

David Hedges

Meeting Aunt Ovidia at Union Station, 1944

A sailor, a white-hat like my Uncle Hank,
hugs a woman so tight I can't see daylight
between them. His hands climb her back, lift
her flimsy skirt, show straight-seamed nylons
clipped to garters on a girdle, like the ones
in the Sears & Roebuck catalogue in Uncle
Melvin's outhouse on the Estacada farm.

A Marine with rows of ribbons on his chest
grabs a woman with an upswept hairdo
and sweeps her off her feet, setting off squeals
that pierce the hubbub like an air-raid siren.
She swings bare legs, longer than I am tall,
between pink-pantied bottom and rolled-down
bobby sox, and wraps them around his waist.

A blue balloon, left over from some welcome
home, hovers in the haze midway between tile
floor and vaulted ceiling, wrinkled like a prune,
the string too high for me to reach. Headlines
at the blind man's news and tobacco stand
shout how well the war in Europe is going,
how the boys should all be home by Christmas.

When Aunt Ovidia's train finally arrives, Nana
will lead me through the gray doors with chips
showing six or seven shades of layered paint,

grimy window panes inset with chicken wire,
brightwork polished by a million hands, along
the platform where green baggage carts weave
in and out, to greet her in a great hiss of steam.

Nana talks about how Ovidia, prettiest among
the seven sisters, envy of all the wallflowers,
kept a dozen suitors dangling like ripe plums
until one by one they dropped. She wed too late
to have children. Gedward died in the pandemic.
Now she makes the rounds by rail, visiting kin
for a month, so as not to wear thin her invitation.

She carries what little is left of her life packed
in a pair of steamer trunks. Lace collars, kid
gloves, high-button shoes, hats with black veils.
The train stops. Steps drop. Nana, hands dead
ahead as in prayer, plows like a cowcatcher
through the chaos of carts and porters. In a great
hiss of steam, I feel a prickly peck on my cheek.

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Green Pond in Dry Wash

South Loop Road, Steens Mountain, August 2006

Beside the green pond in the dry wash spotted with black rocks, the rocks striped, each line a day's evaporation, I drink the glorious morning sky. A doe trots from junipers on the far bank and freezes—we stare forever before she bolts. I climb the near bank, hide behind a small boulder tumbled from rimrock, watch swallows pick off insects. Mourning doves wander about cooing, scores of little birds scratch in the grass covering mounds of dirt crumbled from the banks. I stretch—a six-point buck goes *thump-thump-thump* up the far slope.

I return to the pond. In the soft mud skirting the fringe, ants and flies feed in hoof prints filled with dark green frog eggs. Here and there, tiny frogs hop toward the pond. Two-inch-long water beetles with four oars and iridescent green shells rest between dives to the murky depths. Pint-sized two-oared versions follow suit. Water striders glide like Dutch skaters. Spiders skitter like silent movie comics rounding corners.

Glancing down, I see a fat rattlesnake wrapped around a rock, its head in the downstream depression. I circle, camera ready. Why is it not coiled, rattling and spitting? Is it dead, drowned in the tiny pool where its head rests, submerged? The heavy snow pack that gave birth to this August pond kept the Loop Road closed through mid-July. The late thaw must have held the snake snug in its hibernation. It stirs—adrenaline kicks in. Before I know it, I'm back up the bank, behind my boulder.

What becomes of these creatures when the pond vanishes?
How do they hang on through long years of drought? These
are lessons we need to know. Perhaps we'll learn to let go
of those at the fringes, sacrifice our weakest young so some
will make it through, learn to get along with fewer, and less.
I capture the sluggish snake before my camera's battery dies.

