

The Sisyphus Complex

Cowboy Canoyer Rides Again

(A Reminiscence of Peace in a World at War)

David Barney

Albuquerque Academy

This memoir, begun in January during the early days of the Gulf War and finished before Iraq's unconditional surrender in early spring, calls to mind other wars that scar the author's landscape of memory: the big one he grew up in, the small one he served in, and the unconscionable one that he gratefully missed. He talks little about the villains of those conflicts: Tojo and Hitler and the North Korean warlords or Ho Chi Minh or even Saddam Hussein himself.

The massive buildup of troops half a planet away in the Arabian desert triggers instead the memory of those people who helped to calm the chaos he grew up in, World War II. Most memorable of those silhouettes was one of life's little people, an albino dwarf named Joseph Canoyer. Joseph's costume and antics, his peculiar voice, the human comedy he never saw as comedy, helped to assuage the daily horror of headlines in the Boston Globe as well as the author's vague awareness that on the other side of oceans the cities in his history book were going up in flames. In short, the dwarf's presence in his life was a diversion; ultimately, it became an elixir of sorts. He called the dwarf the Cowboy because of his predictable dress and his passion for the old West.

The reminiscence provides not only a graphic and epic description of the Cowboy himself and his fascination for the old West and particularly western movies subscribed to religiously, but also allows the reader to see behind the twisted cruelty of kids, taunts and talk colored by an ignorance blacker than the Cowboy's mask.

The central moment in this memoir focuses on the choreography of a singular instant in sport that the author refers to as "Cowboy time." The moment fuses myth and magic and curiosity with the forces of nature. But unlike the myth, Sisyphus, aka the Cowboy, overcomes gravity; he conquers both rock and mountain, but it is not the shades of Tartarus that note his triumph but rather the faithful few-hundred that attend the sweaty, smoky heavens of a high school gymnasium on Saturday nights. Perseverance pays off is the lesson celebrated here, and the author leaves the reader to put the pieces together.

Contemplating May and the aftermath of the Gulf War, the author pays a final tribute to gods and heroes and concludes with a tarnished view of war softened only by the poetic retrospection of love for a little guy in a cowboy suit: *So now that the ghosts of this and other wars have been put to rest, my final thought is of the Cowboy and how it was back then in war ridin' west. What I remember best is the end of all those movies where cowboys saddled up together and rode side by side down the trail toward some distant sundown somewhere. In my memory, I always added the epilogue: they camped, they kindled a campfire, they propped their saddles beneath their heads, they stared at stars then closed their eyes and rode away into the wool of dreams and sleep, leaving the blue, cold, quiet of flames smoldering at their feet. I was the one who gently scattered the ashes.*