

WHERE TO STAND IN A WAR

Short Fiction

4,643 Words

The Boy perches, still in the upper boughs of an elm tree. Finches and sparrows land near, looking at him first with one tilt of their delicate heads and then another, cheeping, curious about this gangle-limbed boy invading their country. Soon they lose interest, their heads swiveling like tank turrets seeking a target. He is drawn to the way their feathers glisten in the sunlight, splashes of paint on the irrepressible mural of his imagination.

When they take off, he longs to launch himself after them, his shadow racing along lush terrain beneath him, escaping the greedy pull of earth, seeing that hated house dwindle beneath him as he soars toward heaven, Icarus ascending.

He is seven when he kills his father.

He is an observer of life, a student of humanity. He doesn't feel the need or desire to speak until he passes his fifth year. His parents believe him retarded, autistic, words that mean one and the same to them. They're simple folks, living on five or so acres somewhere in the middle of Michigan. Doctor after doctor fails to provide a satisfactory diagnosis for the boy, so he's left alone. He isn't treated as if he's "of them," and he knows with certainty that he isn't. They're loud, brash, uneducated. He grasps complex words and concepts as if he was born with that knowledge already in his head. They treat him as an idiot because they don't understand him.

He escapes when he can to this perch in the tree, slinking away from the house as if a cartoon piano was hurtling toward him from a blue summer sky, sent to obliterate him and erase any memory. He doesn't belong. Birds are his kin, not the battle-fatigued people who occupy the house like forgotten soldiers.

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Father struggles through each day, afraid that his boss will discover his secret; that darkness, like a convulsion of evil, encroaches on his every thought. He is hearing people talking to him, about him, but when he turns, there's no one there. He doesn't understand what's happening, only that there is a preposterous calculation of possibilities. He doesn't yet recognize the glitter of delusion, the fool's gold of his illness. He retreats further and further within himself, seeking a bomb shelter of safety from the world careening desperately out of control. He gets through each day just barely, seeking the solace of his summer-heated car. The long drive home is the only time he feels *normal*, though that word is growing less and less suitable for him, he knows. He promises himself that he'll see a doctor. Soon, soon.

The Boy watches from his perch as the glinting predatory car crunches along the gravel driveway, as the man behind the wheel – his father – sits there for long moments, doing nothing, staring at nothing. The Boy cheeps at him, but of course his father can't hear him. Father can only hear a voice telling him to kill his family. Kill himself. That they're all going to come for him soon. He grips the hot steering wheel so the tremor in his hands doesn't show. Soon though, his entire body is trembling, rattling like a field of beaten corn.

Finally, he climbs out, the heat oppressive, expanding the wet circles under his arms that stain his work shirt. He doesn't notice.

The Boy watches until father is out of sight before he exhales. He is seven, but the more emotionally mature of his brothers. He understands complexities well beyond his years even if he doesn't yet have the vocabulary to express them.

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Saturday. House cleaning chores are done and the boys are ready for this week's match. They hover restlessly in the living room, waiting for father to appear, to signal that wrestling will commence. And he does appear. The Boy studies his expression for signs of things that slither behind his father's smile, things he can't name, but make him feel bad and afraid.

The eldest launches the first attack. At eight, he is the unspoken leader by might and will alone, though the Boy is far smarter. He despises these weekends when he is forced into competition with his brothers in their attempt to slay the giant. He is forced to participate because mother will beat him if he doesn't. So he waits, watches for an opening. Then he leaps upon the giant's back but is quickly thrown from the bucking beast. Again and again they try, and the moves get more aggressive, the air fouled by the musk and sweat of seven male bodies thrashing about in the over-warm room. He is hanging on to the giant's belt, jerked here and there, when he realizes a familiar, unsettling quiet has settled over them. He scrambles away to see the giant with his thick, calloused fingers overlapped around the eldest's neck. His brother struggles, face red as summer apples, turning toward blue. His older brother is latched onto the giant's solid wrists, but the giant is no longer living behind those eyes. His face is blank; an erased chalk board.

They can only stare as their brother is rendered helpless, unable to draw in even a single breath, their fallen comrade at arms.

