



ZACHARY ROYER SCHOLZ

*Action 8.51106 (4 table legs, paint, ground), 2006, digital print, 8 1/2 x 11 inches  
courtesy: the artist*

## WHEN HITLER GAVE STALIN A PORCELAIN DOLL

*Eireene Nealand*

*I*nside of the trailer it was cramped. I was one of five children, and nine years old, behind Obe and Ean and Promise and Hope. We slept in shifts on the foldout benches. A foldout table was attached to the wall by one rusty hinge.

Our neighbor Al marched up our aluminum stairs every sundown to share my awake shift, because I didn't mind playing Stalin when Al wanted to play Hitler on his three-paneled board game, Eastern Front.

Our rickety green trailer had broken down under the mossy fork beech across the road from Selah and Dr. Ted's rental cottage—Al lived in a camper shell in their backyard.

He sprang out of the bushes with his beret and peacoat and board game and dice. We had broken down on top of some mushrooms he wanted to collect. He was upset, but he welcomed us.

My mom liked that Al kissed her hand. She hoped he would eventually tell my dad not to be a dolt all the time, but Al didn't.

Al had to untilt the table by holding it up with his knees. He contained himself politely, elbows never touching the table, thin hands setting up markers and dice. He had to lean forward so as not to brush my mother and father's bodies, tangled behind him under a curtain of beads.

"Think of the war brides," Al said. His voice was hoarse, thin as a cracker. An octagon marked off every section of the board, continents and oceans alike. That was how it was in the Summer/Winter Campaigns, '41-'43. None of the countries had more than dotted-line boundaries. Those were for history to decide, and our skill.

During the Siege of Leningrad, Al said, children—especially little girl children—made circuses on freezing wood floors. They carved their performers out of icicles—everything from bears to ballerinas—which didn't melt the whole winter. In fact, many ballerinas and bears outlasted their children.

Modest girls refused to take a bath when the Soviet Women's Councils came by with wood. Some girls saved food for their supposedly returning fathers, and starved.

Still, in those times, there were war brides, Al said. His pencil mustache twitched when I made my first formation at Minsk. He told about Lena, who could have been my great-grandmother if only she'd survived just a few more years. Lena escaped from the war in an unsuspecting farmer's hay cart. She fled with the dirty clothes on her back and a single letter that she couldn't throw out. It read: "Lenka, I've got a piece of bread for you. I'll get more. Love, Morris."

That story wasn't the only thing that made me like Al. When he reached for the dice to make his move on the Caucasus, it seemed somehow right that the trailer's one window was thick, yellowed plastic—too warped to let in the light. At first, blackouts were ordered because of flyover bombers, Al said. Later, no one had oil to spare.

"Were you ever brave enough to get married?" I asked Al.

He had just ordered his troops to move up the Volga into Moscow. He had even more troops in the Ukraine. Al settled them on the border town of Lvov to make sure no more great-grandmothers slipped out. It was only after he had his pieces settled that Al set our conversation on a new course. He agreed, finally, to take a closer look at my scars.

I told him how my dad had insisted that all of us children infect ourselves with last spring's chicken pox: *Get it while you're young* was the plan.

Al didn't try to make it seem good that each family member snored to drown out the others. We shivered together about the things my dad preached in his sleep:

"The Lord's hand was upon me, and he carried me out by my spirit and set me down in a plain that was full of bones. He made me pass among them in every direction. Countless in number and very dry, they covered the plain.

"Prophecy over these bones," my dad said. "Say: 'Dry bones, hear the word of I and the Lord, the Lord and I.'"

"O, man," my dad said, "these bones are the whole people."

"That's Ezekiel, chapter 37, verse 1," I told Al.

His elbow helped a U-boat flotilla move into the Black Sea. I was too busy watching my father's cracked lips to care whether Turkey had been persuaded to break the Montreux Convention of 1936.

"Dwell in darkness," my dad said. "Let the Whole be thy sight."

During his first months in Vietnam, Al slept grunting at the gun beside him on the army's mosquito-filled cot. Ever since Vietnam, all allusions to sex have caused Al to have visions of bestial palms. At that time, however, it was just loneliness. Catholic school hadn't let in young women, and Al missed his mom.

Before long, he'd won a Purple Heart for exterminating his first gook wife and her family at their own dinner table with his bare hands.

When malaria made him weak, they sent Al to Washington, D.C. He sat in a dark room smoking and filing papers for a scandal that became Watergate. It wasn't his job to read White House transcripts, but he did because he liked the swear words Nixon used.

Then he married a Jewish girl for her money. She took his medals and his pension and opened a brothel. It turned out she didn't have any money of her own. Still, Al thought, he had been in love.

"No oceans without water," Al quoted. "No wars without blood."

I told Al why our unstable table was decorated with a cartoon blizzard made by the blue snowflake wallpaper that had once covered my three-speed. I had given up that bike in Utah after our turtle, Yorick, hanged himself in the spokes. My brothers had taken great pains to build Yorick's terrarium sturdily. They covered every hole with mosquito netting so he wouldn't eat the wrong bugs, but somehow he found a crack near the wheel; somehow he climbed out onto the back hitch where my three-speed was strung up with bungee cords.

