

The Fertilizer Man

Jurey could not appreciate the ice. He had been told that ice storms create landscapes of extraordinary beauty, that it was as if the trees were glass or crystalline and the earth had become a freshly polished parquet floor. He suspected that those who said this thought that beauty was a preservative. They were mostly elderly female servants who had spent enough time in the master's house to see someone point at an object beneath a frame or inside a box and call it beautiful. For them, he thought, the trees might as well be encased in the dried sugar of hardened maple syrup. As long as they had a protective barrier, as long as something shielded them from age or movement or change, they would have been beautiful.

For Jurey the ice only embodied the destructive potential of stasis. He sat in the doorway of a one room squatter's hovel, watching a frozen maple sapling assume a willow's posture. In his imagination it was the force of unfulfilled potential that bowed the sapling, not the weight of frozen rain water. He felt this static pressure too. He had removed his once drenched, now frozen outer clothes. His chain smock lay besides the rotten door frame. He had made the smock himself, from discarded planter's stilts and fencing wire. Now it was bent and tangled, frozen fast to his overalls. Even without damp clothing, he still felt weighted, bowed by the frost of possibilities denied.

It was not even his squatter's hovel. He had found it, complete with its squatter, shortly after the rain had

become hail and the mud had begun to feel slick under his boots. The squatter lay behind him on a cot made from three pairs of ragged pants. The pants were bound together with bailing twine and the cot was supported by the poles of four rusted pitchforks. It sat near a cracked and sauce-stained cast iron cook stove.

The squatter was dead. During the night, before Jurey arrived, an oak bough, already weakened by parasitic fungi and burrowing beetles, had frozen and collapsed. It fell on the shack's frail tin chimney, which had been no wider than a drinking glass and was already half-clogged with ash. This left the fumes from the night's small trash fire with no choice but to retreat, filling the stove, then the hovel and then the lungs of the squatter.

When Jurey looked at the squatter's corpse, he imagined that the body, like the trees and himself, might only be paralyzed by frozen potential energy. He thought that if he could force himself to overcome his own inertia, he might be able to rise and shove the man out of his cot, giving him enough force to create the vigor needed to roll by himself and eventually to stand and to walk and, perhaps eventually, to make demands of life again.

Jurey had only seen a corpse stand or walk once. An amateur folk magician, eight hard drinks into his night, was determined to prove his ability to a ring of mocking men. His assistant was the corpse of an elderly serf who had suffered heat stroke in the field. The serf had been allowed to die by the medical ignorance and apathy of his overseers. They had left him in the field, half tilled into the soil, to compost the row of wheat that

murdered him. Jurey was too young to drink with the men. He was watching from a distance, separated from the rest of the observers by stalks of adolescent corn.

The magician squatted beside the corpse. He lifted the fertilizer-man by his armpits. He forced the dead man to stand upright as best he could, a task that alcohol had made difficult for the magician alone. He embraced the remains with mock tenderness, and he released them. Once freed, the fertilizer-man took two steps forward, walking awkwardly on the sides of his feet as if afflicted by gout. He unearthed a shaft of wheat with his right fist, and stared uncomprehendingly at what he had just harvested. He squinted, stuck his tongue between his lips, and fell onto his back. After this he did not move again. The magician, having redeemed himself, turned to his audience. He stifled a belch and asked, "Impressed?"

Jurey was fourteen then. He was the serf-son-of-a-serf-son-of-a-serf who had not yet had any thoughts of revolt. For five years already he had walked in the rows of men who followed the rows of stalks. He had watered and tilled and harvested and ducked blows from iron gloves. The overseers followed the rows of men along the rows of stalks on horseback, wearing metal shirts and plated helmets. This uniform, mandated by rank and tradition, left them uncomfortably hot during the spring and summer planting, uncomfortably cold during the fall harvest, and irritable during all seasons. So they berated and beat the men as they worked. Abuse was relief from an improper wardrobe and inclimate weather. A boot to the intestines was cold water and a prolonged three man beatdown was hot tea. Imagining themselves knights, the

overseers also insisted upon the title "sir." This title could appear before their name or at the end of a statement, "Sir" or "sir," but it was not to be neglected. Jurey did not consider either the title or the abuse unjust, only uncomfortable. They were birth defects. He had known nothing else and imagined that any hope for change had been passed along with his placenta.

It was only his vision of the fertilizer-man that made Jurey question. It was not that this glimpse of maybe-magic had expanded his consciousness or offered him fantastic new possibilities. It was not the newness of the experience that shook him, but rather its similarity. He saw his family's history and his own future fully reenacted in two shuffles and a shaft of wheat. He saw, in pantomime, the cost of the fertilizer-man's refusal to question, of his family's obedience, of his own shrugging simplicity.

