

Faith, Hope and Fiction

Remembering Mushroom Seekers and Electric Street Cars

By Tom Sheehan

They came out of West Lynn or East Saugus years ago, dark mushroom seekers, with their long-pieced poles, their own language whose word for amanita, to the initiate, would tell where their roots began, whether they were Florentine, Roman, or islander, Piana di Cartania. They might say *Cocoli*, *Coconi* or *Coccori*, the delicacies growing thirty or forty feet up on the great elms in the circled green of Cliftdale Square, those huge sky-reaching elms that fell to the hurricanes of '38, or Carol in the 50s, finally to the toll of traffic demanding the green circle be cut down to size.

Once, in a thick fog, on my third floor porch, the mist yet memorable, I remember thinking the elms were *Gardens in the Clouds*. I felt a bloom rise in me, a taste fill my mouth.

They don't come for amanita anymore because the elms have all gone, those lofty gardens, those mighty furrowed limbs; now shrubs and bushes stand in their place you can almost see over.

Nor do the street cars come anymore from Lynn into Cliftdale Square. They say the old yellow and orange ones, high black-banded ones, red-roofed ones, real noisy ones, ones long-

electric-armed at each end, the ones off the Lynn-Saugus run, are in Brazil or Argentina or the street car museum in Kennebunkport, Maine; quiet now forever as far as we are concerned, those clanging, rollicking machines that flattened pennies on the tracks so that good Old Abe became a complete mystery, or the Indian Chief, him and his background, became as flat and as charmless as his reservation.

From my porch high on the square, I'd watch thin long poles extending men's arms, needles of poles they'd fit together, as they reached for the white-gray knobs growing in cloudy limbs. They wore red or blue kerchiefs around thick necks, like Saturday's movie cowboys if you could believe it, as if any moment they could slip them over their faces and hide out in such bright disguises. They'd cut or tap loose the amanita, see it fall slowly end over end, like a field goal or a touchdown's point-after, down out of the upper limbs, cutting a slowest curve and halved orbit, and they'd swish butterfly nets to catch the aerial amanita, or *Cocoli*, as it might be; or the women, in kerchiefs and drawn in and almost hidden away, faces almost invisible, with an upward sweep of gay aprons would catch the somersaulting fungi, the amanita colytraderma, or being from Piana di Cartania, calling out its name *Coconi or Coccori*. Oh, Mediterranean's rich song airing itself across the green grass of Cliftondale Square, Brahminville being braced, uplifted.

I was never privy to know their roots, their harsh voyages, to know where they landed and why, and now their sounds are lost forever, their voices across the square, the gay and high-pitched yells setting a brazen mist on Cliftondale, their glee as a soft white clump of fungi went loose from its roost, coming down to net, swung apron, or quick hat as if a magician worked on

stage in the square, heading for *Russula Delica*, *Cocoli Trippati*, *Veal Scaloppine*, *Mushroom Trifolati*, *Risotto Milanaise* or plain old *Brodo dei Funghi*.

All these years later I know the heavens of their kitchens, the sweet blast front hallways could loose; how sauce pots fired up your nose, how hunger could begin on a full stomach when Mrs. Forti cooked or Mrs. Tedeschi or Mrs. Tura way over there at the foot of Vinegar Hill feeding her gang of seven and their guests.

And I grasp for the *clang-clang* of the trolley cars, the all-metallic timpani of their short existence, the clash of rods and bars stretching to the *n*th degree, of iron wheel on iron rail echoing to where we ear-waited up the line with firecrackers' or torpedoes' quick explosions, and the whole jangling car shaking like a vital Liberty Ship I'd come to know intimately years later on a dreadful change of tide.

How comfortable now would be those hard wooden seats whose thick enamel paint peeled off by a fingernail as I left her initials and mine on the back of a seat, wondering if today someone in Buenos Aires or Brasilia rubs an index finger across the pair of us that has not been together for more than sixty years. But somehow, in the gray air today, in a vault of lost music carrying itself from the other end of town, that pairing continues, and the amanita, with its dark song-rich gardeners, though I taste it rarely these days, and the shaky ride the streetcars gave, for all of a nickel on an often-early evening, softest yet in late May, give away the iron cries and, oh, that rich Italiana.

Once from a sheer edge of moonlight, a reflection hung in my mind of a whole night's vision, the smell and the sound of it all, the touch of things as they were.

Tom Sheehan's books are Epic Cures and Brief Cases, Short Spans, November 2008 from Press 53, NC; A Collection of Friends and From the Quickening, March 2009, from Pocol Press, VA. His work

is in Home of the Brave, Stories in Uniform and Milspeak; Warriors, Veterans, Family and Friends Writing the Military Experience, both new issues from Press 53. He has 14 Pushcart nominations, Noted Story nominations for 2007 and 2008, the Georges Simenon Award for Fiction, a story in the Dzanc Best of the Web Anthology for 2009, and a nomination for Best of the Web 2010. He served with the 31st Infantry Regiment in Korea, 1951. His collection, Epic Cures, was an IPPY Award winner.