

RURAL REASONING

Wolf sits with his left leg slung over the box that is neatly fitted between the driver and the passenger seats. He is reading a *Home and Away* magazine; every now and again expelling a “humph” or a “hmmm” accented by a scratch of his index finger over his left ear. His right elbow rests in the open window frame and the chicken leg in that hand is dancing to the tune of each word. Envelopes, magazines, small parcels, and circulars, all but one banded in small bunches, sit within the two topless cartons on the driver’s seat. He moves his leg slightly outward and the magazine flaps shut between his legs and falls to the floor. While Wolf is retrieving the magazine, he accidentally jams it beneath the lunch cooler and tears the front cover. Once returned to his lap, he notices that he has gotten quite a bit of chicken grease on the cover. He returns it to the stack for the Edmundsen family and rebinds it with a rubber band, feeling an air of guilt at it having been soiled.

With lunch being done, it is time to return to the remainder of his rounds; The Tierney’s, The Blake’s, The Stuckenschneider’s, Dr. Biddlen, and, of course, The Edmundsen’s, are amongst the few that have yet to receive their Monday mail. He should be finishing up around 4:00 or so. There are so many bills to deliver today. Monday’s are rough. The revolving orange light on the roof needs to be switched back on. He maneuvers his left foot over the accelerator, turns the keys in the ignition, and moves out onto Highway U.

The fence lines along the shoulders work much as a mantra would for Wolf. His thoughts steer toward a painfully young memory of last week. He had just returned home for the evening, having dropped the outgoing mail at the office, to find his son tormenting his daughter. Sibling strife was not unknown in Wolf’s household, but usually his wife kept the kids well in line, at least when he was home.

It was the nature of the tormenting that gave Wolf such anguish. He had returned to find his six-year-old daughter trapped in the cage of the papassan chair with his eleven-year-old son reclining in the bowl. His

daughter was sobbing and there was a quickly spreading puddle of urine on the parquet floor. His son was gesturing wildly, accentuating his monologue:

“The w-w-world is a-a-a-mighty big place! Hu-hu-hu-one can’t just expect t-t-t-to live w-w-ithout contributin’ somethin’! You need t-t-to m-m-ake you’re mark, a-a-accomplish somethin’, be a MAN!”

Wolf opens the Stuckenschneider’s mailbox, removes the outgoing mail and places it in the carton on the floor behind the seat. He grabs their bundle, removes the rubber band and puts the mail in the box. He grasps a *Pioneer* and places that within the newspaper holder attached on the post below the mailbox. He lowers the flag. Glancing out over the field, he sees Aaron about to climb into his tractor, lifting the brim of his ball cap and wiping his forehead with his forearm. Aaron’s son is already in the cab. Wolf can hear him tuning the radio. Aaron just became a grandfather to a five pound, three ounce baby girl.

“If all y-you ever read are those comic b-books your friends sneak you, you’re n-n-n-ever gonna learn nothin’ ‘bout nothin’. History, now th-th-there’s what you need. Learnin’, reading! Hah! He thinks he’s so smart. He can’t even talk right. Mitz, you like my comic books, doncha? Well, doncha?”

Wolf had frozen in the doorway with his arms at his sides. He had felt like his face was melting and everything tilted. He wanted to yell, scream, but when he gets really upset he really can’t say it right. Is that really what he sounds like? His son’s voice had been so menacing, so nasty. His daughter had tucked herself between her knees whispering, “Yes, yes, please let me go.” He could not see her face, but he imagined her eyes held the same look of pain and shame.

Stop, mail, flag; stop, mail, flag; stop, mail, flag and Wolf spies Mrs. Tierney heading down her drive waving a letter. He feels a stab in his intestine and pulls up just a little more in from his usual spot so as to leave little room between his window and the mailbox. In this way, Mrs. Tierney will have to approach from the side. Maybe, she won’t even want to talk. She is huffing with exertion, “Well hi there, Mister Becker! I’m so glad you’re a



Melissa Cooke, *Bear and Bees*, gouache, 2004

little late today. If I didn't get this bill out today I mighta ruined us. Good credit and a spotless record. Not many farmers can say that, can they? We don't wanna end up like Maureen and her bunch. Foreclosure, terrible! Did you hear 'bout that? Oh, a course you did! Don't imagine your deliverin' any mail there these days.