While three unsteady men with shovels, singing a tavern song that was equal parts chivalry and adultery, reburied the fertilizer-man, Jurey left the fields. He thought that he might not return to them. He imagined leaving for an indistinct somewhere-else beyond the crops and cattle, beyond the shacks and the manor house. He did not go there. He went to his shack, lay down besides his parents, and he slept. He returned to the fields the following morning without protest or delay, but the possibility of difference remained.

That possibility was frozen now, held in stasis with the ice beyond the doorway. Jurey watched the narrow path that lead to the overturned whiskey keg that

functioned as the squatter's doorstep. The path was covered with a crisp film of frost, disturbed only by his footprints. He did not know if the overseers would come for him. During his flight, he had expected to be caught. He had listened for the sound of horses or men behind, waiting to hear a voice yell his name. He had heard nothing, and now he wondered if they would come for him at all, if they knew his name.

He hoped they would come and that they would catch him. He hoped they would bind him and drag him, barefoot and stumbling, over the frozen ground as they rode. He hoped they would stop to push him and goad him and step on his frost-bitten toes. He hoped they would put him in stocks and set him on display so that the other serfs could laugh, spit, and kick at him, so his skin could absorb the mucous, liquor, mud and urine of those he had failed. He hoped to be drawn and quartered, to feel the hemp knots chafe his wrists and ankles, to hear the horses called, to watch as his limbs were dislocated and his body dismembered. He hoped they would collect his pieces, his arms and legs and intestines, and scatter them over the fields. But nothing moved beyond the doorway.

Jurey could not clearly remember how his adolescent impulse to flee had matured into revolution. His memory of those years was fractured, all bits and fragments. It did not seem possible to him now that a rebellion had happened at all, let alone that he had caused it, or at least nurtured it. He remembered the books, smuggled to him by the women, mostly his mother's friends, who worked in the manor house and the

homes of the overseers. He did not want to attribute much to those books. Possibly they had influenced him. There had been ideas--political theories, philosophical arguments, treatises on warfare--that had inspired him, but those ideas had not been his. They were the ideas of aristocrats or of parasitic traveling bards and intellectuals who manipulated themselves into court. They slept in homes that serfs maintained, ate bread made from wheat that serfs had grown and milled, and fed corncocks to their dogs that dead serfs had fertilized. Whatever they had given him had been unintentional, stolen like the books themselves.

He preferred to credit the conversations. They would usually begin with questions. A bent man laboring beside him would pause while wiping the drying dirt and blood from his chapped palms, and ask himself why the hell the work had to hurt so much. Jurey would overhear and reply that he did not think it had to be, but that he hated that it was. Little else was said in the fields, where the overseers listened, but Jurey would seek out the man later.

He would find the man at his home or at one of the unvarnished, moss-colonized sheds where the serfs would go at night to sit on feed crates and drink home-brewed intoxicants. He would speak to the man, encourage him to vent, to ramble, to explode. He knew he could not sermonize or solicit. He knew that he could not argue with them. The men hated condescension. They were emotionally calloused, but also extraordinarily brittle. A word of reprimand or a moment of pretentious

superiority was enough to transform a friend into an overseer.

But once a man had found release, once he had ranted, cried or screamed and broken a cup or crate, then he could be spoken to. Jurey could empathize with the man, and he could explain. He could tell him how unjust he thought their lives were and how desperate he was for change, and they would listen. They did not accept it all immediately, just as he had not left forever on the night he saw the fertilizer-man, but they listened. And, after they had listened, they spoke, sharing their own frustration, their own outrage, and their own hope.

Once these conversations had spread through the community and each man had been given his chance to yell, spit, and vandalize, it was not long before the serfs began to realize that they were surrounded by potential weapons. The accumulated detritus of farming was secretly an armory. A wooden planting stake, trimmed, sharpened and sanded was an ideal shiv. A blade from a discarded plow needed only to be mounted on a handle and set to a whetstone to become a sword. Shovels, sickles and scythes were lethal already. Any large shaft of wood or iron was a club, and any club could be improved with brambles and nails. The serfs began to enter the fields armed. They worked with weapons tucked under belts, hidden in boots, and concealed wherever else opportunity allowed. This intrigue was only bravado then, covert one-upmanship. The men would brag to each other later about how close they had come to being discovered and what they would have done to the overseer who caught them. But Jurey knew that these

fantasies would only satisfy them temporarily, that each new embellishment in the serfs' boasts made conflict more certain.

