

Fly Away, Breath

WENDELL BERRY

ANDY CATLETT keeps in his mind a map of the country around Port William as he has known it all his life and as he has been told about it all his life from times and lives before his. There are moments, now that he is getting old, when he seems to reside in that country in his mind even as his mind still resides in the country.

This is the country of his own life and history, fragmentary as they necessarily have been. It is his known country. And perhaps it differs also from the actual, momentary country insofar as time is one of its dimensions, as reckonable in thought as length and breadth, as air and light. His thought can travel like a breeze over water back and forth upon the face of it, and also back and forth in time along its streams and roads.

As in thought he passes backward into time, the country becomes quieter, and it seems to grow larger. The sounds of engines become less frequent and farther apart until finally they cease altogether. As the roads get poorer or disappear, the distances between places seem to grow longer. Distances that he can now travel in minutes in an automobile once would have taken hours and much effort.

But it is possible, even so, to look back with a certain fondness to a time when the sounds of engines were not almost constant in the sky, on the roads, and in the fields. Our descendants may know such a time again when the petroleum all is burnt. How they will fare then will depend on the neighborly wisdom, the love for the place and its genius, and the skills that they may manage to revive between now and then.

The country in Andy Catlett's mind has assuredly a past, which exists in relics and scraps of memory more or less subject to proof. It has presumably a future that will verify itself only by becoming the past. Its present is somewhat conjectural, for old Andy Catlett, like everybody else, cannot be conscious of the present while he is thinking of the past. And most of us, most of the time, think mostly of the past. Even when we say, "We are living now," we can mean only that we were living a moment ago.

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Nevertheless, in this sometimes horrifying, sometimes satisfying, never-sufficiently-noticed present, between a past mostly forgotten and a future that we deserve to fear but cannot predict, some few things can be recalled.

In all the country from Port William to the river, one light shines. It is from a flame on the wick of an oil lamp, turned low, on a little stand table at the bedside of Maximilla Dawe in a large unpainted house facing the river in Glenn's Bottom between Catlett's Fork and Bird's Branch. The old lady lies somewhat formally upon the bed, seemingly asleep, in a long-sleeved flannel nightgown, clean but not new, the covers laid neatly over her. Her arms lie at her sides, the veined and gnarled old hands at rest. She is propped, in the appearance at least of comfort, on several pillows, for she is so bent by age and work that she could not lie flat.

She has been old a long time. Though "Maximilla" was inscribed in her father's will, by which he left her the farm in the river bottom, the family of "the slave woman known as Cat," and his stopped gold watch, and though it was signed in her own hand at the end of two or three legal documents, she was never well known even to herself by that name. Once upon a time she was "Maxie"—"Miss Maxie" to the Negroes and some whites. For at least as long, to herself as to all the neighborhood of Port William, she has been "Aunt Maxie." To her granddaughter, who was Andy Catlett's grandmother, she had always been "Granny Dawe," as to Andy she still is known.

Andy's grandmother, born Margaret Finley, now Margaret Feltner, sits by the bedside of Granny Dawe in that room in the dim lamplight in the broad darkness of the river valley in the fall of 1907, a hundred years ago. Margaret Feltner is a pretty woman—or girl, as the older women still would have called her—with a peculiar air of modesty, for she knows she is pretty but would prefer not to be caught knowing it. She is slenderly formed and neatly dressed, even prettily dressed, for her modesty must contend also with her knowledge that her looks are pleasing to Mat Feltner, her young husband.

With her are three other young women, also granddaughters of the old woman on the bed. They are Bernice Gibbs, and Oma and Callie Knole. Kinswomen who know one another

well, they sit close together, leaving a sort of aisle between their chairs and the bed.

Their voices are low, and their conversation has become more and more intermittent as the night has gone on. The ancient woman on the bed breathes audibly, but slowly too and tentatively, so that they who listen even as they talk are aware that at any moment there may be one more breath, and then no more.