Mother appears from the kitchen at the sudden silence, pale hands wrestling like pink puppies in a dish towel. With a grimace of flashing anger, she strides to her husband and strikes him again and again on the sides of his head, fists closed like she's hammering on the battened drawbridge of a castle. The Boy sees his father come back into himself, blinking, confused as to

what's happening. It seems to the Boy that his father has returned after a long journey to some distant place only he sees. Father's hands loosen, fall limp at his sides as the eldest gasps and sputters like a newborn breathing for the first time, tears leaking from his terrified eyes. There are perfect handprints on his neck in fiery red that will turn dark over the next few days. Mother will force him to wear a hated turtleneck which he'll complain is a *winter* shirt, not summer. And he'll get a smack in the mouth for his troubles.

The Boy forces himself not to cry, not to show emotion because he knows that it somehow makes things worse. "I'll give you something to cry about!" mother will say, brandishing the closest thing at hand like a sword.

The man hears the doctor's words, but they make no sense. *Paranoid. Schizophrenic.* He is told he must check himself in for treatment. He hears, but doesn't hear. There's a cacophony of laughter in his head, but he doesn't laugh along with them because he knows they're laughing at the doctor. Or perhaps at him, at his weakness. Minutes later he is driving, safe in his metal cocoon.

The Boy learns, in the days and weeks that follow, how to slip quietly into shadows and cracks in the world, eavesdropping on adult conversations, sussing out meanings of words he has never heard before. His grandparents visit – stern, clinical – and he listens to their whispers as they talk about his father's "condition," as if it's an untreatable cancer. The Boy hoards the words like lint-covered gumdrops extracted from a pair of forgotten dungarees. He knows that he should not be seen or heard when adults are present, martial law that mother enforces with those iron fists, so he learns the art of invisibility.

Father is a quiet man; tall, thin, black Irish in looks, and a man despised by Mother's parents.

Mother is a fiery redhead whose eyes, the dark green of plastic army men littering the Boy's bedroom floor, dilate like bombs bursting in air when she gets her mad on. Her anger is a war lurking around every corner. She is creative in her punishments, able to wield uncommon weapons to inflict the maximum payload of pain. Their bruises and scars are laughed off as the marks of "rough and tumble boys." They are admonished to never tell a soul what *really* happened. This tactic is not lost on the Boy. He fears her.

"If I ever find out you told, you'll never sleep again without knowing that I'll sneak into your room and push a pillow over your face until you're *dead*."

Her threats confuse him. When the giant is trying to kill one of them, she comes to their rescue. Not out of love, no. He never mistakes her actions for love. He learns, years later, that if someone were going to end his life, it would be her and only her. She brought them into the world, and she is the only one who can take them out.

She dispenses father to their rooms to exact a painful retaliation for some slight, real or imagined. He does so without emotion, merely following orders.

The Boy's nightmares feature her as a commanding general, assigning orders and dispensing faceless soldiers to do her bidding. She is an angry queen ruling tyrannically over the land. After awhile, friends stop coming by, and then family. They are afraid of her, her wrath, leaving them all isolated in their tiny fiefdom. Yet the Boy sees her as their protector and champion; his brothers clamor for her favor lest she lop off their heads.

"Get up, boys," mother says from the bedroom doorway, the sun barely up on that

summer morning. “You’re going to clear all those dead trees from the ridge out back. Your father left saws and hatchets in the shed. And you better be done by dinner.”

They are reluctant to leave their warm nests for the bright, clinically clean kitchen. The Boy often imagines that she raised an ant colony, not a family. They are the workers, tasked with chores to carry out all summer long.

They trudge bleary-eyed to their bowls of cereal, then parade out the back door where the tree infested yard stretches for several acres down to a natural depression in a meadow that had filled with water and been dubbed a lake.

The Boy learned in school that there is nowhere one can stand in the state without being less than a mile from a body of water. Their lake is an excellent source for catching tadpoles and turtles, but no one swims in it. Rumors say that several kids drowned one year in the middle, where the bottom of the lake has never been found.

He imagines the state as a giant, moth-eaten mitten whose holes filled with water each time it rains or snows.

Working through the summer is difficult, but it forges the bonds they require to watch over each other. They fight less among themselves, argue only good-naturedly. They are not the enemy. The giants are.

Play, when it’s allowed, is as intensive as work. Capture the Flag becomes battle training, teaching them strategy and how best to disable their opponents to insure victory. The Boy is an excellent strategist. He wins most every game, even though he’s not the fastest or the strongest. He is often ganged up on when the others get mad at him for outsmarting them.

