

A parcel finds itself wanted by someone other
than where it sits. Your finger sizzles,
an easy target surrounded by harsh red clay.

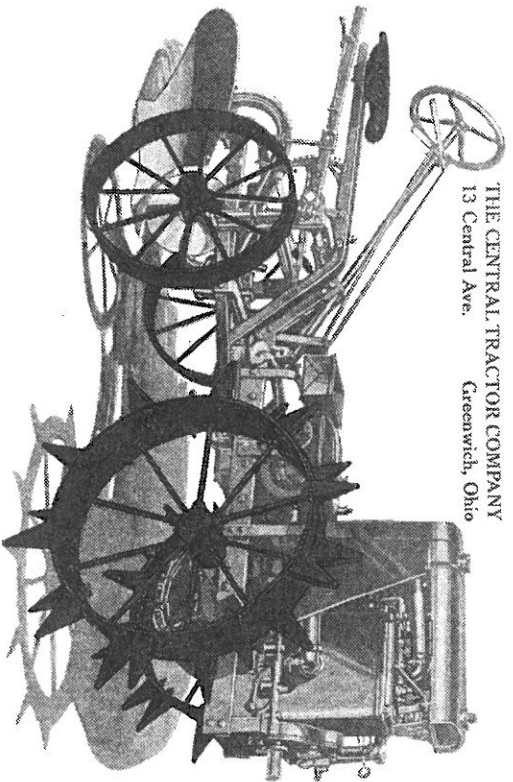
Mending the Centaur

Billy Joe Stratton

Royse awoke before dawn and stole over the creaking floor into the kitchen. He looked towards the door at the back of the house where his son, James, lay curled in a pocket of warmth beneath a frayed quilt. He didn't want to wake him since there wasn't much in the cupboards. It was better to sleep than to wake up early and be hungry. Royse warmed himself with a cup of coffee, but the weakness of it reminded him of the way things had come unhinged. Once he finished the coffee he filled a tin bucket with hot water and headed out to feed the pigs. It steamed and sloshed against the soft curve of the lip while he moved down the path. Aside from a wind that scratched through the barren tree-tops, the hollow was quiet. Royse hadn't smiled in a long time; it had been four years since he'd placed his Julie in the ground. Since then the surrounding hills had begun to seem unfamiliar and James's voice came to him distant and faint. In that interval Royse's face had grown around its deepening lines and creases like a maple tangled in barbed wire.

The hogpen clung to the side of the mountain above the icy creek. Royse's tin-roofed house stood fifty yards above, screened by a stand of scraggly, leafless trees. A lingering scent akin to curdled buttermilk wafted in the air as he neared the primitive structure and opened the wooden bin containing a dusty sack of feed. Royse stood for a moment trying to shake his weariness and listened to the rippling of the creek overlaid with the snorts and grunts of awakening pigs. After a moment, he went about the task pouring the warm water into the trough and mixing the feed. He entered the shelter just as the lumbering black sow sank her head into the steaming mixture. Pausing to let his eyes adjust to the dark, Royse applied a swath of iodine tincture to the dried and shriveled remnants of each pig's umbilical cord. He then shook out the burlap sacks and spread them back over the floor and returned the distraught pigs to their bedding. The coming of morning light revealed by degrees the pallid woods, which seemed to have deepened beyond the distance of sight by the time he emerged back into the cold, crisp air.

With a stroke of good fortune I just might be able to get the Centaur running again, Royse thought, making his way back up the path. He knew what he needed to do and could see a way to make it happen. Nearing the house, he passed the machine which stood sharp and angular like some barricade of war poised against a frenzied charge of muddy soldiers, his thoughts settling on the loamy scent of newly plowed furrows and the rough texture of dried seeds loose in his calloused hands.



More than a week had passed since the obstinate sow had farrowed a litter of eleven glistening pigs. They writhed like larvae exposed beneath an upturned log. One was born dead. The stars formed a million points of radiance that spilled out through the night onto the serrated horizon, giving form to the mountains' silhouette.

Royse set a pair aside to raise as his own, leaving the other eight to sell. They should make him enough to get the Centaur mended and running. He expected to clear near about ninety dollars by his figuring.

Royse took the birth of the pigs as a sign that his luck was turning. His designs were finally starting to take shape and before long the Centaur would be gouging at the earth. If he could seed a couple acres of corn, beans, tomatoes and cabbage before the end of April, he could still raise a respectable crop. It was a late start and he had to put his fate in the weather, but nothing else could be done.