But she is dying in no haste, this Aunt Maxie, this Granny Dawe, who lived and worked so long before she began to die that she was the only one alive who still knew what she had known. She was born in 1814 in the log house that long ago was replaced by the one in which she now is dying. At the time of her birth, the Port William neighborhood was still in its dream of itself as a frontier, "the West," a new land. The chief artery of trade and transportation for that part of the country then was the river, as it would be for the next hundred years. When the time came, she bestowed her land, her slaves, and herself upon a man named James John Dawe, whose worldly fortune consisted of a singular knack for trade and the store and landing, the port of Port William, known as Dawe's Landing. He left the care of the farm to her. With the strength and the will and the determined good sense that have kept the farm and household in her own hands until now, she ruled and she served through times that were mostly hard.

The Civil War had its official realization in movements of armies and great battles in certain places, but in places such as Port William it released and licensed an unofficial violence also terrible, and more lasting. At its outset, Galen Dawe, on his way to join the Confederate army, was shot from his horse and left dead in the road, no farther on his way than Port William, by a neighbor, a Union sympathizer, with whom he had quarreled. And Maxie Dawe, with the help of a slave man named Punkin, loaded the dead boy onto a sled drawn by a team of mules. Looking neither right nor left at those who watched, she brought home the mortal body of her one son, which she washed and dressed herself, and herself read the great psalm over him as he lay in his grave.

The rest of her children were daughters, four of them. Her

grief and her bearing in her grief gave her a sort of headship over daughters and husband that they granted without her ever requiring it. When a certain superiority to suffering, a certain indomitability, was required, she was the one who had it. Later, when a band of self-denominated "Rebel" cavalry hung about the neighborhood, she saved her husband, the capable merchant James John, from forcible recruitment or murder, they never knew which, by hiding him three weeks in a succession of corn shocks, carrying food and water to him after dark. By her cunning and sometimes her desperate bravery, she brought her surviving family, her slaves, and even a few head of livestock through the official and the unofficial wars, only to bury her husband, dead of a fever, at the end of the official one.

When the slaves were freed in Kentucky, when at last she had heard, she gathered those who had been her own into the kitchen. She told them: "Slavery is no more, and you are free. If you wish to stay and share our fate, you are free to stay, and I will divide with you as I can. If you wish to go, you are free to go."

There were six of them, the remaining family of the woman known as Cat, and they left the next morning, taking, each of them, what could be carried bundled in one hand, all of them invested with an official permission that had made them strange to everything that had gone before. They left, perhaps, from no antipathy to staying, for they arrived in Hargrave and lived there under the name of Dawe—but how could they have known they were free to go if they had not gone? Or so, later, Maxie Dawe would explain it, and she would add, "And so would I have, had it been me."

She and her place never recovered from the war. Unable to manage it herself, and needing money, she sold the landing. She hired what help she could afford. She rented her croplands on the shares. After her daughters married and went away, she stayed on alone. To her young granddaughters, and probably to herself as well, the world of the first half of her life was another world.

No more would she be "Maxie" to anybody. Increasingly she would be "Aunt Maxie." She was respected. By those who lacked the sense to respect her she was feared. She held herself strictly answerable to her necessities. She worked in the fields

as in the house. Strange and doubtful stories were told about her, all of them perhaps true. She was said to have shot off a man's ear, only his ear, so he would live to tell it.

And now her long life, so strongly determined or so determinedly accepted by her, has at last submitted. It is declining gently, perhaps willingly, toward its end. It has been nearly a day and now most of a night since she uttered a word or opened her eyes. A younger person so suddenly moribund as she would have been dead long ago. But she seems only asleep, her aspect that of a dreamer enthralled. The two vertical creases between her brows suggest that she is raptly attentive to her dream.

That she is dying, she herself knows, or knew, for early in the morning of the previous day, not long before she fell into her present sleep, her voice, to those who bent to listen, seeming to float above the absolute stillness of her body, and with the tone perhaps of a small exasperation, she said, "Well, if this is dying, I've seen living that was worse."