It won’t last, the Boy knows. Like everything, they will eventually fragment and split apart under the pressure being forced upon them, and they will then carry out the extraordinary

duty of destroying each other. In the way he understands so many things, this was to be the last summer they'd be together as a true band of brothers. Soon, they'll fall prey to the machinations of adults and the carnival of brutality that was, even in those moments, bearing down on them.

Fall in Michigan is a wonder. In earlier times, when Fox and Sauk Indians lived on the land, they called it "season of fire." Trees ignite in brilliant hues of vermillion, amber, and brassy orange. The scent of wood smoke entices memories of families sitting down to dinner, gathering around a fire, or walking through the brilliantly-hued woods.

For the Boy, it is all work and no play. He learns the art of war through the psychological and emotional tactics of his commanders, always aware of the hideous proximity of false cheerfulness and carnage. There are rare displays of affection, but even then he tries not to cringe or flinch away when one or the other calls him over. Emotions are landmines buried beneath the surface of their expressions, and he learns to traverse those treacheries with a look of studied nonchalance. He learns that no adult can be trusted. He is just as likely to get smacked in the face as receive a hug.

War changes everything it touches. It has no ambiguities like marriage. It is obvious that mother is ruler over all, including her own husband. Father retreats ever deeper into the turmoil of his mind, rarely appearing as more than a shadow in the room. He has become one of the walking wounded, unable to battle the war going on inside him and keep up a defensive against the regular barrages made upon him. Every day becomes more deadly, a struggle for life.

Saturday afternoon, deep in October. The boys initiate a cautious roughhousing session.

Children tend to forgive but not forget. They don't hold onto the memory of pain as tightly because their minds are full of wonder and awe at the world around them. That is, unless, they live at ground zero. Then it's impossible to forget and becomes muscle memory. A flinch, the holding back of tears...their reflexes become automatic, like dogs who've known only hurting.

Their play slowly becomes more lively, the Boy monitoring his father's face for the sudden disappearance of emotion that signals his leap from play to violence. This day, it doesn't come, and he relaxes into the moment, craves physical contact with his father, even if it's steeped in this painful masculine ritual. But then...

His father is holding the youngest against the dark blue carpet, punching him repeatedly in the face. The Boy jerks with every instant of flesh against flesh, his younger brother's anguish becomes his own. There is something darkly gleeful on his father's face as he extracts his pound of flesh and then some.

Mother is in the basement doing laundry. She is to be no help this time. The boys back away as one, horrified. He is oddly relieved when the youngest loses consciousness, yet the meteors of his father's fists continue to impact the bloody planet of his brother's face. His brother's eyes are swollen closed, his nose smashed like a road-killed rabbit. The Boy barely feels the hot, stinging tears as they run down his face. He has never felt so helpless in his life. Soon he'll turn eight, yet he's already a man in all but body.

Father looks up, the dark rictus of pleasure affixed to his face, and he looks directly into the Boy's eyes, his terrified soul. The Boy feels the horrible coldness that presses against his skin, crawls along the contours of his body. Father truly is the giant now as he lifts the youngest's limp arm between his hands and snaps it like a late autumn twig fallen from a tree. They twitch at the sound. One of the other boys winds up like an air raid siren.

It's the moment the Boy knows – not fear, no longer fear – but fury. *Real* fury. Almost too big to contain within the same skin that lugs around his bones and his organs. Now the fire has been ignited within and it will never, ever, go out. He vows that this will not happen again.

The boys become sullen, withdrawn. The rules of engagement have changed. None of them are safe. The Boy in his tree knows this, yet the feeling of overwhelming helplessness torments him, that moment of indecision in which he failed to save his comrade. He tosses pebbles from his pockets at the birds he was once fascinated by to scare them away. Their bright colors are offensive now, mocking. “Find another tree, stupid fuckers,” he says to them as they flee his unexpected assault.

Mother took the youngest to the hospital and returned without him. Their story, she says, is that he fell from a tree. The Boy stares at her, shocked as she continues to weave her subtle, insidious game of power from which no one will emerge intact. Now his toxic love for her has turned to disgust. To *hate*. War has changed him in irrevocable ways. He wants to show her, show everyone, that he's smarter than they are, that he cannot be called stupid or retarded any longer. In quiet moments, he experiences wild paroxysms of anger and hate where all rationale is occluded by darkness so fierce, he wonders if he will ever find his way back.

