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Slaughter, Massachusetts

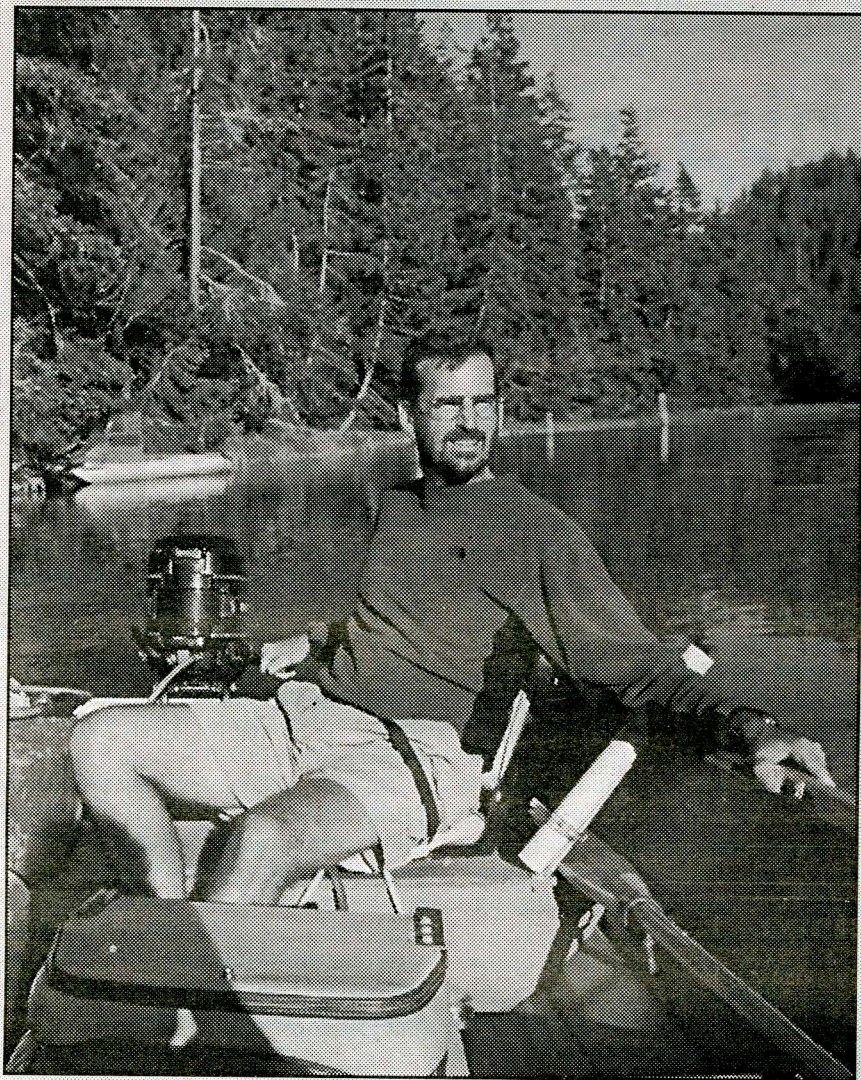
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*M*ichael Joseph Bennett has a bachelor's degree in zoology from Connecticut College. He has studied avian ecology along the coast of Connecticut, in the Adirondack Mountains in upstate New York, and in the Laurentian Mountains in Quebec. When he found out he had won second place in *Worcester Magazine's* 4th Annual Short Story Contest, he was at the mouth of the Albion River in California.

Bennett, an occasional freelancer for *WoMag*, lives in Leicester with his wife Tara. He says he started writing after he graduated from college and discovered that reading and writing stories gave him an outlet that science could not.

"It seemed like writing was moving me more than work in a rigid scientific field," Bennett says. "Some of the short stories I was reading at the time seemed to be moving me more."

"*Slaughter, Massachusetts*" is set on a farm where death occurs with all the fanfare of corn growing.

"There is a lot of death on the farm, but there's no sense in getting shook up about one single organism dying," Bennett explains. "There's the reality of a farm, and then there's the romantic notion of the farm. Death occurs quite frequently, and farmers become somewhat immune to it."

"Slaughter, Massachusetts"

1. Nest Building

Timothy Hales sits on a stump outside the double door entrance to the hay barn. It is late morning and a cool breeze combs through the fields of growing alfalfa and grass, carrying ascent of sweet manure. For two weeks now, Timothy has angled his view upwards into the rotting beams of the collapsing structure. Here he will stay for most of the afternoon, his only movements an occasional glance through an ancient pair of Zeiss 7x35 binoculars.