The night began cloudy, and the clouds have deepened over the valley and the old house with its one light. The first frosts have come, hushing the crickets and the katydids. The country seems to be waiting. At about dawn a season-changing rain will begin so quietly that at first nobody will notice, and it will fall without letup for two days.

When midnight passes through the room, nobody knows, neither the old woman on the bed nor the young ones who watch beside it. The room would seem poor, so meager and worn are its furnishings, except that its high ceiling and fine proportions give it a dignity that in the circumstances is austere. Though the night is not quite chilly, the sternness of the room and the presence of death in it seemed to call for additional warmth, and the young wives have kindled a little fire. From time to time, one or another has risen to take from the stone hearth a stick of wood and lay it on the coals. From time to time, one or another has risen to smooth the bedclothes that need no smoothing, or to lay a hand upon the old woman's forehead, or to touch lightly the pulse fluttering at her wrist.

After midnight, stillness grows upon them all. The talk has stopped, the fire subsided to a glow, when Bernice Gibbs raises

her hand and the others look at her. Bernice is the oldest of the four. The others have granted her an authority which, like their grandmother perhaps, she has accepted merely because she has it and the others don't. She looks at each of them and looks away, listening.

They listen, and they hear not a sound. They hear instead a silence that reaches into every room and into the expectant night beyond. They rise from their chairs, first Bernice, and then, hesitantly, the others. They tiptoe to the bed, two to a side, and lean, listening, at that edge which they and all their children too have now passed beyond. The silence grows palpable around them, a weight.

Now, as Andy Catlett imagines his way into this memory that is his own only because he has imagined it, he is never quite prepared for what he knows to have happened next. Always it comes to him somewhat by surprise, as it came to those who remembered it from the actual room and the actual night.

In silence that seems to them utterly conclusive, the young women lean above the body of the old woman, the mold in which their own flesh was cast, and they listen. And then, just when one of them might have been ready to say, "She's gone," the old woman releases with a sigh her held breath: "Hooo!"

They startle backward from the bedside, each seeing in the wide-opened mouths and eyes of the others her own fright. Oma Knole, who is clumsy, strikes the lamp and it totters until Bernice catches and steadies it.

They stand now and look at one another. The silence has changed. The dying woman's utterance, brief as it was, spoke of a great weariness. It was the sigh of one who has been kept waiting. The sound hangs in the air as if visible, as if the lamp flame had flown upward from the wick. It stays, nothing moves, until some lattice of the air lets pass the single distant cry of an owl—"Hoo!"—as if in answer.

Callie Knole turns away, bends forward, and emits what, so hard suppressed, might have been a sob, but it is a laugh.

And then they all laugh, at themselves, at one another, and they cannot stop. Their sense of the impropriety of their laughter renews their laughter. Looking at each other, flushed and wet-eyed with laughter, makes them laugh. They laugh because

they are young and they are alive, and life has revealed itself to them, as it often had and often would, by surprise.

Margaret Feltner, when she had become an old woman, “Granny” in her turn, told Andy of this a long time ago. “Oh, it was awful!” she said, again laughing. “But the harder we tried to stop, the funnier it was.”

And Andy, a hundred years later, can hear their laughter. He hears also the silence in which they laugh: the ancient silence filling the dark river valley on that night, uninterrupted in his imagination still by the noise of engines, the great quiet into which they all have gone.

The laughter, which threatened to be endless, finally ends and is gathered into the darkness, into the past. The night resumes its solemn immensity, and again in the silence the old woman audibly breathes. But now her breaths come at longer intervals, until the definitive quiet settles upon her at last. They who have watched all night then fold her hands. Her mouth has fallen open, and Bernice thinks to bind it shut. They draw the counterpane over her face. Day whitens again over the old house and its clutch of old buildings. As they sit on in determined noiselessness, it comes to the young women that for some time they have been hearing the rain.