

Introduction by M a r g o J e f f e r s o n

Those who aren't American like to say Americans have no history, but that isn't so. We have plenty of history; we just don't know what to do with it. So we treat it like land ripe for a fancy new development, or like an old neighborhood about to be renovated in ways that wipe out all marks of previous use. In his majestic memoir, *Native Realm*, Czeslaw Milosz writes that, "unless we can relate it to ourselves personally, history will always be more or less of an abstraction, and its content the clash of impersonal forces and ideas. . . . Doubtless every family archive that perishes, every account book that is burned, every effacement of the past reinforces classifications and ideas at the expense of reality. Afterward, all that remains of entire centuries is a kind of popular digest."

Hugh Nissenson's novel—novel seems a tepid word here, let me call it a portion of our history made art through a brilliant and uncanny joining of fact and imagination—begins as an account book. Those Yankee farmers and tradesmen kept accounts. They measured the progress of their businesses, their communities, and their souls. Thomas Keene was once a Congregational minister, a New Englander and a graduate of Harvard, who lost his faith and traveled the country for seven years working as a laborer. Now it is 1811, and he has settled in Mansfield, Ohio, with 25 other whites, just at the boundary of Delaware Indian territory.

He has \$17.62 in ready cash, and his possessions include a rifle (Harpers Ferry model), a red Devon cow, a still, malt, and

vials to test his whiskey's proof. The sum total of his worth: \$82.92. The sum total of his debts: \$304.00 to the Federal Government Land Office for 160 prime acres.

The Tree of Life shows us the people we have made into archetypes and a world we have turned into a national myth. What is history to us (social, political, geographical) was simply what they did or felt, craved or were shamed by, day after day. You shelled corn and walked through ankle deep turkey shit; ate squirrel pie and rid your bed of fleas. You watched a man die from snake bite, assured your minister that Newton believed in the Bible's account of Creation, courted a widow 20 years your junior who wished you to stop drinking, and used liquor to buy sex from the ex-slave who did your laundry.

It's a beautifully paced book. Its form—it is Thomas Keene's journal—allows the shocks and resonances to gather slowly, the way they do in life, when you are taking everything in but cannot yet allow yourself to admit how much you've been affected. Here, notice how the entry draws us in before we realize what we have assented to (this, from an ad in the local newspaper, "The Chillicothe Independent Republican"):

Riflemen Attention! A man will be shot for the benefit of his wife and children—\$1 a shot—one hundred yards distance, with rifles—on Sunday, the 27th instant., in front of Slocum's Tavern, Mount Vernon Township, Knox County, at 3 P.M.

The fore-mentioned man is in a very low state of health and wishes to leave his family snug.

We wonder: Can this be? We realize: It can.

Thomas Keene reads Swedenborg; he befriends John Chapman (later to be known as "Johnny Appleseed"), with whom he discusses and disputes theology; he translates (also mastur-

bates to) the verse of Juvenal. He breaks a greedy rabbit's back with a log, then writes a poem that signals quietly and ruefully to us across the centuries.

Is Love as strong as Death?
I do not know.
Is Art?
My Art
Will raise the part of me
Writ here
Within some reader
In the year—
I do not care.
My life to come
Is now,
Within
This tune,
This flow.

He paints, draws, gets drunk and writes this poem.

The Book of Life.

Two drinks, today
And what a shot I am.
After three,
I hit a hickory
Six feet in breadth:
The requisite depth
For planting flesh.
Flesh must decay.
Not like this book.

This book, which sprouts from rot,
Is here to stay.

Art and history (life as we have known it) do sprout from rot, and yet truth and beauty can be raised—resurrected—within us.

What spare and painful beauty Mr. Nissenson gets from death and nature and rumors of war, without ever neglecting our private and indispensable obsessions. Read this passage, for all the shifts and modulations:

16 August. Noon.

Borrowed Jones' brass blunderbuss, which I loaded with 2 oz. gravel, and, with one shot, killed 15–20 of the blackbirds in my corn. Now, immediately upon my raising the barrel, the birds call out to each other & scatter. I will lose 23–30 bushels to them.

My horned owl spent an hour this morn. perched on her hemlock, staring directly into the sun.

A riddle for Sarah: Jones, who speaks some Del., asks why the Indians call us whites horned owls (Ko-ko-suk). The answer: Because these owls hatch their eggs only in nests stolen from red-tailed hawks, who must also surrender their hunting grounds to them.

11 P.M. I drink myself to sleep every night lest thoughts of the naked eunuch commanded by his Mistress to fondle her breasts make me abuse myself.

We are not in a land that anyone discovered; we are in the land Europeans uncovered and Indians struggled to recover. Those who write best about America take in all the implications of this fact: the brutalities, the traumas, the griefs; but those occasions for gentleness, too, and even respect. War is coming closer and closer to this Ohio settlement. Tecumseh, the Shawnee warrior, is fighting General William Henry Har-

ri-son, famous for his triumph at Tippecanoe. What will the Delaware, under Chief Armstrong, do? He declares at a Council meeting: "The Chiefs of our Nation pledged themselves at Greene Ville to keep the peace. . . . If my village is attacked, I will fight. But I will not go back on my word." Whereupon his ally Reverend Cooper tears off his shirt ("exposing his flabby breast," Keene notes) and cries: "Kill me, I beg of you by Jesus Christ, if ever your village is attacked by whites." Chief Armstrong yells "Amen!" and they shake left hands, Indian-fashion.

But the young Delaware warrior Tommy Lyons says: "Tecumseh bids us join with him and drive the whites from our country once and for all. You know he is right, but you are afraid. I see it on your faces." And Phil Seymour, a white settler, hates Indians and wants to kill every one he can, including the children. "Nits breed lice," he says curtly.

So that abstraction, that "clash of impersonal forces and ideas," to return to Milosz's words, becomes the exact and awful reality that history books call the War of 1812. And, in thrall to the powers Mr. Nissenson has invoked and wielded with such fearful symmetry—the powers of documentation and of vision—we can only read on.