February fell away into March and Royse was able to sleep without waking. The sow nursed her young through the interminable winter nights and only one more was lost. Royse found it lying frozen in the snow-covered slough near the opening of the pen, its stiff body encircled by a whorl of tiny cloven prints. The course white hair of the pig's outstretched legs melded with the snow so that its small black body took on the resemblance of a large bristly caterpillar.

Royse didn't notice it until reaching into the feed bin. "Well I'll be damned," he said under his breath. He mixed the feed and at first it floated in small swirls before being submerged in the wake of the worn shovel, which was alternately wielded to keep the sow away. When Royse was satisfied with the thickness of the slop he stepped back from the trough. The hog lurched forward and buried its head nearly eye-deep into the frothy mixture. Several of the piglets strained to pull themselves above the lip of the trough, their muddy hoofs tapping for purchase on the frozen ground.

With the sow distracted, Royse scooped the dead pig into the shovel and hefted it over the fence. It landed with a dull voiceless thud. Royse knew that breeding the sow in October had been chancy, but with each passing month wearing on the rusting tractor, waiting out the winter would only multiply his troubles. He no longer possessed the vigor to do the planting by hand. His brother, Clem, couldn't understand why he kept tussling with the land. "I'll just take and take, and keep on taking 'til there ain't nothin' left," he'd said.

On the last day of March, Thomas Harmon came loping up the hollow and gave Royse thirteen dollars for the pick of the litter. The chosen pig was inky black with a white band that ran across its shoulders. A squeal echoed through the hollow when James cornered it at the far end of the pen, near the old scarred hickory that served as a corner post. He scuffled with the writhing animal while Royse leaned against the inner gate to keep the sow from joining in the commotion.

"Fetch it up under its front legs," Royse hollered.

Thomas watched with amusement from the other side of the fence. "He'll learn sooner or later, Roy, just like we did," he said with a wry grin.

"Yeah, but he may be the last that needs to," Royse replied. "I'll probably be better that way and I don't dread it none."

"Could be, sure as hell could be, Roy."

James finally gained the advantage over the pig and forced him onto the ground. He knew it had given up and this gave him a peculiar satisfaction. "Any more you want caught, Daddy?" James said brimming with pride.

"Not now, but you'll get to run another'n down before too long," Royse replied.

James carried the vanquished creature to Thomas who lifted it over the fence before lowering it into a sack he'd brought for the purpose. Released from his grasp the pig seemed to gain new life and began to squeal and thrash inside the sack. "Whoa," Thomas bellowed, giving it a hard jerk. The pig let out a final tortured shriek and collapsed into a quiet lump.

Others came for pigs, totting sacks or pulling cages lashed to small carts. Viney Parsons tied her pig's feet with baling twine and hoisted it over her shoulders where it came to rest on a bedding of silver hair. It trembled and grunted in protest, eyes darting wildly, but it grew calm after she whispered into its ear. Viney lived with a litter of children on the other side of the mountain and some feared her. They said she roamed the hills at night, but for what aim no one knew.

With Viney's twelve, Royse now had almost sixty dollars stashed away in the coffee can he kept on a bedroom shelf next to a creased and yellowed photograph of Julee. Her dark penetrating eyes chaste, inviolate. Some nights James could hear his father through the papery wall speaking in soft tones that trailed away into heavy sobs. He had enough to buy the parts to repair the Centaur, all he needed to do now was make the daylong trip to Boyd's where they could be sent for.

Royse and James made their way out of the mountains on a clear spring morning following the course of the creek to where it converged with the muddy river near Isaac Boyd's store. It was good to be out from under the angle of the mountains, away from the field and the squealing pigs, to see the sky opening up before them, immense and serene. They spoke of many things along the way, but later when Royse tried to recall the words that passed between them, all he could remember was the boy's smile and his wide green eyes.

Boyd was able to find what was needed in his collection of dog-eared catalogues and wrote an order to an outfit located in Cincinnati. Royse picked out some flour, sugar and a can of coffee and set it on the counter. He then reached into the cooler and pulled up two bottles, the condensation dripping onto the grainy floor, and asked Boyd for a twist of tobacco. Royse savored the sweetness of the drink while Boyd ciphered the bill for the goods in a small notebook he pulled from his greasy shirt pocket; the numbers were thick and

blocky in their drift down the page. After counting out the money, Boyd told him the order would be sent with the next week's post. With their business complete the two men stood under the front awning and talked about the pigs, the weather and then of events that happened in places neither would ever see.