The path outside the hovel remained empty. It was late morning and the clouds that had brought the last night's rain had retreated north, taking with them the low, heavy current of cold air that had turned a fall shower into an ice storm. The ground was defrosting and Jurey's footprints had begun to dissolve, leaving vague slushy pits. He felt an increasing restless energy, a tremulous heat in his abdomen. He was confident now that they were coming for him, confident that he was too important to neglect.

He no longer wanted to be arrested. He wanted to fight them. He wanted to twist out of their gauntlets and bite their wrists, teething through their flesh at the thin bone under their metal casing. He would force them down, under his feet, to kick them wherever their breastplates did not cover. Then he would kill them and he would run again. How didn't matter. Where was irrelevant. He would stumble to another plantation, find receptive serfs and begin the insurgency again. But he could not do that unarmed. He could not remember where he had left his long knife. It was a curved scimitar-length blade scavenged from a decrepit chaff cutter, easy to swing but cumbersome to transport. It had been too large to fit inside the legs of his overalls and too awkward to carry across his shoulders. He had tried to run with it in his hand, but found that it would collide with his hip, bruising him. It had dropped it as he had fled the fields,

before the rain and the ice. He imagined that it was now caked in thawing mud and that the blade had frozen and cracked. He needed a new weapon.

He turned towards the squatter. The man had lived tenuously as an invasive parasite, eating what he did not plant and living where he was not wanted. Jurey did not think he could have done so without fighting. He must have kept a homemade sling, a stolen shepherd's crook, or a whip made from foraged cords. The squatter had not left his hammock of pants and pitchforks. He wore an open robe of yellowed, undyed wool, made from inferior castoff spools, mostly from yearling lambs. He was all filth, stink and hair, but his skin was soft and unblemished, only the soles of his feet were calloused. His only weapon was a fisherman's knife, blunter than his fingernails. He was harmless.

Jurey's confidence emptied. He became aware of the clammy weight of his defrosting sleeveless shirt. His flesh was puckering beneath his damp underclothes. He had been sweating, and his scalp itched with encrusted perspiration. He wanted to undress and bathe, but he did not move. His impulses and desires had disconnected from his muscles, joints and tendons. The connective tissue, will, had decayed and dissolved. He stood and stared at the squatter's corpse.

He remembered when they had killed the overseer. A late summer frost had arrived unpredicted, withering uncovered crops overnight, days before the beginning of the harvest. The serfs had been separated from their cots before dawn and driven into the rows to rifle for grain

and vegetables that could be rescued among the lifeless stalks. They remained in the fields past noon. The morning had begun bitter and the serfs had been miserably underdressed, but it warmed quickly after sunrise. The overseers, now overdressed, became agitated and then abusive. They swore at the serfs, blaming their laziness for the destruction of the crops, and promising them shorter meals and longer days for the rest of the harvest and decreased allotments for the winter. They rode behind the slower men, slapping their shoulder blades with metal palms as they bent forward and seizing their loose hair as they stood up.

One ambitious overseer had brought a cattle goad, which he would stick between the ribs of bending serfs. He had discovered a lanky adolescent serf with tight skin and a hand-me-down shirt that was irresistibly short and had begun to prod him compulsively. He would wait for the boy to discover an unblemished tomato or edible peapod and then thrust the goad quickly, so that the boy dropped whatever he had found and was forced to kneel and grope to find it again. This continued until, instead of retrieving a bruised cucumber that he had dropped seven times, the boy withdrew a planting stake shiv from within his boot and drove it into the overseer's ankle. The overseer felt the pain before he understood it. He released the cattle goad and shifted awkwardly on his horse, trying to pulp the biting fly or beetle that his instinct held responsible. The boy seized the arm of the off-balance overseer and jerked, unseating him from his horse. Three nearby serfs discarded their harvesting baskets and joined the boy. They did not immediately remember the

weapons that had become more accessories than arms. They began to kick the fallen overseer, catching whatever bit of writhing, desperate life they could under the heels of their boots.

Jurey was on a separate detail when the overseer fell. He was walking between rows of maturing corn, watering their recently frozen leaves to prevent them from being damaged by the heat from the sun. He heard the yells first, distantly. The overseer beside him turned in the direction of the shouts and saw from horseback something that Jurey could not see through the corn. He rode immediately towards the uproar, leaving Jurey temporarily emancipated.

Jurey did not know what to do. He looked at the shriveled leaves of a browning corn stalk, hoping the dying plant would explain what had happened. Before the stalk could answer it was crushed, trampled by the retreating horse of an overseer. Stones, sticks and obscenities followed the overseer. Three other horses followed the first.