Here is nest building. High in the eaves, five pairs of chattering barn swallows have been busy since early June constructing cup-shaped mud homes for their young. Darting in and out, each adult brings in tiny billfuls of mud from the soggy ground to press into shape against the wood.

Timothy watches the birds carefully, particularly the contents they carry. What he is waiting for are indications of moss, horsehair or the down of milkweed. It is a sign. As the females ready to lay their eggs, the nests are neatly

lined at the last moment with soft, insulating materials, giving the young a warm place to begin their blind, naked lives.

Abigail approaches silently. As she does one of the swallows spots her and zings out the barn like a feathered arrow, rocketing toward her head.

"Jesus Christ," Abigail says, ducking.

Timothy looks over and smiles. "Hey, Abby."

The swallow turns a tight loop and returns for another strafing run. This time the bird finds a strand of hair, pulling it from the root. Timothy raises his binoculars and watches the bird place his sister's lock into the nest.

"God dammit," Abigail says, almost hitting the deck. "Friggin' thing pulled my hair."

"They, they," Timothy stutters, "they don't know you."

"I don't want them to."

"You, you . . . you're part of it," he says.

"Part of what?"

Timothy thinks for a moment. "Their struggle."

Abby gives a short laugh. "That's

Gramps talking to you, again." She makes her way over to him and clamps him in an affectionate bear hug.

"Struggle," he says, his face buried into her shoulder, proud of his ability to say the word.

Abby releases her grasp and smiles into Timothy's serene, Down's Syndrome eyes. "We're all struggling," she says, "It's part of our nature."

Overhead, another swallow begins a new bombing run toward Abigail but veers before getting near.

"See, they beginning to know you," Timothy says.

Abby looks into the features of her brother's face, smoothed and oval from birth. She sighs. Very gently, with the tip of her finger, she knocks the sleep from his eyes, then places a long kiss against his cheek, long enough to feel the crimson flush rise against her lips.

"It's you they see, silly," she whispers in his ear. "You're my shield."

Timothy's face grows red as a tomato as he beams through watery eyes. He takes two deep breaths. "an . . . an . . . and . . ." he stammers.

"Slow down, big boy." She holds up

her hand like a traffic cop. "... and, what?"

Again, he takes in two more gulps of air, then begins, pronouncing each word as clearly as he can. "An . . . And you're my sister, Abby."

2. Protocalliphora

Three weeks pass when Timothy first hears what he believes are high-pitched peeps from one of the nests. He enters the barn and climbs a large stack of hay bales that brings him nest-high, with a view into the cup. At this elevation light leaks in thin, dusty shafts from chinks high in the barnboard.

Timothy pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose. Finally, he sees the hatchlings, their necks stretched, mouths agape, as they bump downy heads into one another. Faintly they peep for food. Soon an adult returns with insects captured in its bill. Again the heads, like bobbing light bulbs, clamor for the handout.

For three days it rains. On the fourth the sun returns, illuminating the upper reaches of the barn once more. Timothy

quickly climbs the bales toward his own perch where he sits bathed in sweat, breathing in the sticky, stale air. As they pass one another on runs for insects the adult birds chitter in greeting. The brood is insatiable.

Timothy removes his glasses and wipes the sweat from his forehead. Nearby, something lying on the bales catches his eye. He picks up the small, feathered mass and notices it fall limp into his palm. Quickly he rushes out the barn.

"Grammpy . . . what?" Timothy says, holding the bundle of feathers.

Hearing the boy, the old man halts the scythe he has been swinging near the barn. All around him and scattered over his old leather boots tall shoots of cut grass rest like matchsticks. It is early afternoon. Up above the sun breathes its first exhalations of the warm season to come.

Rearing back, the old man stabs the blade of the scythe into the ground. The sharp steel trembles for a moment, then quiets as it sticks into the soil. Slowly, he turns to face Timothy, his movements hampered by a gimp leg he swings around in labored, staccato jabs.

The old man holds out his palm, its surface leathered from what it has handled — earth, blood, years. The boy, his cheeks now streaked with tears, hands over the hatchling.

The man brings the dead chick close to his face and examines. After a moment he shows the boy.

"Here," he says in a harsh whisper, "by the bill and the eyes." The words are

labored, from deep in the throat and end sharply, bitten down from the ebb of one man's life. He points with the yellowed nail of his little finger. "Soft tissue . . . Blowflies got to it, laid their eggs around the eye sockets where the maggots have emerged." He tosses the blighted chick toward the back of the barn. "Nest parasites . . . It's the way some things live."

