

BIG EARS AND RUDDY FACE

-- after Horacio Quiroga

Keep telling yourself this is just a story. It never really happened. Just something somebody made up. Otherwise you won't believe it's true.

There is a pastoral setting. A narrow road meanders through a valley. There is a patch of corn and a vegetable garden with a scarecrow that wouldn't frighten even the stupidest bird. There are grassy pastures with lazy cows and sheep surrounded by low stone walls and wooden fences -- no barbed wire on this farm.

There is only one house in sight -- the most storybookish of ageless little cottages where a hard-working man with big ears and a ruddy-skinned woman live with an eight-year-old son who has big ears and a ruddy face. He is their marriage's only fruit and the adoration of their lives. The parents are a happy couple in most ways, but blame each other for the boy's big ears and ruddy face, and for his not having any brothers or sisters in their twelve years of mostly-content marriage.

They also disagree on the boy's future. The father wants his son to be a farmer like himself and work the land and gradually buy more nearby. The mother wants her son to study to be a scientist or a priest -- a biologist, a veterinarian, or a Franciscan -- and tries to teach him about the mysterious wonders of nature, its creatures and its ever-changing ways.

The father has an entirely different idea about nature and its ways. He sees the fields and animals as the practical elements of a working man's everyday life. The animals are to be milked, sheared, fed, tended, slaughtered or sold -- everything for some practical benefit. Not to be thought about -- but used. Toward this end he has put his son in charge of a herd of hogs in a small muddy pen beneath a shady tree across a low stone wall near a barn.

One morning when the boy goes out to the pen to feed and water the hogs, he catches a glimpse of a robin's nest in the low branches of the tree and decides he'll climb up and have a look. Maybe he'll discover some of nature's wonderous mysteries -- brightly colored eggs yet to be hatched or baby robin chicks chirping with their bills open, waiting to be fed.

Just as he gets within reach of the nest, he slips and goes tumbling down with flopping arms into the hog pen

where the usually apathetic creatures come grumbling upon him as though he were a shovelful of corn. When, horror stricken and desperate, he finally scrambles over the wall around the pen, his ruddy face is bloody, scratched and scarred, and his big ears have been entirely gnawed away.

His eyes are full of mud and blood, but he can still see the green pastures, the heavy shade trees and the low stone walls of the valley. Even without his ears, he can still hear the excited grumble of the hogs growling muffled and dull, the nearby baying of cows and the occasional bleat of sheep as he runs toward the cottage. And even though he is desperately traumatized and afraid, he still believes in love, trust and hope.

For the rest of his days the big-eared man blames the ruddy-skinned woman for the boy's having climbed up into the tree; and she, in turn, blames her husband for having sent him to tend hogs at such a tender age. The boy sits mute and still with no ears and a scarred face.

Of course, all this has some moral or meaning, but damned if I can figure it out.

-- James Miller Robinson

Huntsville AL

GRANDFATHER

On the day you died,
we received
from Creative Playthings
a box of orange wooden letters
for your great granddaughter
Melanie Anne.

I thought of your defunct esophagus,
your failing heart,
your cataracts,
and your old mind,
and I wished I could spell out
an indestructible
orange message
for you.