Jurey ducked the hooves of the second horse and tumbled into a shallow drainage ditch. He lay in the ditch for several minutes, stunned, counting retreating horses. He counted to fourteen before he stood again.

When he dragged himself from the ditch, he found the fields almost free of overseers. Only one remained, and he was dead, circled by beating, kicking, spitting serfs. One of the serfs was speaking to the corpse as he kicked it, saying, "Sir, sir, sir."

Three days passed before any overseer returned to the fields. The men did not harvest, and their wives and daughters did not go to the manor house. They did not know what would happen next. Most could not imagine a future in which they were free, or alive. They had never believed that they were the overseers' equals or that they could kill one, at least not without losing their own lives in exchange. That's not what they had told each other when they in the homebrew shacks, but all of that had been empty talk. It had been hopeless relief, like a terminal sufferer with a wasting disease threatening a disinterested god. They felt helpless, so they acted confident. They swore the overseers were cowards. Why would they come back? Did they want to have their asses offered to them again? Were they looking for their teeth, or their testicles? No, they were gone. They were scared. They were chicken shit. The overseers weren't coming back.

On the morning of the third day, the overseers returned. They had added heavy visors to their helmets and carried tower shields. They had painted over the personal insignia on each shield. Without face or symbol, they had no identity. No serf would know which had beat or abused him in the past; any violence would be impersonal.

They rode through the fields cautiously, keeping quiet and trying not to damage the plants that were still intact. Once they arrived at the small unmowed commons between the fields and the shacks they dismounted. They released their horses and shooed them

back toward the manor house. They set their shields forward and formed a tight line, facing the shacks, leaving no space between the shields. They were unarmed and they did not advance.

Jurey was sleeping when the overseers came. He had fallen asleep outside. He hoped to escape the noise of the self-affirming, self-medicating celebrations that were now a nightly occurrence near the shacks. He walked out to the edge of the commons and began an inattentive patrol, fidgeting with the handle of his chaff cutter. He was nervous. He could not comprehend why the overseers had retreated, why they had not retaliated. He did not believe they were afraid; that was wishful fantasy. Why then? He could not understand, so he paced himself to sleep.

He slept through the arrival of the overseers. It was the serfs who awakened him. He heard them yelling, wordless, all whoops and hoots and barks. He opened his eyes to a cracked boot sole, decorated with dirt, grass, and manure, passing over his face. He caught the scent of the manure, and, still groggy, imagined that he had missed the battle, and that he was smelling the bodies of the overseers, stacked, rotting, and ready for the mass grave. He stood, and, instead of the aftermath of a massacre, saw a line of overseers, standing motionless and undisturbed, and an amoebic mass of serfs pulsating chaotically towards them. His reaction was immediate. He found the chaff cutter, which had been trampled into the soft dirt. He grabbed it from the ground. He lifted it by its blade first, and then, after lightly cutting his index finger, moved his hand to the hilt. That was the only

blood he drew in the battle. He stopped only a moment to suck the blood from his fingertip, and then he ran to join the others.

He did not reach them before the quivering forward edge of serfs intersected the line of overseers. The leading serf ran with a sharpened spade that he had set under an arm to imitate a pike. As he reached an overseer he thrust the spade outward with an uneven jerk. The overseer leaned left, allowing the head of the spade to pass, and drove his shield right. The shield caught the spade by its shaft, and the momentum pulled it from the serf's hands. The overseer pushed his shield forward once, precisely and without spite, shoving the serf back. Each of the advance serfs were deflected in the same way. They were disarmed and dispassionately pushed away. If the repelled serf fell, he was not kicked, whipped or taunted. No residue of past abuse was detectible in the overseers' stance or actions. No serf pierced a shield or penetrated the line.

The serfs who had not yet touched the shield of an overseer pushed forward eagerly. Some stepped on the arms, limbs, necks and faces of the serfs who had fallen. From the beginning of their charge they had felt the ground convulsing and retreating under their trembling legs, and they felt no difference now. Others were struck by the stumbling men behind them and pushed forward, shoved back into the shields of overseers, who volleyed them into the crowd again.

Frustrated, disoriented and disarmed, the men at the front began to swing their arms and legs haphazardly. They were desperate to hurt someone. They had never

imagined a battle with an invulnerable opponent disinterested in fighting. It was nothing like they day they killed the overseer. It was senseless.

They began to hit and kick each other. The blows were accidental at first, but they quickly became intentional. This satisfied in ways that striking the shields of the overseers did not. The pain was immediately clear and it was reciprocal. A swollen eye could be answered with a broken jaw. A kick to the crotch was roughly equivalent to a thumb in the eye. A punch to the neck might drop a serf immediately, but the fall only put him in a better position to chew on his assailant's ankle. Justice became uncomplicated.

