

The Holes So Freshly Sliced

by Liz Robak Carpenter
English 4

She stood in the warmth of late morning looking around at their yard with its patches of grass, yellow weeds and moist black earth. An army green poncho laid over one arm and she gave it a brisk shake and hung it on the mailbox to dry. As she stood there with the sun on her face she felt warmed and immobile. But George and Judith's Pontiac was parked under the locust tree by the road, so she walked up the broken cement walk to the door.

She heard echoes of George's laughter as she walked in the house, saw Lou in his usual corner, and took her place on his other side. "Well, here she is," Judith said, getting up and pecking her cheek. "We almost thought we'd miss you today."

Both were dressed in their Sunday slacks and sweaters and they told her they'd taken a drive after church to see their favorite "pseudo-married" couple. She saw among their usual offerings—some leftover pie and a stack of magazines—a copy of *Bride's* on the table, and smiled at them with tight lips.

"Well," she said, "have you been here long?"

"Oh, not nearly long enough for this boy, I'm sure," George grinned, reaching out and patting Lou's head. She watched Lou lean back in the rocker.

George chuckled at what he thought was Lou's playfulness. George had shifted in his chair and she

smelled soap and imagined cigarettes, wishing for just one failure in his facade of khaki healthiness. "I was just telling Louis that this place really looks lived in," he said. "Lived in by what I'm not sure, I said, but it sure has that lived-in look!" Pausing a moment to give his audience the full effect of his wit, he burst out with "Ha-hah!" and looked around for reactions.

Not a violent person by nature, she nevertheless felt herself drawn to the half-plate of pie on the table, especially since pumpkin wasn't a favorite of George's. She calculated it would just about cover his nose.

At his blast she'd opened her mouth to reply, but seeing Lou's half-hearted laughter, she cleared her throat instead. Then she told George and Judith about herbs and clover and dandelion wine, talking to George's winks and Judith's gray blankness.

When she'd stopped, Judith was looking at the wall. "Young people today are so much different from my . . ." she said.

George pulled a folded white handkerchief out of his back pocket and blew his nose. "Well," he said, his red nose casting a pallor over the whole room, "all I can say is I'm glad you're on the edge of town and not in the middle of the neighborhood. Come on, Mother, we should be going." Everyone stood.

They walked out the door—Lou, then George and Judith—and as they paused on the walk she saw Judith grab Lou's arm. "Marycarol Stevens asked about you the other day," she told him, then glanced over her shoulder. "She was one of his little friends in church back home, but I suppose," turning back to him, "you probably don't care to hear about your old church anymore."

She watched Lou step away from his mother and pick up a twig in the yard. "Of course I want to hear about my friends, Ma," he said. "Remember me? This is Louie, same big nose, same holey jeans—remember?" He kissed her cheek. "Besides," he looked off towards the water tower, "you never know what might happen with us." And mother and father moved away to the car with their son.

She followed them to the locust tree. Judith gave her another cool peck while George pulled out his handkerchief and rubbed some dried bird droppings off the roof of

the car. Then she and Lou stood side by side in the shade smiling and waving good-bye as the Pontiac lumbered down the lane, close but not touching.

When the car was no longer in sight Lou walked away. She stood awhile, and the sun crept under the edges of leafy shadow. Eventually she felt the cold wet that had soaked through her sneakers and she returned to the house.

She left her shoes outside the door and changed into thongs and cutoffs. If she hadn't known of the visit she would have figured out by the signs Lou left: the toilet seat was up and his faded blue hanky laid on the kitchen table. Most times he was more of a housekeeper than she. She called him but he didn't answer and she headed for the kitchen.

She didn't really even have to look. The old metal knife wasn't in the kitchen crock and George and Judith had just left. As she walked towards the front door she could hear the soft scrape of blade slicing earth.

Through the screen she saw the small square of grass to the right of the walk pockmarked with holes where dandelions had once rooted and spread. The dirt under the sun's glare was black and moist. From the other side of the yard by the birdbath—where pert yellow blossoms had reappeared only this morning—came the knife's methodical slicing. "It's not worth it," she said to him through the screen door, and when the scrape of the blade continued, she followed the sound outside.

This grassy area was also pocketed with holes among the new weeds but the dirt was fresh in only a few of them. She watched him—bent at the waist and reaching with freckled arms, his back the color of wet wood, the salty drops rolling off his forehead and melting into the dirt—and folded her legs beneath her on the sidewalk.

"I'll walk over to the library with you now if you've got to study," she said.

He paused and looked up at her. A pile of uprooted dandelions were drooping on the road, and she saw how long, hard veins stuck out on his arms and neck and noticed the earth's wormy smell. The backs of her legs on the cement were damp.

