stoned and stabbed at snakes beyond number in the creek. We had fished up crawdads the size of small lobsters, using rod-and-reels baited with clumps of bacon. Some of these crawdads were a winey red and some of them were a stinky gray-brown and some of them had beautifully colored pincer-tips, bright black and red and yellow, like the beaks of tropical birds. This creek was the animating principle of our neighborhood. And best of all, when we were there, we were without adults. Except, for me, once.

It is a vague and mysterious-feeling memory. We have just moved into the neighborhood, my father and my mother and I, and my father has laced on the olive-green combat boots he brought back from Vietnam, and he has taken me with him to walk the creek bed, exploring. We go farther up it, I am sure, than I would ever go later, on my own, as a boy. The creek here is quiet and overhung and dim. There are only the sounds of wet gravel under our feet, the occasional shifting and clocking of larger rocks, the burbling of water. A soft, strange sunlight falls on us through the canopy overhead, and I am following close upon my father, and we are in that corridor of light and water and pre-time together. And while any number of soft-focus depictions of the afterlife may well have had some influence on this memory, inseparable from my recollection of its details is a very strong feeling, rising perhaps to the level of knowledge, that we are in a place, my father and I, to which we will never return. Even now I fear I will not be able to revisit us there this clearly ever again, and that maybe even in the very act of committing to paper so delicate, so tenuous a memory, I will have made an irreparable trade, and closed the door on the

memory itself forever. Be that as it may. When we return home, my father is very interested in some rocks he collected from the creek bed on our walk. He is squatted on the back patio (in the very spot where Lady would one day lie down to die), and he is running hose-water over the rocks and setting them gently over in a plastic bucket. He shows them to my mother and me, and there is an unfamiliar quality in his voice, something like a note of urgency: the rocks look deliberately shaped. We all three look at them closely while he turns them over, one at a time, in the palm of his hand, and it is true. One ivory-colored piece in particular looks undeniably like a sheep, with four short legs and a head, even little ears. This piece my father set in the curio cabinet in the hallway off our kitchen, where it sat for the next several years, amid rows of arrowheads, broken pottery pieces, and a category of smooth, variously-colored rocks we always said were the ceremonial stones of Indians, though on the basis of whose expert opinion I do not know.

Zeke and I came out on a ten-foot bluff overlooking the creek, holding the dead possum upside-down by the tail and a hammer and nails. Beside us stood the enormous rootball of a fallen tree, an old gray oak whose top lay in the cane thicket on the mud bar on the other side of the creek.

Zeke led us midway out onto the tree bridge, to where the creek was gurgling in the rocks directly below, and we knelt. We laid the possum on the wood between us. We turned it over on its back and spread its front legs. Then we each took a ten-penny nail and drove it through one of the little padded possum hands, deep into the wood of the tree. We then sat back and looked at the weary possum, pinned there against the gray of the tree, with the sodden, black and yellow leaves sluicing in the creek below.

I said, Let us pray.

We closed our eyes.

I said, God, this is Your possum. I pictured it there before us: nailed-down, weary. I said, We are returning it to You now with

grateful hearts. And we hope You will accept this our humble offering, but we understand if You don't, because we don't deserve it. I paused, to feel how we didn't deserve it, then leapt to what I had come to say. I said, God, all creation is the work of Your hands and reflects Your glory. Everything is beautiful, and everything is miraculous, and we are out in the middle of it, and it feels like we will never die, and we are overwhelmed with joy.

This is what I had come to say, this is what I felt, and whether from this complete satisfaction, or from the absolute height of dissatisfaction—are they not, at some point, the same?—I could feel my throat closing, my eyes filling with the tears that had not come earlier, when I had been alone with the possum in the clearing of the vacant lot.

I said, It is all more than we can say or comprehend.

And reaching for something that would say what still needed, it seemed, to be said, I found God's own words: You have told us, Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man what good things God has in store for those who love Him. We believe You. Help our unbelief. Amen.

I opened my eyes, and looked over at Zeke.

His eyes, I could tell, had been open for a while. He was grinning.

I knew John Dixon sometimes grinned because he was Catholic and so was amazed that people could make up prayers out of their own heads. But Zeke was Baptist. They made everything up out of their heads.

I said, What.

Zeke tucked his chin, but he was still grinning.

What, I said.

We were still on our knees, on the tree bridge, over the dead possum, looking at each other.

Nothing, he said. He started getting up.

And it was then my eye happened to wander past him.

At the end of the tree bridge, the end lying in the cane thick-
et, stood Booger Daniels. He wore a dark nylon windbreaker
and heavy frame eye-glasses and on his unshaven face what
anybody in the world would have described as a kindly smile.
When he saw that I had seen him, he raised his hand in a way
that made me think he was about to wave. Instead, he brought
an upright finger to his lips. Then he stepped without a sound,
out of sight, into the cane.

What, said Zeke.

He was standing, no longer grinning, and he looked down
the length of the tree bridge at the cane thicket, and back at me.

When I have had occasion to wish I'd answered him differ-
ently, I have to wonder whether he would have had ears to hear.

Nothing, I said.

We walked up out of the ravine with our feet crunching in
the dead leaves and a cold wind blowing down out of the sky.
More than once I paused and turned to scan the surrounding
hills through the naked trees. In the street, I walked Zeke back
up the hill to the foot of his driveway. I told him I'd see him
tomorrow, then turned and headed back down the hill, for the
creek. Snow was falling.