Several rusty and dented signs advertising such things as RC Cola, Moon Pies, and Farm Bureau Chicks were haphazardly arranged on the outside wall next to the door. James walked the fence line that enclosed an overgrown pasture adjacent to the gable facade of the store. It was strung with a rusted ligature of barbed wire that drooped between the petrified locust posts jutting in sharp monochromatic relief. The pasture had once contained a small herd of prized cattle owned by Boyd's father, but both he and the cattle were now gone. Despite the passage of years, a faint scent of manure lingered in the air while James sipped from a cold, green bottle of Ale-8-One.

"Looks like we best be headin' back," Royse hollered out to James as he emerged from beneath the awning and stomped at the ground to draw the feeling back to his foot.

Boyd followed him out into the sunlight, "Good luck with them pigs, Roy, I'll send people your way if I can," he said.

"Appreciate it," Royse responded, looking off towards the hazy green mountains. He called out again to James and tipped his hat to leave.

"Three weeks should be enough. The parts won't take no longer than that."

The sun had already descended below the rounded edge of the trees by the time they made it home. It always took longer going back up the path with its steady rise away from the river valley into the crouching hills.

Thomas was waiting on the front porch when they arrived. His legs dangling at the edge of the dark that clustered beneath the porch held up by the dusty rock stanchions supporting the log crossbeams.

"Hope you weren't waitin' for us too long. We went to Boyd's, I'll have the old Centaur mended soon," Royse said as a form of greeting.

"Good to hear, damn good, Roy, but I need to talk to you about something," Thomas said. "It's the pig."

"You want another'n to go along with that little banded one?" Royse replied, running a hand across the back of his moist wrinkled neck.

"Well, no, not exactly . . .," Thomas hesitated, his eyes focusing on a dented bottle cap pressed into the dirt just in front of his feet. "The thing's dead, Roy; got sicker than hell a week after I got it home. Died a few nights back . . . I found it stiff as a board on the back porch after it quit eating."

"Well I'll be damned; I had one die on me too, Tommy. I regret to hear it." James looked past Thomas, down towards the pen.

"Yeah, me too Roy, me too. I hate to bring it up, you just coming back from Boyd's and all, but I was hoping I could get my money back . . . Twelve'd square it if you're willing." Thomas said, hopping down from the porch, his voice wavering.

Royse's face hardened. He turned to spit, but his mouth was too dry. His steel gray eyes darted like dragonflies into the depths of the enveloping trees.

"After paying out for the parts, five dollar and some change is all I've got. I can give you the rest next week. A couple of ol' boys are supposed to be coming up here tomorrow. I don't reckon you'd want one to take back with you? You must've got the twin to the dead one," Royse said.

"I appreciate the offer, Roy, but that wouldn't help me a bit . . . I don't think I'm cut out to be raising pigs. I'll come back to get the rest."

"It don't matter, I expected as much. I wonder if anyone is cut out for such a thing."

Royse's father, Ransom, spent the better part of a year repairing the old clapboard house and clearing away the vegetation—elderberry, dogwood, and indigo bush—that spread over the isolated heart of the hollow. He collected the wilting brush and fallen trees, burning it in heaps placed over the gnarled stumps until they too released their hold on the earth. He carried away the smaller stones, breaking those that were too heavy or ill-shapen to roll or drag away with a twelve-pound sledge. He piled them in rectangular cairns on the corners of the sloping piece of bottomland that drained towards the east as if drawn off by the snaking creek.

Ransom tended to his field year after year, uprooting the invading brush and weeds each spring and he grew to hate the land. With dusk settling down through the trees one blustery August day, Royse came down to the field and found his father lying cold and flat. His clouded eyes draped open as if looking up through the yellowing stalks of corn to measure the speed of drifting clouds.

Whenever Royse passed the place where Ransom had fallen he knew he would never leave the mountains. Ransom was buried in a small plot situated on a rise that overlooked the field, just north of the house. His mother, wife and daughter kept him company. Forgotten antecedents from an earlier generation of itinerant mountain people also shared the space, their scrawled names long faded from the weather-burnished facades of declinate stone markers.

Royse and James tended the sepulchers every spring and fall, clearing away the weeds, fallen branches and brittle leaves that accumulated with the changing of the seasons. Despite the monotony of the task, James enjoyed being at this place where the sweet smell of ripening pawpaws bore heavy in the air. Sometimes James would pause before his grandfather's stone marker:

RANSOM ALVIN CLARK

BORN

JUNE 25 1876

DIED

AVGVST 13 1929

He admired the smooth resonance of the name and sometimes whispered it to himself while swinging the scythe through the falling weeds.