I told Al how my brothers blamed me for Yorick's death and how they tried to get back at me by hanging themselves in the woods.

Al nodded knowingly when I rolled four snake eyes in a row.

That winter, Obe and Ean tried it again. They snuck out just before sunrise. They chose for their hanging two adjacent, tall oaks, but the rope broke before they were thoroughly dead. Al was the one who brought them home.

When my dad found out, he smashed a bottle across the back of my head and called the boys traitors.

“O, Absalom, Absalom,” he said. “Where is Joab to stab three darts in your skulls?”

“Coming of age,” my mom said about Obe and Ean’s strung nerves. She’s an aura seer, but doesn’t always know where we are. Only Al and I knew the public truth about Obe and Ean. We had heard them groaning at night over Selah.

Everything got worse after we all saw Selah naked. Her golden retriever had caused a skunk to void its wet fear on her legs. The only way to wash off skunk spray, my mom said, was for us to bathe Selah and her dog in tomato juice. When they both stepped out of the tub, Al and I towed off Selah. Obe and Ean took the dog. The tomato pulp clung to us all. Every one of Selah’s pores was freckled with it. She was a redhead anyhow, former groupie to The Beach Boys, and that day her skin had a tomato-bright sheen that made Al and me—anyone who saw it—want to flee to the city and eat pizza after pizza until we got sick.

It was about that time that Gaylord started charging rent for our trailer being in his woods. His white Cadillac raised a wide swath of dust when he came once a month to pick up his money.

Al said Gaylord’s orneriness was easy to explain. It came from the fact that his left leg had rotted in a Pacific Front trench.

“Malaria,” Al said, “was common.”

I hoped that my own scars would make me skinny. I sucked my cheeks deep into my bones, but Al said that I only succeeded in looking like a bourgeois gentleman.

“Some people are generous,” my mom said, looking with mushroom-cloud eyes at Gaylord, “others are not.”

Selah and Ted, macrobiotic psychobiologists by profession, discoursed on the dangers of overcrowding; they said Obe and Ean should move in with them. My mother was too proud to ask about herself or us girls.

Gaylord offered to take me and Promise and Hope for a ride. I would have said yes if he hadn’t looked toward the back seat. Drifts of French fry cartons, candy wrappers, and Coke cans took up all of the space for one’s feet. My mom said when Gaylord’s Cadillac got filled up with garbage, he’d buy a new one.

Both Al and I laughed when the God’s Eyes my mom had strung up for Christmas sagged down on our heads.

Al temporarily lost control at Kursk, but there was still no indication that Stalingrad would become Hitler’s losingest obsession. My Siberian troops had been hardened by informal Manchurian clashes. From the age of six, young Mongolians considered it a sport to joust with machine guns in order to show off their horsemanship.

Promise, meanwhile, became a pharmacist—legal. Hope ran off with a doctor to New York. I rattled my feet against Yorick’s terrarium and lost 3,000 peasants. While disease cleared the Caucasus of infantry, I picked at the corner of our wallpaper until a snowflake wedged under my nail and drew blood. Al offered his handkerchief, but I snatched the dice off the Sudetenland. Maybe no peasants ever deserve to be freed.

“Let’s take a day off and go out to the fair,” Al said, when he saw he would win.

He piggyback-rote me all the way out.

He won a doll by popping balloons with red darts. I had never wanted anything so much, when I saw the barker unwrapping twisty ties from the doll’s porcelain neck. She had a cloth body and blonde, painted-on hair.

“That’s for my daughter,” Al said.

For the first time, he showed me the picture that he kept with his dog tags and a can opener on the chain around his neck. She was a small, ringletted girl, blonde with blue eyes, my height.

“I’ll win you a doll next,” Al said.

He easily popped more balloons: two green ones, three orange.

The barker’s eyes darted, looking for a porcelain brown-haired doll, but there were only more blondes.

“I guess I can take one of your ducks,” I said. “The blonde

doll can ride on its back.”

Al’s neck got stiff, as it always did when he was preparing for battle. From under the counter, the barker dragged up a plastic doll with black nylon hair.

“Why don’t you take both dolls,” Al said.

The barker replaced his popped balloons. Al and I marched away to buy pink cupcakes with sprinkles, and blue fizzy drinks. It was our victory day, Al said. I wanted to celebrate by riding on an elephant like some returning tsarina.

“I might even educate your peasants,” I told Al.

In the Razorback Mountains near Khe Sahn, Al said, there was a waterfall called the Whining Place. During the Tran Dynasty, spurned lovers would drown themselves there. Just below was the Valley of Names, where American troops disposed of the families they’d shot. Generations were piled one on top of the other four meters deep.

“You can’t stand at the top of the waterfall without looking down,” Al said.

Tourists flocked to the spot. They took trams down the side of the cliff so that they could walk in the flat, sunken earth where the ground had been dug. There were no markers, nothing to look at but elephant grass. It had rained when Al went. The swampy soil soaked his old army boots.

“Cold and cholera were what really defeated Hitler,” Al said. “Unlike bullet holes, those pains require victims to endure.”

