

On Turning Thirty

Austin

Having recently passed the age of thirty without fanfare in the middle of the week, after having approached it for so long, rather, as mass must approach the speed of light, I find myself, strangely enough, feeling younger than I did at twenty (that birthday, I remember vividly, evenly divided between drinking and vomiting). The reason, I have decided after the fact, is that I have passed one of those cultural deadlines America so conveniently provides for her citizens to help them parcel up their lives. At thirty you are officially relieved of your credentials as a member of a "generation"—a cultural grouping so ephemeral that it can only be compared to a French "republic."

Now that I have been demobilized and the regiment disbanded, I think I can see some of the peculiarities of that generation of which I was a part, at least that part born west of the Mississippi before the second war, too young for Korea and too old for Viet Nam. As a group, those qualities we most valued were mobility, privacy, and luck, and the greatest of these was luck.

First of all we were lucky not to be on Iwo Jima. The children of destiny were dying on the Rhine and in the Pacific, and I learned to read from their casualty lists. We were the children of fortune and knew it. I remember watching the Cuban crisis on the television in the student union with a friend. When the Russian ship turned, half the room sighed and the other half cheered. Armageddon re-privileged. But Timmons was grinning, and I found that I was too—that sort of idiot, embarrassed grin you see on amateur crap shooters after seven straight passes.

ONE OF THE difficulties, though, with being lucky, is that it heightens your sense of the bizarre while it lowers your sense of self-importance. For us, even the generation gap was lucky, since our parents, and not us, were the casualties. They had been through a depression and then a war. The best of them were dead, so we only knew them as names on plaques at school or at church. Sometimes a street was named for one of them in the new subdivisions where we glided on our bicycles. Those who weren't dead were scarred for life.

There were no heroes, because we weren't stupid. It was no trouble to tell that the guy in the picture in the flight jacket with his fifty-mission patch was the same fellow sitting on the couch flushed with his sixth drink. On the whole children are brutal and ignorant little animals, but they can see the deadness in some-

one's eyes, and we saw it. We knew that fifty missions isn't any fun. We had read the casualty lists.

Because we had read them we knew, even before we knew what a politician was, that they lie. I can remember sitting in my dark room listening to the canned patriotism on the radio and watching the bombers, dazzling with lights in the darkness, sliding down the runways at Carswell Air Force Base in Fort Worth (Carswell, named for Horace Carswell, schoolmate of my mother's, KIA, which we knew was different from DOW which meant "Died of Wounds," a different but not a better thing.). When a plane would leave the ground, its lights suddenly rising from the lights on the runway, it would take your breath away, but I never doubted that some of those men would die. What being dead meant to me I'm not sure. I think it meant that the clothes in the picture of the dead person became more and more old fashioned.

There is one memory which is terribly vivid, and probably a little ludicrous because of its solemnity. For some reason, from some dream in the nights of bombers rising from the runways, I became the first exponent of naturalism in my kindergarten art class. I drew with fine attention to detail a B-24, one wing severed, falling in flames while a Zero escaped unscathed. One young lady, who probably grew up to say the same of Norman Mailer accused me of fabrication, sedition, and just plain naughtiness. "It happens!" I said in a manner which would have made Zola proud, and to a man the boys around the table nodded in agreement. If the teacher was watching, it must have been a chilling sight. Six young proconsuls, six years old, bleakly nodding over the disasters of state.

I HOPE I live long enough to really understand this—the effect of growing up lucky in peace and relative comfort in the omniscient shadow of war, surrounded by its human waste and its monumental paraphernalia.

• I can remember a picnic held in an enormous tunnel hangar on the deserted seaplane base on Eagle Mountain Lake. There were two families of us dwarfed in the slate grey hangar which opened at both ends onto a concrete runway that extended in one direction into a wilderness of Johnson grass and in the other toward and down into the brown water of the lake. At twilight with the warm wind funneling through the hangar and the concrete spreading away into pastel darkness, it was like being on Mars—this being the metaphor conjured at the time,

not after the fact.

• I can remember paddling my make-shift surfboard (named for some lost reason "New Mexico Junior") out past the breakwater at Santa Monica, to see the LST's bound for Korea; "New Mexico Junior" sliding on the swells while the giant ship heaved, its slick side lifting and plunging, soaring three stories above me.

• My great aunt in Boston took me into a dusty room full of dark furniture, doilies, and the hot brown light that comes through window shades. She showed me a picture of a boy in old fashioned clothes and gave me his first baseman's mit. It changed my life in a way—until then I had intended to become a shortstop.

• I remember a newsreel of the bombing of Hiroshima; we sat on the right aisle of the Tower Theatre in Dallas and I licked a Holloway's All Day sucker. It seemed prudent, considering the holocaust on the screen, that the Holloway people didn't ask you to commit yourself to more than twenty-four hours of future. This year in a true gesture against the coming night Holloway's has come out with an "All Week Sucker."

GROWING UP, so to speak under the nuclear umbrella had its advantages. Assuming that the future was about to be pre-empted by a late news show, the so-called public life associated with "making it" in finance or the quality lit biz seemed a terrible waste of time, and still does. And luckily, those who had made it, the pundits, journalists, and tacky intellectuals who now make their living by verbally molesting any stray adolescent who wanders into view, were so mesmerized by the spectre of the mushroom cloud, so attracted by the possibility of being the very last and loudest Jeremiah to get a nickel a word for codifying his hysteria, that they left us alone to wander the highways and indulge ourselves in older if not wiser mushrooms. Since no one was watching we could move easily, almost invisibly, across the nation, and with a little skill you could get into a conversation with anyone about whatever interested them. Thank God they were not interested in us.