Winter. The Boy sits alone at the window listening to the wind snuffle at the eaves, trying to find a way in. In the yard leans a snowman, and the Boy wonders if it hurts to melt, to feel one's arms drop to the slushy ground next to your head that toppled off days earlier.

Mother and Father are in their bedroom, their voices like a distant rumble of thunder in the darkened house. The youngest returned home one day, unable to speak, unable to meet

anyone's gaze. The Boy tried to take his hand but his brother jerked away so violently he nearly fell to the ground. Now he stays in his bed, rarely emerging from his room. The fragmenting has begun and it's every soldier for himself. The troops have gone rogue, AWOL, glancing with anxiousness at one another, not knowing where the next bomb will strike.

They don't have to wait long.

Mother announces the divorce. The Boy knows the word well, for they're not the first of his schoolyard friends whose parents have dropped that word on their families.

The Christmas tree stands in a corner of the living room, a nod to the false gaiety of the season, the boys at ease on the floor in front of the couch where Father sits holding their new baby sister. The way his head is positioned causes his eyeglasses to reflect back emptiness, and the boy thinks of Little Orphan Annie. There is no comfort in that thought.

Though there have been no skirmishes in a long while, the Boy feels that the battle has continued to spread like ink spilled on linen cloth. He dreams of tanks rumbling inevitably toward their house with the solemnity of elephants.

Mother perches on the arm of the sofa next to Father, but their bodies do not touch, nor do they look at one another. She has dressed carefully as if for some shabby and ceremonial violence. The Boy feels the finality of life pressing down on him, on all of them.

Afterward they scatter to the darkness of their thoughts. Only the wind, the incessant and gossiping wind, has anything to say.

The eldest was caught smoking in the garage of a friend, and somehow burned the structure to the ground. Mother first made him sit at the kitchen table and scrape one hundred

matches to life and allow them to burn down to his fingers while she monitored his progress from the stove, a stew pot steaming on a burner. The Boy hovers at the periphery, balancing guesses against his meager defenses. What will happen?

He uses his invisibility to slip behind the sofa with a line of sight into the kitchen, reconnoitering his brother's fate. She chain smokes and her slippered foot creates a hushing sound on the linoleum as she shifts in restless fury. She lifts the boiling pot of water from the stove and sets it on the floor. The boy smells the stench of melting plastic as the bottom of the pot scorches the linoleum. She snatches the eldest by his upper arm and drags him to the pot. The boy sees blisters on his brother's fingers from the matches. His brother is forced to kneel before the pot, and the boy wonders what offering he will be forced to provide, what sacrifice was being demanded by the Queen.

"Clasp your hands together," she orders.

"It hurts," the eldest complains, showing his fear and pain, his entire body trembling of it. Weakness, and the Boy sees the victorious gleam in the Queen's dark eyes. He understands what is about to happen of a sudden and tries to scramble from his hiding place, unable to tear his gaze from the tableau before him.

With a terrifying smile, she bends and grasps his brother by his upper arms and thrusts them into the boiling water, holding them there as his cries of agony and torture fill the house, fill the Boy's head, fill the entire universe. Only then does the Boy hide his face from that terrible sight, screaming into his hands until he can scream no more.

"Go on in there," Mother says weeks later. "He's your father. This may be the last time you see him, so do what I say or else."

The Boy struggles to find a way out of wrestling. Visions of his brother's badly scarred arms flash in his mind and the horrid smell they'd emitted for days and days after his punishment. He has to dig deep within himself to find the courage to walk into the living room holding his younger brother's hand. The youngest has begun sucking his thumb again, wetting his bed, and the Boy forces himself to wake early to change his brother's pajamas and hide the bedsheets in the basement where he will wash them later.

The others are absent, and the Boy realizes it's only him now. He is alone in protecting all of them from further ravishment. The cost of war is dear, and he pays the price every day by blaming himself for not acting sooner, not being a *man*. It has been months and he still feels like the helpless little boy he once was. His world is tattering, and he is unable to keep it from happening. Days and nights, his pain is great, his mind an agonized womb of conscience. His heart is a broken rudder, no longer able to guide him.