The small pig with the white-snout grew sickly a little more than week after the visit to Boyd's, its haunches stained and matted in its own dried shit. Royse only shook his head. Of those he had sold, every one had died except Viney's. This was the last of the bunch and it was languorous and dull-eyed. The sow, as if in possession of some instinctual understanding of the circumstances, turned away from the last of her fevered progeny and slunk off into the shade of the great hickory.

"Going to have to put it out of its misery," Royse said vacantly. He glanced toward the rusting Centaur, now partially hidden under a stiff green tarp at the side of the house. Maybe next year, he thought.

Thomas, who had returned for the rest of his money, nodded and moved towards the .22 propped against the gate.

"I'll do it," James said in an unsure voice.

"Well get to it then," Royse replied with a nod. "Take it out past the chicken house . . . bury it when you're done."

The boy swung the gun onto his shoulder by the shiny leather strap and lifted the listless pig.

Royse sighed as he watched his son head off in the direction of Clem's derelict chicken house.

James tried to push the weight from his mind as he neared the chicken house. Ain't no different from killing a squirrel or a rabbit, he thought—and he'd watched the life seep out of both on many a hunt. The pig barely moved, but its lethargy made it difficult to hold. He carried it on his left side awkwardly, with both hands under its ribs, wary of the reeking filth on its flanks. The pig's heart beat hot and wildly against his palm. He lowered it to the ground behind the coop. Its legs folded underneath with a grunt that was almost imperceptible above the rush of the nearby creek. The pitiable creature made a feeble effort to stand, but could only manage to raise its head, trembling from the sickness.

James unslung the rifle and pulled back the bolt. He set a small brass cartridge into the breech and wrenched it into the chamber. He held the rifle to his side with the barrel pointing towards the pig. It'll be better off this way, he thought; it's going to die anyway, just like the others. His thoughts returned to the cemetery and his grandfather's name, large and smooth and cold on the granite. "I'll take you up there when I'm done," he whispered, putting the stock to his shoulder and leveling the bead at a swirl of dark hair behind the pig's shoulder.

"He's not a lazy one. He'll help you get this place straightened out, Roy . . . Raise a new litter of pigs . . . Get that tractor running again . . . You've done right by 'em and he'll make you proud."

"I don't know if he's cut out for this. For what aim? I don't want him to get swallowed up in these damned hills. To turn mean . . ."

"Hard work never hurt anybody, and a little meanness is good for a boy. He'll need some fire in his blood to get by."

James tightened his grip and looked into the creature's eye. He shouldn't have. The pig jerked its head to the left; its flat wet nose pulsed in the still warm air. With his finger dancing near the trigger the gun grew heavy in his hands. He felt as though he had lost touch with the ground, and while he drifted his nerves left him.

Thomas was sure to rease him when he handed back the gun, but Royse would be sullen. It would be a long time before his failure would be forgotten. Gripped by such thoughts, he squeezed the smooth walnut stock until his fingers were white and squinted down the barrel. He closed his eyes, "I'm sorry," he whispered.

Lite as a deer, James turned and fled from the pathetic creature. A sharp pain tore at his ankle. He stumbled forward and lost hold of the gun, his arms reaching out for balance. James was falling just as the butt of the rifle struck the ground. He didn't hear the discharge, and the rustling of the creek and surrounding trees abruptly died away. His body collapsed into the dry leaves that formed a blanket over the ground, its warm blood merging with the dark earth. After the last quiver, his right foot settled near a strand of rusted barbed wire, drawn away at an odd angle.

The crisp report of the gunshot filled the momentary silence between the two men.

Royse sighed.

Thomas spat in approval.

"We should go huntin' before long. I heard kennis got a eight-point at the head of Buffalo Gap the other day."

"Maybe . . . I heard it wasn't but a little burton buck, might have been a doe," Royse said straining to smile.

from *Even the Trees Yawn*
Joshua Young

Field Notes Entry

the flood will
only increase

the sex
bodies

craving others
the stomach

flattened
into the arch

i want
biblical

facts
here

leave them
they will float

leave them
a fire is not

inevitable
we expect applause

but that—
that is rain

the rain
goes

we will
not

let each
other give

at the fall
there is no ark