

STICK BOY

A tall man, lean; skin taut with the stretch of past suns. He is walking down a rough path which once had parallel walls; lines stretching from houses, dividing gardens of beans, root crops, peas, squash, and the occasional flower. Now, where walls had been, lines of grass darker for decayed mortar and lime. Where gardens had been, flat grasslands stretch. Where houses had been, horizon

He is walking down one of the overgrown paths, a path he used to know well. He is surprised to see that, among the grass and weeds, miniature versions of the original vegetables are still growing; scattered, but growing. He bends down to take a closer look at cabbage heads no bigger than mushrooms, tendrils of beans creeping up grass stems

An apple, normal size, whizzed past his ear. Then another. And another, till one hit him in the cheek as he stood up. Sharp as a sting. A boy, ankle deep in green grass running in over and among the vegetables. A black boy. From just beyond where the man could catch him with a quick lunge, the boy continued to pelt him with apples stuck on the end of a long stick, and flung with the force of a spearthrower. The man walked slowly, pretending indifference, though he was hit with increasing frequency. Then he left the crumbled path and circled closer to the boy. In one fast rush he had him in his grasp

The boy squirmed and kicked, but made no noise. The man tried to get a better hold, but the tighter he gripped, the faster he felt the boy escaping him. Slowly, as he watched, the boy's body began to grow smooth, divide into sections, sprout long lance-shaped leaves; become bamboo, a bamboo that rose higher and higher before his astonished eyes. Twisting one end of itself into the earth, it began to wave the other end in the air. The man looked about in bewilderment. All around had been open grassland. Now he found himself hemmed in at the center of four tall bamboos, already beginning to close over the top of his head, twenty feet in the sky

Before the top could seal him off, he grabbed one of the poles and, tearing, ripping, managed to heave it out of the ground, soil still clinging to its roots. With it he began to beat the remaining three. But he found that his bamboo simply bounced off the others, stinging his hands. Its end began to splinter. He felt the day getting dark, and thrust the shattered

bamboo above him, waving it wildly to keep the sky from shutting. The remaining three plants continued growing. The shattered stem in his hand began to draw his hand down toward the earth. The sky kept growing darker

-- Brian Swann

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VENICE 1976

You were present on that Sunday
when all the bells of Venice
pealed through the morning mist
San Giorgio Maggiore looking so much like
the Christian Science Mother Church,
with its Byzantine tiles

and we admired the glassblower's craft
in a back alley of San Gregorio.
The clinking roses seemed all that remained
of the old symbols, the old guard,
and a faded world that peeled at the touch.

The waters of Il Canal Grande were misty
like memories that resurrect the moment
and surprise by their context.
From there we went on to Olga's
she the hieratic keeper of this past.
Her colloquy was intertwined with
the speech of those bells,
the idealism that would not budge
from its center, her invective
that spilled onto the canal
where Aphrodite rose once out of the sea
with the image of a city
on her headband.
"Maestro," said Ungaretti to Pound,
"you sit first," that rattan chair
a throne for laureates.

And as the vaporetto made its slow course
toward San Michelle, island of the dead,
we thought of our grandfathers pacing
their islands in the sun
making their gentle compositions --
the musician with his Symphony of Psalms
another who asked the wind to speak.