

Glenn Moomau

Things You See Sharp

Ricky had been complaining for an hour about our latest job. We were digging two-foot-deep postholes in hard ground, the beginnings of a shed that Butch wanted built for his rusting tractor.

"If we had an auger, we'd be done already," he said. With one hand he shoved the digging bar into the hole and then stood up as if he couldn't work and talk at the same time. "They act like they hate machinery on this farm. They do! We're the machines!"

I told Ricky that I was glad to have a job in February. He started running his mouth about collecting unemployment until I said, "Give me that digging bar if you're just going to lean on it."

I felt like a machine when I wasn't working, that I wasn't alive, with nerves that connected to my senses and feelings.

But at that moment I breathed deeply and my body was hot even as frosted air jetted from my mouth. The afternoon sky had gone prematurely dark. I kept noticing how the low overcast seemed to wall off the empty field sloping down to the creek bottom and the farther woods. A woodpecker was working on a tree trunk and the sound carried strangely through the air. It was one of those days where I believed what I saw might be the world's limits and what lay beyond the horizon could not be known.

Butch hollered from the hog house, a tin-roofed shanty where trees loomed over the field. The woods were fenced from the road clear to the creek and the ground under the trees was constantly plowed by the hogs. We left our tools stuck in the holes and trudged over.

Butch leaned over the railing of one of the pens where a giant sow lay on her side, breathing with harsh grunts. The pig smell stung my eyes and made Ricky cough.

"I think she's ready," Butch said. "I wanted y'all to see this." The hog business was new and exciting to Butch. Since we were his young employees, he was always trying to teach things that in our stubborn youth we were too blind to notice. That morning we had built rails around the perimeter of the pen—eight inches from the concrete floor, eight inches out from the walls—to protect the tiny newborns from their mother's body. In the last two litters, nine had been crushed.

I put my arms on the pen's top rail and leaned over. Blood squirted between the sow's hams. She moaned and her ears twitched. Then the piglet just appeared, as if it had materialized on the bare concrete instead of coming from the sow, kneeling on its forelegs, its blood-soaked body smoking in the yellow haze cast down by a bare light bulb.

"Will you look at that? Will you just look at that," Butch said. I climbed up one rung on the fence that separated us from the animals and bent way over to see. I looked over at Ricky and his face showed that for once he may have been interested in something other than himself. The little creature stood up on four trembling legs. Its papery skin gleamed between the patches of drying blood as it began to walk towards its towering mother. It fell down on its forelegs, got back up, and moved against the sow's bristling back. Butch leaned way over and picked it up, the piglet not much bigger than his hand. He set it down on the other side of the sow's legs and, after a while, the newborn found a tit. I couldn't figure out why that birth seemed special, but I knew even

then that it had some secret importance, and I breathed in the air of that room, unzipped my coat and took my hands from my pockets.

A foot of snow fell before dark. The snow stuck to our gloves and hats before melting and turning to ice. We set all the posts for the shed, and then had to re-dig three of them when Butch came up with his tape measure and changed the plan. Ricky kept yelling that this was typical of the way Butch did things. He stomped around, talking about the absurdity of building a shed for a forty-year-old tractor, like building a house for a man already dead. He said that he was going to get a class "B" license and drive a tandem dump truck for his uncle. Ricky was hard to like, stuck as he was with his love of sitting, talking and driving.

I didn't care what we had to do that day. I just wanted to be out in it. I wanted the world all around me. Work was more than just getting paid. For a long time my life had seemed like someone else's, but the whole afternoon and into the night I kept thinking about how those little pigs popped out one after another and how I had expected them to come out violently, the way humans are born, and that it would be painful for that old sow, but instead they just tumbled out, the whole event bloody and calm and to this day it is something that I put before my eyes when my head gets too crowded with doubt.