He said to her, "What would you want to go for?" and with his feet braced, his back hunched and head twisted upward he reminded her of an old, gnarled George. Especially if she looked only at his nose.

“I could always read or write letters,” she told him, “but if you want to go by yourself just say so.”

He said nothing at first and she unfolded her legs and stretched them down the length of the warm cement walk. Stray blades of grass poked the backs of her knees. As she settled her eyes on a spot of cement the digging began again, unevenly this time.

She didn’t move when he started speaking, although her scalp itched from the sun and her rounded shoulders felt stiff. “There’s always an answer, isn’t there?” (His words thrust and receded with the rhythm of the knife.) “You can just go to the library, read your books, write your letters, and everything will take care of itself, is that right? What’s it to you if we live in a pit and our yard’s full of weeds?”

There was no sound from the knife now and she felt his eyes on her. “I’m talking to you,” he said, and her chin cut a swift arc as she lifted her head.

The sun slanting on his face made small shadows under his eyes. She asked him, her voice low, “Did George give you an earful?” and motioned towards the yard with a slight jerk of her head.

But he stood as straight as a knife’s edge, his slick body gleaming, and she felt her stomach tighten. “I suppose,” he said to her, “as far as you’re concerned, they are my parents and legally this is my yard. So what’s it to you? Why would you care?”

“Come off it,” she said. “A few dandelions don’t hurt anything.”

“Haven’t you ever seen a really green lawn without weeds or holes or bare spots—”

“But it takes time,” she told him.

“Don’t tell me about dandelions,” he said, and she realized she hadn’t been.

She watched him look over the small weeded square behind her, the drooping pile of weeds on the road and his green and yellow lot ahead. “Nothing’s going to get done this way . . .” His words died away as he bent down to the earth.

He’d reached this side of the speckled-gray birdbath—her birdbath, because it really was hers if it came right down to it—and she thought of last week and how far away were those days. She tried to put herself back: she’d walked up the road and there was the birdbath in the

yard after she'd given up trying to convince him; but there he was now digging around it, and still it would never seem to her to clutter up the yard at all.

She stretched her arms up and over her head then dropped them and scratched behind her knees.

The sun had passed its peak and a cool finger of shadow from the house front touched the tips of her backbone. She could smell her own acrid odor and feel ridges on her legs from the sidewalk's cracks. One by one she watched the dandelions hit the top of the pile and roll off to the side.

She rolled forward and propped herself on her elbow, facing him and the sun. "You know you've got to study," she said. "Why don't we just go?"

"Oh," he spoke to the weeds, "and what else do you and everyone else say I've got to do?"

He sliced and sliced and sliced and pulled and sliced and sliced and sliced.

"For one thing it's Sunday and you're not supposed to be working, are you?"

A mosquito lighted on his neck and she watched it linger before he flicked it off. "For pete's sake I'm sick and tired of this crap," she said. "It's your parents' problem, not mine. Just go look at their goodwill pile in there—they brought us a *Bride's* magazine of all things." She rolled onto her back. "Ask them what you're supposed to do if you can't make up your own mind after twenty-six years."

"I don't hear you coming up with answers," he said.

"Answers—to what? I'm fine. I'm happy. I'm a happy healthy well-rounded individual."

"Well-rounded is about right."

"What—?" She glared. "What do you mean by that?"

She watched him cut away and heard his voice as if coming out of the ground. "And look at your dang poncho—we've got a clothesline, you know."

Without a word she stood and stalked over to the poncho on the mailbox and around the corner of the house. When she came back he was in his usual four-legged position. "What else can I do for you, George?" She knelt on the ground in front of him.

A sudden cool passed over them as a cloud blocked the sun. His head was still bowed although he'd stopped

digging and she saw him place his hand on the edge of the birdbath and grip its thick ledge. "What do you think we should do?" he asked her and straightened, his arms hanging at his sides. His body was softened by points of shadow.

She realized George and Judith were forty miles away by now and wouldn't be back, with luck, for at least another month.

"Plant herbs, feed the birds, grow things," she told him. "Why should we have to do anything else?"

She pushed herself to her knees and stood. "I'm afraid if I don't quit bothering you the dandelions are going to take over."

He looked around him, protesting weakly, "I've already gotten this far . . ."

"Well, good luck with the rest of it."

He pushed the knife in the earth then and let go, and unbending, looked around him. "I don't know," he said to her, running his fingers along the speckled-gray ledge.

"Maybe I'll try for awhile—to grow things."

She said, "Don't do it on my account," and he shrugged.

"At least for today anyway—it's Sunday."

She looked again at the green and yellow lot spotted and nicked with holes and saw where the fresh dirt was already drying out. And as the blades of grass and yellow blossoms stretched toward the emerging sunlight, it seemed to her that their petals were already growing over the holes so freshly sliced.