Father sits, as he does most days, in his easy chair, staring at the walls. There is a pile of newspapers next to him that have yellowed, yet he continues to pretend to read them. The Boy sees that his father is no longer present in that house, in their lives. He rarely spends the night there, finding refuge in a motel in town. Mother forbids them to speak of him. He simply ceases to exist.

"Play, daddy?" the Boy says, his voice loud in the stillness.

Father's head turns to look at them, but sees only strangers. He does not know who these tiny people are. He thinks he might have known them at one time, but no longer. There is only desolation within him, a vast, bleak and barren desert, and they merely mirages perverted by the obscuring light. Yet he moves to climb from his solitude and stand before them, a giant once more. Part of him understands how he appears to them, how they must see him, an enormous

Goliath against these miniature Davids.

By memory, he lowers himself to all fours and the smallest climbs atop him. The other one watches from the edge of his vision, wary, a wolf studying its prey, watching for....

Something.

It feels right to roar, to rise up on his knees like a great, raging beast. His movements are automatic, and he feels himself becoming that animal, the wildness consuming him.

The Boy leaps away, startled by the giant's transformation into this primitive, indecent thing. The youngest holds on, unaware of the change in the battle, laughs uproariously at this onset. He can't see the viciousness in the giant's flaming glare, the bared teeth like a cemetery of uprooted tombstones. The youngest's squeals of delight grate along the Boy's spine, and he and the giant circle one another, months of battle coming to this exquisite moment of violence.

The giant roars anew and swings a massive arm, catching the Boy unguarded, slinging him across the arena to crash painfully into a table, to the floor. Bright novas of light streak across his vision. Mother's thick, glass ashtray crashes to the floor, ashes and lipsticked butts scattering across the floor like bodies from a downed plane. The giant catches him again with a hammer-like fist against his cheek. His teeth clip the end of his tongue and the blood is salty, filling his mouth like the juice of new summer raspberries. He spits, and spits again. He feels blood on his chin; his resolve falters.

The giant reaches behind him and grasps the Lilliputian leg of the infuriating creature on his back, pulling him free to dangle in one hand, upside down. His little face goes red, and the giant knows he cannot bear the sound of the verminous creature's cries, and flings it away

carelessly. There's another crash but he doesn't turn to see, his focus on the enemy cowering before him. The voices within rise to a feverous pitch, clamoring for blood, clamoring for death and he feels the blood lust rise.

The Boy senses the change, sees his brother flung across the room like a boneless thing where he lays in the corner like a pile of discarded clothing. His fear transforms to anger inside him, years of cowering falling away like scales. The giant lunges for him, misses. But the Boy stumbles over the ashtray, falls, burning his already throbbing cheek against the carpet. The giant sees his chance and pounces, his massive shadow dwarfing the Boy. Its stale, sick breath assaults him and he tries not to breathe, not to panic. Thinking quickly, he slides sideways, slipping out between the giant's treelike arm and leg, attempting to scamper to safety. A ham-sized hand grips his lower leg and he is pulled back toward that gaping maw of death. He tries to grab at the carpet; it pulls loose, no help at all. The ashtray tumbles toward him in the onslaught, and he grabs it, his hand fitting around it like it is made for just this moment.

The giant has him by the thigh now and the Boy knows it will be over in seconds. So he twists, swings as hard as he can. Bright slivers of glass and droplets of blood fill the air, hang there impossibly before his eyes as the light in the giant's eyes flicker and go out. He topples over, the grip on the Boy's leg tight but then gone.

The Boy climbs to his feet, shaking. He looks down at his quarry, noting the way the side of its head is concave, slivers of bone pale as toads preserved in formaldehyde. The giant's tongue lolls, blood coating its teeth, filling its lightless eyes.

He watches the trees flash by the car's windows, the unfamiliar scent of mothballs from

the man and woman in the front seat tickling his nose unpleasantly. He no longer cares where he's going. They've been driving for hours. The words "ward of the state" hover at the edge of his thoughts. These were to be his new family. For now. Fosters, like all the fosters before them.

Anti-social. Violent. Defiant.

And the word that brought a certain dark pride up from within.

Killer.

War changes everything it touches. This is his final thought before chemically-induced sleep drops over him like a shroud.

THE END