This was how Jurey found them. He tried to pass behind a fist fight and was backhanded once. The fist caught him in the larynx, ending his advance towards the overseers. He retreated, swallowing and choking, and crouched on the edge of the commons, snorting on the burning phlegm that had filled his nostrils. He a pair of serfs, no longer interested in brutalizing each other, discard their weapons and leave the battle. The overseers made no attempt to pursue. They maintained their line, moving only to deflect the few serfs who still fought their original enemy.

Jurey realized that nothing would change. The serfs would beat each other into catharsis, and go back to their shacks. Tomorrow the overseers would come and take those that could walk into the fields to harvest. There they would walk along the rows of plants, following the irrigation trenches, and followed by the overseers. Some of them would die in the fields, and they would be

tilled into the rows to fertilize the crops. He looked across the commons, over the diminishing quarrel, and at one of the overseers. He could not tell if he had known him. He could not see his face and he was too distant to hear his voice, but he imagined the overseer was speaking to him. He imagined he was asking, "Impressed?"

He turned away and ran from the commons, leaving the fields behind.

Jurey stared at the squatter, remembering how he ran. He felt vacant. All of the emotions that he felt earlier had receded from his mind and settled on his skin. They had solidified, clinging to his pores, sticky and malodorous, like afterbirth on a stillborn calf. He wanted to believe that it was afterbirth. He wanted to believe that the oppressive, oily dissatisfaction was inherited and universal, that all serfs were born frustrated and desperate. He could not believe it any longer.

He understood that he was alone. He realized that no one was searching for him, that no serf was seeking a liberator and no overseer was looking for a prisoner. He could live outside the fields for the rest of his life, like the squatter. He could steal, scrape and scavenge everything essential to remain alive. He could accumulate soil and smells, and only have blisters on the soles of his feet. He could build a hammock from rags and die on it. He imaged that this was the only possible liberty.

He felt that he should bury the squatter. The body was light from malnourishment and had a diminutive frame. He was confident that he could move it, even in his present weakness. He grasped the squatter by his bare

arms. They felt warm against his wet, puckered fingertips. Jurey did not question the warmth. It seemed natural that the squatter's body should not be cold or rigid, like the serfs who died in the field. He moved his hands to the corpse's shoulders and pulled its torso upright. He felt the muscles in the shoulders shift and tighten. He saw the squatter's arms rise, and he imagined they would embrace him. The arms pushed him away.

"Go! Get out! Leave!"

Jurey felt the push before he understood it. He did not know how a dead man could shove him aside. He imagined that even death had rejected him. He looked pleadingly at the squatter's cot, hoping for an explanation. The cot was empty. No body lay on the ragged pants. The squatter stood beside the cot. His arms were raised, defensively. The yellowed wool robe, which was too large for him, hung off his shoulder. His bare feet were blushing pink against the splintered floorboards. He did not move closer to Jurey. He was shouting.

"Go! Get out! Leave!"

Jurey did not respond. The squatter's resuscitation was senseless. He could not reconcile it with his life. He could not see how the gout-afflicted shuffle of the fertilizer-man and the blushing feet of the squatter could coexist. He felt taunted by the blood returning to the squatter's toes, mocked by hopeful possibilities. He had nothing to say, so he listened to the squatter and he left.

By early evening, Jurey had returned to the fields. He hesitated at their edge. He had thought about nothing but his surrender during the return trip, avoiding

thoughts of the squatter. He had not thought of the ice storm, or wondered about the condition of the crops. He was unprepared for what he saw.

The stalks of wheat were broken, bent by the weight of the ice clinging to their heads. Frozen fruit and vegetables lay where they had fallen from their plants, blotched and discolored, with cracked skins and pods. Even the weeds, left untended during the brief revolt, had been killed by the frost. The fields were dead. He saw no surviving plant and no crop that could be salvaged by the harvest. He knelt and retrieved a defrosting tomato from the dirt. Its insides were slush and outside it had begun to brown.

He realized there would be no harvest. No men would return to the fields today, or the next day, or any day this autumn. They hadn't harvested enough crops. They had enough to live normally for weeks, maybe, but not for months. The serfs would go hungry, and so would the overseers. The traditional routine could not be sustained. There had been nothing static about the ice. Survival would be impossible without change.

Nothing was changeless, outside of fearful obsession and hopeful fantasies. He thought of the dead squatter standing, with his pink toes, and the fertilizer man falling, heavy and lifeless, into a freshly tilled row with a shaft of wheat in his fist. He let the frozen tomato fall, and stepped into the field.