"So, Mister Becker, maybe you might wanna take your lunch here tomorrow? I should have some hot roast beef left after the boys have had theirs. Fresh peas, mashed potatoes, fresh bread; you could have a hot roast beef sandwich. I can wait for you, if you like? I haven't been to town lately and I just know you know everybody's doin's. Ian don't tell me nothin'."

"N-n-n-no th-th-thanks, m-m-m-Missus t-t-t-Tierney. Alice is p-packin' me a r-r-r-ight nice lunch."

"Well, I thought I'da ask anyway. I know you can take your lunch in residence. Back home our Mister Knowles always took lunch with one of us. He was a terrible gossip, but you wouldn't be like that, I know, Mister Becker."

Wolf stares at Mrs. Tierney. He just knows he looks stupid. He's NOT STUPID. He knows what she wants. She's relatively new to town; a couple of years and the *Welcome Wagon* ladies don't talk with her anymore. She doesn't have any kids, so they don't really need speak

to her. She likes to meddle. She smiles, raises her eyebrows, and rests her hand on the cooling hood. "Well, Mister Becker, I suppose I'da better let you get back to your job since I know your runnin' late. You just think 'bout my offer. Anytime, you're welcome in my home. You just drive up to the house and give a honk. That's what Mister Knowles always did, you know; give a honk and scatter the chickens. You being a Wolf could scatter the chickens. Isn't that funny, Wolf, chickens, get it, Mister Becker?"

"Y-yes. Th-th-thank you. Bye."

With that exchange weathered, Wolf escapes Mrs. Tierney. The gravel was spitting against the undercarriage of the mini-van. He couldn't help but think it would have been nice to have this sound to drowned out her voice.

Stop, mail, flag; stop, mail; no mail for Dr. Biddlen today. Dr. Biddlen is Wolf's kids' physician. Pretty soon, his son won't be going to her anymore. She is a pediatrician. He won't want to disrobe in front of a woman in his budding manhood. Wolf gets to thinking about it and decides that he will definitely talk to his wife about this. It is about time he starts to see Dr. Mac, like his papa. His son would have gone to this doctor in the first place if Dr. Mac had not been so old. In recent years, Dr. Mac had not been very good with children. None of the neighbors could quite see the need to still be vaccinating for things such as

polio and smallpox.

"Boy, w-w-w-atcha doin' to your sister? C-c-can'tcha hear her c-cryin'? Get outa th-that chair, NOW!"

Wolf had hurled the bowl of the pappasan onto the adjacent sofa and lifted the basket from over his daughter. She had remained bound up; the pink pants she was wearing appeared purple wherever they had been soaked with urine. He unwound her from the ball she had tied herself into and walked her to the bathroom. He grabbed a towel from the linen closet and laid it over the toilet seat. He eased her down onto the towel and smoothed back her hair. She still had not lifted her head when Wolf asked her, "Sweetheart, does y-your brother do that a lot?"

She didn't say anything and when Wolf lowered his head to try to see her face, he had caught her biting her lip. Huge tears were dropping on her hands; they were dropping on his heart. He realized that he had just added to her shame in asking her to inform on her brother. What did it matter if this happened often, once would have been enough. He knew that, certainly, once was enough for him. "It's okay, Sweetheart, let me go f-f-ind your mother. She'll get you c-cleaned up fine. Your papa loves you."

The Edmundsen's house was right on the road. Unfortunately, their mailbox is on the wall next to the front door. Mrs. Edmundsen is terminally shy and will pretend that she does not see Wolf coming down the road. From about a block away, Wolf sees Mrs. Edmundsen abandon her chore on the porch and flee around the corner of the house. At first, this used to unnerve him. Now, he thanks the Powers That Be that the one time he has to get out of the van and expose himself to the elements that there is no hindrance between him and the box unless ... there is Mr. Edmundsen, then there is a lot of back-slapping and rib-jabbing and *how ya doing, Buddy Boying*. Thankfully, there is no sign of the feed salesman today. But, there is still the issue of the magazine that was corrupted at lunch. It is with a feeling of parting with contraband that Wolf places the mail in the box. He returns to the van, telling himself all the while that the Edmundsen's may not think that he did this to their mail. They will probably think it happened in route or at the office. *Buddy Boy* would never do such a thing.

