

SHOES

by John Wideman

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IS it possible to know someone you've never met, and to remember someone you never knew?

[Guam is an island in the Pacific where there was fighting during World War II. A lithographed Pieta is a copy of a painting that shows Jesus' mother, Mary, weeping over his crucified body.]

THIS IS ABOUT A BOY AND A PAIR OF SHOES. NOT really, but one thing is as good as another for the first suspension of disbelief.

Once upon a time there was a gym. A sweaty gym where games were played and time passed with little pain. Eugene played basketball there and was good at it. Because he was strong, fast, and loved to feel the oil of his body slick and rich on his skin, although he didn't think of the last of these things. He was loud and stubborn, and these qualities grew up with him to become manly confidence. But not too long, because Eugene didn't grow too long, cut down by a Japanese bayonet on Guam after twenty years of life. That's his story, or at least as much of his story as I know because most of Eugene happened before I was born. You see, he was my uncle, and not talked of much by the time I could listen. I suppose it's just as well, because I knew him better through his shoes.

They were huge. Dusty under the bed, found one morning while searching for dragons. I dragged them out like barges and stepped into them, shoes and all. They made me feel colossus—tall, stretched over two worlds. They had been waiting, the way she still waited each morning at the gate, early, because she knew he would return just as the sun rose. The rest of him had been packed or given away, after a decent interval, but this canvas-and-rubber had been missed—or perhaps she meant to miss them. They were grass-stained and dry. Sweat had dyed them brown along the seams, and what had probably been mud crumbled dustily from where it had caked on the instep and laces.

Probably football. A long, high pass, perfect as a bird, and he with his legs flying to hawk it in. A scramble, but your fingers are quicker, tougher, and you have it. Touchdown!

How easy, how uncomprehending it was. Afternoons loud and clear. But Eugene is dead—died with his boots on—in another field, another muddy gutted island, where people thought differently.

She remembers how out on the roof the shoes would go, because “I don’t want them things smellin’ up the house.” He would be insulted, but after pouting awhile it was more fun to join the others laughing. How those rings he left in the tub seemed painted on.

It’s too easy—too pure, pat. Her story. It’s too old, too sad—mothers weeping on the plains of Troy, the beaches of Normandy, at the foot of a cross. A Pieta, lithographed, that lines a drawer. Besides, a pair of shoes have been lived in—no reason for regret.

*“Oh Mary don’t you weep;
tell Martha not to moan”*

And the rest tells why, but I remember only the music.

Maybe you’ve heard it anyway. She did. She did and stopped those morning walks to the gate. And the shoes grew smaller.

I was the one who couldn’t let go. Knowing little else perhaps was why the shoes wouldn’t leave my mind. But they left the house, and I remember how alone it felt to be kneeling in front of the closet with piles of shoes pulled out around me and finding them not there. I thought of going out into the yard, looking in the garbage can, rescuing and hiding them in some secret place—like I had hidden the shell of the turtle who had died and was buried which I dug up again to hold my favorite marbles—cats’ eyes, crystals, agates—that rattled like false teeth in the scooped—out shell. But the cans stood near the gate; I would be seen from the kitchen rummaging around and told to go away or, worse, asked what I was doing—and I didn’t know because the shoes were just things that I liked; things that started to mean something, but never let me get close

enough long enough to ask why. Anyway, they couldn't talk because they were shoes, and if they could, whatever they said would smell of mud, sweat, grass, and blood...

Still, I walked and ran in them many times after. Not so big now, because they had grown smaller; but I was bigger, much bigger, than when I couldn't find them to wear. Once I thought I heard them as they tried to speak. Surprisingly there was no gruffness. Rather, a gentle voice, like a lullaby, or a balloon losing its air slowly.

Of him, she spoke gently, too. Would even say his name softly when others were listening, or smile as the conversation lit momentarily on his shoulders. It was at dinner in autumn, because I remember hearing something shuffle through the high piles of leaves we had pushed along the sides of the path outside the window—that one of those infrequent questions was asked of me.

“Do you remember your Uncle Eugene?”

The leaves shouted at me and I couldn't raise my voice over their noise. I was sure now I heard a clump, clump muffled step moving down the path towards the gate.

“Do you remember your Uncle Eugene?”

They laughed now, a bunch of big boys laughing at all they knew I didn't know, leaves laughing because he was walking among them.

“Do you hear me?”

And I cried because I knew no one heard, and no welcome but the vacant shuffling of the leaves would greet him.

“Don't frighten the boy, of course he's too young to remember.”

It shut and he never came back and I knew he wouldn't and cried deeper, but the tears stopped and the forks and knives rang louder and the leaves drifted silently like sand to fill the holes he had made.