

Chimney Swift

-Trey Davis

Bill passes me the ashtray and I take it. A warm Kansas sun sits high over the plains to the west, glinting off of the windshields of the cars on the highway, and the metal frames of the billboards that line the shoulder. There's a dry wind coming from the North that fills the silence with a low ceaseless whistle. Bill dips a pinch of wintergreen Grizz and cracks open the first beer of the afternoon. I follow suit—just two of twenty-four packed away in his old seafoam green cooler. I cross my legs and sway back in the rocking chair, the floorboards creaking mildly under the runners.

“How come you weren't in church on Sunday?” he says, spitting into the tin can he keeps on the windowsill. “Marshy said she didn't see you, and I know I didn't see you. Phil said you were working.”

“Yep.” I say. “Four car pile up on 70.”

“How's business been lately?” He leans forward in his chair and picks up a small portable radio from the porch. It's a general electric model he's had for years but it still gets a channel or two, even in Salina. He turns the dial onto FM and a crackly recording of Willie Nelson's voice pours out of the speaker.

“Worse than ever.” I reply. “Apart from four car pile ups, cars just don't break down like they used to. Even if they do, AAA gets the tow.” Bill nods and sucks his teeth before fixing his

eyes on the label of the beer can. A mosquito lands on the heel of my boot, fidgeting in the mid-afternoon heat.

I watch it for a moment or two, considering whether or not to snub it out on the heel of my palm, but elect to let it stay there, perched delicately on the tips of its bony legs, its belly swollen bright red with blood. The sun slips behind a bank of thin white clouds. Bill sighs. The mosquito twitches gently. After a minute or two of silence it flies away and towards town, disappearing from view somewhere between the porch and the edge of the driveway. I turn to face Bill, only to find him smiling at me from behind his beer can.

“What are you smiling at?” I ask.

“Nothing,” he says, “it’s just—I would’ve killed the sucker.” He smacks the crown of his knee with his free hand. “Goddamn mosquitos.”

“Thought about it,” I reply. “Didn’t seem necessary, I suppose.”

“It’s not a necessary kind of thing. It’s personal.” Bill leans forward again and turns up the volume on the radio. As he reaches forward, I catch sight of the abbreviated nub that used to be the ring finger on his right hand. He got it stuck in a winch back in Alamosa, working on a road construction crew.

Willie Nelson’s guitar fades out behind the wind, followed by a short commercial for Mr. Clean, with a new fragrance called ‘sunshine fresh,’ and then three to five minutes of dead air. Bill spits into the tin can. I take a sip from my beer. The sun breaks back out from behind the clouds, its full light dimmed to a slighter, richer shade by its slippage towards the edge of the sky. A field of sunflowers across the highway catches in a swath of dusty orange-yellow light, breaking long shadows between the many ranks of round, golden faces. The radio static and the wind blend into a single mix of white noise. After awhile Bill sucks his teeth again and looks at me.

“You ever been hunting Arthur?”

“Once or twice with my uncle,” I say, “my daddy never cared for it much to tell you the truth.” Bill nods. “I never actually *shot* anything. By the time I was old enough to be any good with a rifle, my uncle had gotten himself killed.” I thumb the metal tab on the top of the beer and watch as a magpie lands on the telephone wire that hangs over the edge of the property. “He drove his Cadillac straight through his next door neighbor’s garage door.”

“Was he drunk?” Bill says.

“Yep.”

“That’s a shame,” Bill says. “Anyway, I was just realizing, I have never been hunting. Not once in my life.”

“You’re not missing much. Though like I said, I don’t think I’ve ever killed anything *larger* than a mosquito.” I say.

“I killed a swift once.” Bill says. He spits into the tin can again. “A little chimney swift my mother found in the attic.

“They used to nest just under our gutters on the south side of the house. Did you know that swifts can’t take off from the ground? They can’t walk because their legs are too short—they have to spend their whole lives flying. Once a swift hits the ground it’s as good as dead.”

“I never knew that.” I say. I swallow the last dregs of my beer and grab another from the cooler. The cold wet skin of the can feels good against my palm. Bill leans forward and turns the radio down. It has been wavering in and out of Dusty Springfield for the last minute or two and I’m pleased to hear it end.

“My father told me that.” He says. “One of the few things that I actually remember about my father. He was a hard bastard, but he knew animals. Trained to be a vet before he met my mother.” I nod and clip open the beer with a short hiss. Bill grabs another from the cooler. “We

found one out in the yard one night when I was real young. Marshy had been playing outside when she saw it, flapping itself to death next to that oak tree we had. She couldn't have been more than four.

“Anyway Dad comes out, still wearing his work clothes, to see what was the matter. I'm standing there with my hands in my pockets watching the thing jerk around in the grass. Marshy's practically hysterical, tugging at Dad's pant leg. And without saying a word, my father—you know what he does?” Bill pauses for effect and takes a sip of his beer. He smiles. I smile back.

“Without saying a word, he picks up the swift in his hands and lifts it into the air, and it just takes off. Like nothing. It just flies off into the night like nothing had ever happened. And of course, Marshy thought it was all wonderful, and she gave him a hug and he took her inside. That was a good summer.”