"So, you th-think your papa's s-s-Stupid do you? You think he d-d-doesn't know nothin' 'bout the world, 'bout being a man? Well, Boy, your papa knows, no doubt in his m-mind that cruelty and un-un-unkind words and acts on your family won't get you nowhere no-no-no matter how much book learnin' you have! Kris, you just

full of the m-m-m-mean m-m-m-meanness of prejudice. You'll learn, there's all k-kinds a people in the world, all d-different than you. If you can't ac-accept this in your own family maybe you not meant to have a family and th-then you'll be ALONE! I care 'bout you, Boy, but you gotta c-care about your own self, your c-c-character. I'll never, NEVER leave you alone long as I live, but your ma and I wo-wo-wo-on't live forever and then where wo-would you be? Before su-supper you need to say 'sorry' to your sister. Now go clean up in the k-kitchen and th-think about it some."

Wolf had left his son weeping at the kitchen sink while he went to find his wife. He had found her reading in a chair on the back lawn. He had explained to her that she was needed by her daughter in the bathroom and decided not to tell her about the incident. It took some time to sink in; his son did not respect him.

The last stop before the office is the Blake farm. Mr. and Mrs. Blake put six of their eight children through college. No farmhands in those kids. Their children, in turn, have helped support their parents in their old age. Now there are tenants on all the parcels. Mr. Blake spends his days assisting them. Mrs. Blake stays in writing letters to all her children and their children. It is all Wolf can do to not tear into the many packages from this house as they all smell of chocolate and gingerbread and it is always close to dinner.

Wolf thinks how nice it would be if he could talk to the Blakes, about his son. Having so many children who are all doing so well, they might very well know what could be done, what to say, and how to say it. He places their mail in the box and heads for the office. When he arrives, there is a message from his wife; dinner will not be until 6:00, instead of 5:00, and maybe Wolf might like to stop off at the tavern for a couple. He isn't much of a social drinker, but they pretty well leave him to listen when he goes to the Buck & Ale.

At 5:45 he climbs back into the passenger seat of the van with a quick "I'm heading home" wave to Mr. Edmundsen. Even without the cartons, he still drives from the passenger seat. It is more natural to him and he has a clearer view of his path. Home is visible over the side-view mirror and the dread begins to well up in his mind. His son has barely spoken in a week, not even to apologize. His summer activities seem curbed. He has spent much of the time in his room behind a closed door. Wolf did not even ground him; he seems to have grounded himself.

Wolf 's wife greets him at the door. She is not wearing her customary *Cinzano* apron. She is, instead, wearing slacks and a blouse; something she would

normally have on when Wolf's sister comes to visit. He can't stand the idea of a visit from his sister right now. Why didn't she warn him in the message? "Welcome home, Wolf. Let's go sit in the livin' room. The kids are doin' dinner tonight. Isn't that nice?"

The first thing he notices is the conspicuous absence of the pappasan chair. In its stead is a used recliner that looks so comfortable Wolf just has to make a beeline for it. He settles in as the dread subsides into the well of memory. His wife sits on the sofa and winks at him. "They've been very busy arrangin' our evening. Kris has been the mastermind and Mitzy, a course, has had to take a bunch of directions from her brother. Like the chair?"

"Well, yes, it's nice. Comfy. Just right I th-think."

"Kris picked it out yesterday from the Hayes' garage sale. He's quite a bargain hunter, unlike his papa."

"How come I don't smell nothin'?"

"Oh, supper's not here yet. What, you thought Kris was cookin'? What do you think I am, crazy? I know who'd still be doin' the dishes, even if the kids are cookin'. It's my night off, too, you know."

There is a sound of blaring hip hop; the bass from the woofer rattles the windows. Kris emerges from the kitchen with his wallet and struts toward the door. Wolf makes to get up and his wife gestures palm down for him to reseal himself. His son somehow looks older and more serious. He checks inside the box to make sure that it is what he ordered, his head bobbing to the sound of the retreating music. Wolf did not know his son liked hip hop.