The old man says no more. Once again he pivots the lame leg then wrenches the scythe from the ground. Smoothly the blade is swung out twice, and two arcs of the long shoots fall, dazed as if in slumber, asleep now like soldiers caught young at the drill.

3. The Loner

During two weeks while on break from chores, the fieldhand, a white itinerant loner, quietly constructed the crude tree stand where he now eats his noontime sandwich. Here the air blows remarkably cooler than below where dusty waves of humidity have begun to push and billow, swamping all life in heavy breath.

Within view is the farm. Invisible behind the thick cover of white pine needles he patiently follows the activity below.

Each afternoon around five o'clock break he has seen Abigail and Timothy push the vegetable stand back into the barn after a day of scattered sales. Once everything has been secured the two have consistently taken off on Abby's bike, Timothy a yelling, bouncing cork on the long banana seat, his sister, her legs contoured in supple agony, pro-

Amidst the acrid smell of gunpowder and the indigo of evening, the unheard notes of pianissimo issue still from the Philco set.

pell the extra weight. They leave on average for two hours at a stretch. On return the pair have arrived with wet hair and dripping shorts, leading the fieldhand to reflect upon the possible location of their swimming hole.

For a third week the fieldhand simply watches. Nothing changes. It is nearly the end of August.

The day before the bloodfever seizes him, a step rung up the white pine pulls out on his ascent. Then a plank from the tree stand cracks in two under his weight. In a sickening instant his foot goes through the hole, causing him to lose balance and almost fall forty feet down from the perch.

He knocks once, then again at the heavy door to the ell. No sound comes from within. Finally he turns the large wooden handle, shiny and smooth from

years of use, and pushes inside.

The scent of wood smoke is overwhelming. Though nothing obvious is burning, the odor of what must be years of winter fires imbues the space. The fieldhand breathes deeply and feels the faint narcotic effect.

Soon his eyes adjust to the dim and find the cast iron stove, its clawed feet firmly planted atop a patch of fieldstone flooring. Above in the low rafters of the dark ceiling are countless pieces of barn board, scrap lumber, and an old pair of crutches. The sound of classical music, a piano sonata he recognizes but cannot place, plays quietly from somewhere. Wandering, his eyes find an old Philco set, its tiny green dial, a Cyclops stare through decades.

"Beethoven," comes the taloned voice from the corner of the room. "Sonata

number 30, Opus 109 . . . first movement."

The fieldhand finds the silhouette of old man Hales seated at his chair behind the slab workbench. The corner is poorly lit, its only illumination a drifting dusk that spills in from a small opened window nearby. Outside a flat field of ripening lettuce, broccoli and peppers extends in rows toward the hillside murk.

The fieldhand sits on an upturned milk pail and listens to the music's quiet authority. As the tempo speeds then slows again, he closes his eyes in the pooling sound. What feels like a half-hour goes by. Still the music plays. Slowly the fieldhand opens his eyes.

From his seat the old man silently raises the 20-gauge from the workbench. Calmly he cocks his head slightly to the side then fires both barrels through the opened window. A white blast of buckshot, a man's violent recoil, a groundhog suddenly lifeless in a field. As he feels his heartbeat return, the fieldhand knows his ears will be useless from the percussion for days.

Yet on the milk pail he lingers for a half-hour longer. Amidst the acrid smell of gunpowder and the indigo of evening, the unheard notes of pianissimo issue still from the Philco set.

He walks over to the workbench and places his hand on the radio's rustling side. Briefly he swings a glance to the occupied chair next to him. Stock-still the old man stares wildly out at the coming night, his eyes hooded, the dark

of onyx, the color of history.

The sonata dips then builds once more. Soon the final figure arrives. There it is held against the keys like the deepest of sleep.

Mute in the roaring echo of buckshot, the fieldhand slowly shifts perception. He begins, faintly at first, then with greater clarity, to pick up the buried voice that runs deep in the droning set. Chorded, the notes of time hum purely against his touch.

From the running stream outside a bullfrog croaks and the first of evening's crickets lends itself to chorus. The man lifts his hand, immense with sudden weight, away from the Philco set now quiet between selections, and moves for the shotgun lying on the workbench. □

Gloria Abramoff said of "Slaughter, Massachusetts": "The carefully observed details, the tight structure and the detached, naturalist's view give this story great power."

David Vilandre said: "Wonderful construction of a story — all characters merge together in the end. A great mixture of destruction and beauty."