“Well damn,” I say, tapping my thumb against the wooden armrest. “So you don't *have* to kill them if they're grounded.”

“Not always.” Bill says. “My mother found the second one in the attic. Trapped between some insulation and a box of Christmas Ornaments.” Bill packs another dip into his cheek and cracks open another beer. I ask him to hand me one, which he does. “Dad had been gone awhile by that point, and I had just gotten a job as a cashier down at Ray's. I came home and found my mother sitting at the top of the stairs, just staring at the trap door, screaming about bats.”

Bill chuckles a bit and I reciprocate. The magpie has been joined by three or four of its fellows on the telephone wire and I watch them closely. The sunlight behind them casts their closest side in shadow, making them look more like statues, or drawings, of birds than birds themselves. Bill makes a sound in his throat and I turn to face him.

“So I go up the ladder with a flashlight and one of Mom’s old tennis racquets to try and clear out these bats, and I find this swift—this little, black swift crammed into the corner of the attic. It’s filthy with dust, scared half crazy I can tell. But I know, from what my Dad told me, that if it can get off of the ground, it can probably fly.”

I lean forward in the rocking chair, resting my forearms on my thighs and looking at Bill. He smiles weakly and swallows a gulp of beer. The wind quiets down for a moment and time seems to slow. Nothing moves save the ever-present stream of traffic passing on the highway. Even the weeds stand still. Bill hesitates for a moment before continuing.

“So I step over to it, and it starts fidgeting, like the one my father picked up, only it looks tired, and its wings are making this terrible slapping sound against the floor. And my mother is half way up the ladder now, screaming her head off, you know, ‘Kill it Billy, kill it!’ And I’m telling her I don’t have to, that I just have to get it outside and it’ll be fine.

“And I try, first, like my Dad had done. I put down the tennis racquet and I reach down to pick it up, but it just won’t stop shaking long enough for me to get close to it. And I had never held a bird before, and I didn’t know how to grab it, and—and it just seemed so fragile, you know? How birds—They just seem so fragile.”

“Anyway, as I stand there, trying to figure out a way to go about doing this, I realize that there’s something about its wing—it’s left wing—that just isn’t quite right. And there was no blood or anything but it just wasn’t moving right, and I realize that its gotten itself, kind of wedged, into this crack in the floorboard. And I can see this look in its eyes that I had never seen—this fear—this blind desperate fear—

Bill stops and takes a breath, casually spitting into his tin can. The sun has fallen another few degrees towards the horizon, casting the porch in rosy orange. Several magpies have come and gone and only two remain sitting on the wire: little black gargoyles just

watching the highway, and the house, and the sky, and after awhile they leave too. It's minutes before Bill opens his mouth again, turning, in his seat, to look me in the eye,

“And I tried with it, through all the screaming and the flapping, just to get a hand on it, for a moment—just to help it up. But it couldn't do it.” He smiles and looks down. “It just couldn't stop. And all the while, my mother just won't stop screaming, and the whole attic is filled with this stench—this old, shitty stench. And finally, after what felt like hours, of poking and prodding, and yelling at this stupid little swift, I realized that it just wasn't going to get out of that attic alive. It just couldn't do it.”

“What'd you do?” I ask, clasping my hands in front of me.

“I told you, I killed it.” Bill says. “I bashed its little head in with the tennis racquet, right there in the attic. It took a few goes, but it wasn't hard. You'd be surprised how brittle birds' bones are, especially swifts.” He drains the last third of his beer and cracks open another. I do the same. Bill stares at the back of his right hand, tracing his nub with the pointer finger of his left. The wind picks back up, out of the west this time, rippling across the sand and the weeds, and the sunflowers.

“Anyway, so I scoop it onto the tennis racquet and take it down past my mom and into the backyard. She's stopped screaming by now, but just barely. And then, of course, right as I reach the back door, Marshy comes in through the front from school, only to find her dear older brother in the kitchen, holding a dead swift on a tennis racquet.” Bill laughs under his breath and lets out a low sigh. “She was furious. She told me that Dad could've saved it. And maybe he could've.”

“Maybe not,” I say. Bill nods and spits again. The sun finally begins to disappear behind the hem of the sky, its light transformed to a warm pink smear. On the highway, cars begin to flip their headlights on, forming the worn out lines of light and dark that will fill and empty, on

and off, until morning. I finish another beer and set the empty can down beside me on the porch.

“It doesn’t matter anyway, does it?” Bill says, “It would’ve died a week later from something else, just like that mosquito probably went and got hit by a car as soon as you let him go.”

“Probably,” I say, “I suppose there isn’t much of a difference.” Bill nods but says nothing. After awhile the sun vanishes completely and exposes the dark fabric of night—pinned to a waning moon, and peppered with millions of far off, little lights, breaking in and out of focus. I close my eyes and lean back in the rocking chair, listening to the gentle din of the cicadas as it rises out of the black. Just the cicadas and the occasional plink of Bill’s spit hitting the bottom of the can—calling out to that empty country like a shitty little funeral toll—ringing through the dark—as big, and as terrifying, as the real thing.