Maybe it was that saying that let me get by without Al.

It was December 16, 1981, when the Great Offensive ended.

Selah, Dr. Ted, my mom, and my dad had become religio-existentialist co-cottage sleepers, a fact they celebrated for three weeks straight, popping beers and reading about the Findhorn Garden, a macrobiotic paradise where the plants told their caretakers not to be concerned if brown leaves popped up every once in a while.

When Al fell down the stairs, everyone raised their drinks. “It’s important to let people die when it’s their time,” my mom said.

For four hours, Al struggled and called. Having cracked his skull on Selah and Dr. Ted’s washing machine when he fell down the stairs, he could do nothing but gurgle up his own blood. It was

no help when the washing machine overflowed, adding its pine-scented suds.

“Napoleon lost at Waterloo because of hemorrhoids,” I said to Al’s corpse.

I had been the one making him wash his peacoat.

Because of me, he hadn’t had a drink in five days. He was trying out Antabuse pills the government shrink had prescribed to my dad. A second chance with his daughter, I said. I refused to start a new game until Al had gulped the pills down.

“You and me and your daughter can run away together just like Morris and Lena,” I said.

Al said that there weren’t always places to run to.

“By the end of World War II, Morris had sold his violin to buy cameo-carving tools,” I told Al. “The Austrians paid well for these. The Americans did not. Morris became an accountant after a year in New York.”

I drank from Al’s smooth silver flask, which repeatedly spilled on Murmansk. Three steppe towns near Archangel were wetted. Kvosok was not. I blotted out the ripples in the White Sea with our purple checked curtains. The checks, anyhow, had faded to a dull brown.

“After Morris became an accountant, Elena requested alimony, but not the children,” I said to our mildewy trailer walls.

My mom came out of the cottage to pick up her plants.

“Good night,” she said. “And stop brooding. Al is in a better place.”

“In Poland, they fought house to house,” I said to my mom. She said that history made her yawn.

Selah and Dr. Ted said I was angry that Al had failed to reveal the secret of Deep Throat, which he promised to whisper into my ear when it became clear that there was no hope.

“The forest gets thicker as you go deep,” Al liked to say, “but a true soldier never lies.”

“We are a traumatized people with an atom bomb in our hands,” my dad told the Macrobiotics Meeting when it convened in our woods.

“I’m a scroll of agony,” I said to my dad.

My dad hopped around with Gaylord at Al's funeral. The wealthy veteran said he'd only come to pick up the rent, but for some reason he'd brought four pairs of shoes that he found near a dumpster. They were stiff Buster Browns. The stack of shoe boxes went higher than his head. Gaylord only managed to hold onto his cane by letting the strap chafe his wrist.

Gaylord shook the tops off his boxes and lined up the four pairs of shoes on the side of the trailer where Obe and Ean had once found it convenient to pee. Each shoe had cardboard inside, and there was a whole nest of tissue paper padding. My mom and dad and Gaylord seemed to see the shoes as fine china. That made me suspicious, because why would anyone wear breakable shoes?

"Try them on," Gaylord said.

He sounded like a general commanding troops that he knew would have to die.

"Here's a hot squaw," Gaylord said, hovering over Hope when she tried to squeeze her foot into a size five narrow. "I'd like to meet this one. Burn you right up."

"Just look away," my mom said, when I asked what he meant.

Gaylord offered my father a cigarette and lit it with a lighter he claimed had cost him only 25 cents.

"Bought it in Chinatown," Gaylord said. "It goes on. It goes off. Happened to me a few times."

"We've got some nice colored lighters," my mom said, "yellow and bronze."

I slapped the red lighter out of her hand.

"Give us some air," I said to my dad.

Under my dad's direction, Gaylord retreated to the Cadillac. He stood straight as a pine and watched while Hope and I, even Selah and my mom, hopped and flopped, cramping cramped toes and twisting weak ankles to make the shoes fit.

My mom said Gaylord had agreed to chauffeur me and Hope Back East to some kind of survival school run by vets.

"The whole world is a classroom," she said. We'd learn as we drove. And Gaylord would pay our expenses. He had, after all, many fond memories of two Cambodian girls he'd sponsored during some war that was not quite Vietnam.

"It was a much smaller rebellion," Gaylord said, "another one of the cute nameless ones."

Gaylord had fudged paperwork to help his girls cross to

Thailand. Still, they stole his loose change.

"That was the end of the girls," Gaylord said.

He balanced carefully against his Cadillac, not scratching the paint job he polished constantly with his nylon-clad rump.

"Let's have a look at those shoes," my dad said.

"There's just enough room at the toes," said my mom.

I ran into the forest and scuffed Gaylord's shoes against the edge of a rock so they'd be veterans, like Al.

"You want to be trash," Gaylord said. "You'll have to get off my land."

I held my breath so I could hear if Al was still rolling his dice.

"It was an accident," I told Gaylord. "A bear pushed me down."

He knew I didn't want to leave, because Al was going to be buried right there in the woods. And what if Al rose from the dead?

"The only important boundary is between life and death," Al would have said. "And what is there? Who is there? With what army shall we conquer this land?" □

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