Another benefit of growing up ignored was that we were allowed to move easily and without didactic hostility in the enormous and ephemeral environment which surrounded us. For the most part we were rescued by brinksmanship from the "art-of-living, Lewis Mumford, Sierra Club" nature freaks who have poisoned the—

younger generation. The virtues of dirt over plastic, of steam over electricity, or an abacus over a computer will never be clear to me.

I really like plastic, neon, freeways, Diet Cola, American cars, whopper burgers, discount houses, and washaterias. However vulgar this face of America might be, at least it exhibits some energy, some brave if tawdry gestures, two things

notably lacking in the academic community which offers no delicacy or manners in compensation for this deficiency, and totally lacking among the local intellectual primitives whose idea of a big time is sitting under a scrub cedar drinking coffee and talking about Charles Lamb, with long significant, humanistic pauses during which you listen to the birds twitter and identify each one.

I have kicked a champagne bottle down Fifth Avenue in the snow, and the only thing I can imagine that would be more fun than that would be cruising down Wilshire in an air conditioned convertible, high on dexedrine and easy on beer, watching the lights run like liquid fortunes on the lime-lacquer hood. That's what I mean by lucky, and private, and mobile. □

Texans, ABM, and Vietnam

Austin, Washington, D.C.

An assessment by the American Friends Service Committee of how congressmen are leaning on the question of the anti-ballistic missile shows one Texan firmly against it, Bob Eckhardt of Houston; Henry Gonzalez of San Antonio is leaning against it. Apart from Burleson, Price, and Casey, "leaning toward" it, and Cabell and Bush, definitely for it, all other Texas congressmen were listed as uncommitted.

Texas' two U.S. senators have, predictably, split on the question, John Tower favoring and, it was lately disclosed, Ralph Yarborough dead set against. Yarborough has this month called the ABM "a big boondoggle packaged in a big hornswoggle." He sees such military programs as severely undercutting domestic progress in America and, indirectly, leading to the divisiveness that now plagues the country. Yarborough, in speaking before a meeting of the Business Executives Move for Peace in Vietnam, noted that the federal education budget has declined from \$4.1 billion in 1968 to \$3.2 billion requested for the coming fiscal year.

With fellow Texan and party colleague Lyndon Johnson no longer in the White House, Yarborough now is more free to criticize the Vietnam war, which he loathes. "Talk about students rioting," he told the BEMPV, "if the people of this country understood what has been done to them in the last five years I believe the

majority of them would be in a frame of mind to riot."

Yarborough is greatly concerned that President Nixon is not making good his campaign pledge quickly to end the war. "It isn't about over," the senator said of the war. "It won't be over until we have a voice of reason being heard."

Yarborough said, "I tried to do something about it [the war] last year. I am the only member of the Senate who endorsed Sen. Eugene McCarthy." He said he did so hoping that "we could write a plank in the Democratic platform calling for settlement of this war."

"We must stop this thing that is doing such damage to the American people, the American nation, the American ideals, that has brought about the divisiveness among our people, the near run on the dollar last year, the highest interest rates since the Civil War, the longest war this nation has ever fought, the only war except World War II that has cost over \$100 billion and is costing us about \$36 billion a year."

He was scathing in his BEMPV speech of "the people who are making profits off of the \$3 billion a month cost of this war, and who have made peace a dirty word in America," the sort of people, Yarborough implied, who would profit from the ABM, which he deems unnecessary for national security and an unnecessary drain of national resources.

Yarborough suggested that the war-profit industries may be behind some of the peace demonstrations that have yielded support for the war in persons who other-

wise might call for peace. "How would you get support for an unpopular war?" Yarborough asked. "You would have someone burn some draft cards, storm the Pentagon."

Present in the audience were BEMPV members Major J. R. Parten, Houston oilman; Fagan Dickson, Austin attorney; Jesse Oppenheimer, San Antonio attorney; and Bernard Rapoport, Waco insurance executive, who introduced the senator. All are important contributors to liberal causes and are leaders in the Texas liberal movement.

CONG. ECKHARDT, in his current *Quarterly Report*, discusses his opposition to the ABM, concluding:

"(1) That, in result, offensive nuclear technology outruns defensive nuclear technology, and it is not likely now or in the foreseeable future that this can be changed.

"(2) That the goal must be a de-escalation of the nuclear arms race, and this must be done by negotiations.

"(3) That in a world where mutual potential for nuclear destruction lies in two great powers, the building of a shield by one of them constitutes a threat, in the other's eyes, of a pre-emptive strike. What I mean by a 'pre-emptive' strike is one launched by one of the major nations which would so cripple the other that the second nation could not strike back, or that the return blow could be shielded. I do not believe that either the United States or the Soviet Union can so protect itself, but there could be a race to get in that position....

"The only way to relieve tensions and reduce nuclear risks is for nations to de-escalate the nuclear arms race now and eventually lay down their arms permanently. But it does not help the situation, in an interim period, for one opponent to don armor. Could the other be expected to

MEETINGS

THE THURSDAY CLUB of Dallas meets each Thursday noon for lunch (cafeteria style) at the Downtown YMCA, 605 No. Ervay St., Dallas. Good discussion. You're welcome. Informal, no dues.

CENTRAL TEXAS ACLU luncheon meeting. Spanish Village. 2nd Friday every month. From noon. All welcome.

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