

Keeping Fire

Warren Hatch

The moon is up, and the fire has burned down.
Benjamin stoops, coaxes embers to life.
“Hello,” he says.
“Cold?” I ask.
“Not so much,” he says.

His sister died last winter.
And now night under stars overwhelms his father.
So of all the boys, Benjamin camps alone.
I pull my blanket close against dewfall.
Soon, under the weight of stars
boys from other troops arrive
in longjohns and boots.
They lean close to the fire.
“The Utes believed stars were their ancestors,”
I tell them.

Benjamin stokes the fire
then walks the crescent of meadow
among dozens of clustered tent societies.
Where the meadow narrows, he stops,
hearing two voices, trees and water.
On one side, the Palisades River curves away,
slow, like great stones tumbling.
On the other, the bone rattle of willow canes.

From that far edge of the meadow, he sees
how the fire glows beneath the rim of the ground.
He sees that the boys have warmed and gone,
and I bow, tending fire.

He walks on into the willow grove.
Old trees, older than our people in this land.
Brooks seep down to the Palisades.
Under banks, brook trout flop in moonlight,
feeding on a stonefly hatch.
He crouches on an overhanging tuft of meadow,
unfolds his jack knife, cuts willow shoots.

He returns as the moon sets.
I remember, "My father's mare, Old Pal,"
her breath as she prodded along my neck.
"In mountains, Old Pal preferred a fire through night."

Benjamin offers the willow shoots. I choose one,
tilt it to catch firelight, check for scars or branches.
I tap my penknife handle along the bark.
It loosens, slides off, filmy,
the wood bone-white.
I notch one end of the wood, step the notch deeper,
and carve a channel the length of the shoot.
Sliding the bark back on,
I bore seven finger holes over the channel,
press my lips to the shoot.
One thin note floats out.

I teach the boy a ragged scale,
 then bits of *Ave Verum Corpus*.

Then I teach the boy the journey of song:
I face East,
 each note of the canon folding back
 from the willow grove,
 weaving through the melody,
 and I wait a half beat of my heart,
 seeking unison with the notes among the willows,
 with the voice of wind and water.

The notes reach a farm plot below the willow grove,
 following a farmer's water turn,
 a shovel tamping mud to seal a weir gate—
 river flowing to stone-hard highlands.

I turn from the woods,
 each note spreading
 across meadow to river
 like footsteps
 of a thrown stone's passage
 across water. Dawn nears.

The boy sleeps near the fire.