After dinner, the family sits in the living room watching the television. Wolf is not paying much attention to the program; he is watching his son. His son is not watching the program either. He is staring at a corner of the room with words caught in his throat. Wolf is watching him swallow, pull his lips in, squint, and squirm. Finally, he speaks, "Pop, can I ask you somethin'?"

Wolf's wife gets up and taps his daughter on the shoulder. They go out onto the front porch, turning the television off as they go. Wolf wishes they would stay. He

is so suddenly uncomfortable in his comfortable chair.

"Sure, Kris."

"Did you always stutter? I mean, did somethin' happen to you to make you stutter, somethin' bad?"

"No, son."

"So you're not *handicapped*, right? I mean, my teacher wants us to call it *mentally challenged*. But, if you were *handicapped*, you wouldn't be able to read, or drive, or have a job, right?"

And there it was, so clear and so biting. He had hit this wall before and with the help of his own parents, and a few understanding teachers, he had hurdled it again and again. This time, the wall was too high to hurdle. His son had heard others call him *retarded*. That must be where this came from. These kids know about inferior stock. They know about the genetic possibilities in breed-

ing these traits; the probabilities involved with the offspring; the decline in value on the market. His son was scared.

"Look, Kris, th-this won't never happen to you. Everybody's dif-different. Just with some you c-can see it, or h-hear it on the outside. You're gonna have y-y-your own th-things to deal with; your own ch-chall-challenges."

"Papa, I wanna talk to you more, but you don't like to talk. You're not stupid and I'm really sorry I called you stupid."

His son started crying and fighting with himself to stop. He was beating his palms against his forehead and the air was fast being expelled from his nose along with mucous that he kept wiping away with his left hand. Wolf went into the kitchen for a dishrag, but grabbed three, attached sheets of plain white paper towel. He handed them to his boy and reseated himself in the recliner. After it seemed that his son's emotion had played itself out, Wolf gave a little cough, "We can talk m-more, I promise."

"I was thinkin', maybe I could write you letters, you know, and leave 'em in the van? Or, I could mail 'em, if you like? That way, if it's hard to talk 'bout, I can just write it down and you could find it later."



Melissa Cooke, *L-o'go; log'os*, serigraph, 2004

Why hadn't he thought of this before? And, he could write him back. His son could see how much he had to say. His son got up and went to his bedroom and Wolf waited for the door to slam. But, he returned with a letter addressed to Papa and placed it on Wolf's knee. "That's for tomorrow. Don't read it 'til tomorrow, okay?"

Wolf nodded slowly and shook his son's hand, "I promise I'll r-r-ead it at lunch, okay?"

Instead of picking out a magazine from the carton, Wolf opened the letter from his son. He felt nervous and tingly, just like a first date. This was new and exciting, but very frightening:

Dear Pop,

*I thought alot about what you said about being alone. I do not want to be alone EVER!!! I am alone in my room right now but I still know you are all outside in the kitchen or the living room. I do not want to be prejudus. I do not want to be mean. Mitzy cried because I was mean to her. I cried because I thought you were mean to me. But I thought alot about it and you were not really mean. You just do not want me to be alone. You do not want Mitzy to get so mad at me that she would not talk to me anymore and I would not have anybody to call me papa or uncle Kris. I am going to work on my charicter. I want you to be proud of me. I promise not to make fun of your stutter any more. You are my dad and its hard for you to talk. So thats why I am writing you this letter. You can write me back if you want to. Just leave it by my door. If you write me back I will make a mailbox for my door that you can leave letters in. Thank you!
your loving son
and warm regards, sincerely
Kristof W. Becker*

Wolf opened the glove compartment and took out a pen and a spare envelope. He placed a stamp on corner of the envelope, addressed it to his son at his home, and



Melissa Cooke, *Lake Clean-up*, serigraph, 2004

placed it on the dashboard. He then pulled out a pad of paper from the pocket behind the seat and began his letter:

July 16th

Dear Kristof,

I was so very pleased to receive your letter. Installing a mailbox on your bedroom door, I feel, might fit very well into some father and son time this Sunday. If this letter does not reach you in time for plans on Sunday, I will knock on your door Saturday night before dinner... ❖