

## **Pledging: A Eulogy**

by Gary Fincke

### *Woom! Ball*

In early May 1964, during Hell Week, we played Woom! Ball at four a.m., just before the two-mile run, fifteen pledges in a circle slamming a football broadside into our neighbors' guts. Woom! we said, then cupped our hands like running backs to keep ourselves from harm when our turn to receive arrived. Woom! The ball traveled clockwise because all of us except Cal Mroz were right-handed, and we were expected to take and deliver pain from the strongest side.

Woom! Early morning after early morning until we were five days into Hell Week, a half hour of sleep and six and a half hours of proving ourselves per night. We were nearly finished with Woom! Ball, one more night, but now there were more pledges who, after only three or four rotations, moaned and doubled up, clutching themselves in a way that signaled they were dropping out, and signaling as well they would accept the ridicule of the active brothers instead of shouting "Woom!" and silently wishing that half hour gone.

That night those pussies were given brooms or dust mops or bottles of window cleaner. They were told to do housewives' work, to be something other than useless until there was only one man standing. Woom! I stayed upright, but near the end of the half hour older fraternity brothers joined, shouldering in among the tough guys like Jim Ulsh and Dave Mazur and Cal Mroz, the pledges who never showed fear or pain.

Woom! We had our chance to fire back, driving that ball into the stomach of seniors just returned drunk from Friday night bars, juniors who insisted Woom! Ball used to be worse, that every pledge test had been softened for the likes of pussies like us. Woom! Until Jim Ulsh took that ball point first and looked to have come apart inside. Woom! Until Dave Mazur cracked a rib because that ball thunked wide. Woom! and I was left standing

beside Cal Mroz, who, because he was left-handed, finally reversed the direction and screamed “Woom!” like a sound could take the air out of me.

“Woom!” I shouted, using my right hand, the ball stuttering between us four times. “Woom!” he screamed, but all the pussies were being herded up the stairs and outside by the Pledge Master. Cal and I had no choice but to follow. Once outside, we broke for the road that ran into town. It was a mile out to town, and Cal ran beside me that early morning, matching my strides as if I’d earned something for accepting and returning fire. The two of us watched for lights in windows at quarter to five, guessing whether whoever moved there was coming home from trouble or waking into a day that, starting this early, had to promise nothing but work and pain.

### *Housework*

The last day of Hell Week, a Saturday, every pledge did housework for eight hours. We dusted and swept and mopped. We polished shoes and washed cars. We changed records from the Supremes to the Beatles to the Miracles for a room of early drinkers, or as I made sure, to lift the needle in a senior’s room and replace it exactly on time so that “Suspicion” by Terry Stafford played fifty times in a row without more than five seconds between plays during a two-hour stretch in mid-afternoon.

We scrubbed until a fraternity brother dropped cigarette ashes, and then we scrubbed again. I mastered buffing shoes until they nearly reflected my face. I made sure to rinse every trace of soap film from a glistening car. And I watched, without comment, a fellow pledge chew and swallow half a cigar for leaving a scuff mark, then sent outside to puke in the weeds beyond the parking lot. I learned to hate, during those final hours of Hell Week, half the fraternity brothers I wanted to live with for the next three years.

### *Factory Work*

A month later, my mother’s brother demanded that I get a haircut before he agreed to make an appointment for me with the office responsible for hiring summer workers at Heinz. When I hesitated, my mother promised him.

“They have a union there,” she told me after he left our house. “You have to fit in or else.” When my expression suggested I didn’t believe that, she added, “And you won’t embarrass your uncle.”

Within days, my hair above my collar, I reported for union work. By mid-July, when a foreman looked dubiously at my lengthening hair, I jammed it inside my company-issued hat and pinned it like an old woman first to arrive at church. In the sterilizing department, I worked for two weeks beside enormous cylindrical pressure cookers. I did the simple things, loading cans and helping to roll a filled truckload along the tracks between the rows of cookers, shoving it inside one of them on cue. Someone else set the temperatures and times. Someone else checked the pressure and the seals. Those two men told me they’d been doing their jobs for more than twenty years, and I was glad to hear it because a mistake would likely kill us all. And when they showed me that leaning out an open window into the early evening ninety-degree heat was a way to cool off, I moved to those windows every time there was a lull.

In August, a boss sent me into boxcars where bags of dried beans and flour roiled dust around my face while the forklift driver waited for me to reconstruct the shifted pallet loads. If there were split bags, he handed me a shovel and a short tub to fill while he smoked outside on the loading dock. Another foreman made me kneel in watery blood to unclog a set of drains because three pairs of men, including me, had spent half a shift hoisting frozen beef slabs, one hundred-twenty pounds per lift, and all of us were sick of wading ankle-deep. “Use your fucking fingers,” he said, as I struggled to yank half-thawed meat and fat from dozens of drain holes.

“Good,” he said at last, the blood swirling down. I got back to my feet and gripped the next crate, waiting for my partner, who’d been standing on high ground, to put his hands under the box and nod as if I’d passed a test and earned something by silently swearing obedience.

*Ben Hur*

When spring Hell Week arrived the following May, not all of us who had pledged together took pleasure in handing down our pain as a long-delayed reward. Not Dave

Mazur and Jim Ulsh. Not Cal Mroz, for sure. And mostly, not me. All I wanted was maid service from a loyal pledge who reliably made my room spotless. I didn't stay up late for Woom! Ball or get up early to watch pledges squirming under sunrise cold showers. The only group-torture "game" I stayed awake to watch was Ben Hur.

It was played mid-week at midnight. The pledges became galley slaves as if they were a boatload of bare-chested movie extras rowing with Charlton Heston. Dressed only in underwear, the pledges sat on the fraternity house basement floor while the Pledge Master sprayed them with water from a hose. "Row," he commanded. "Row." At first, they rowed slowly, their oars the empty wooden cases that glass soda bottles were delivered in for the fraternity house's vending. I remembered how the wooden cases had seemed light, at least for a few minutes, but soon, like we had the year before, they were rowing faster—"Ram Speed"—the floor puddling a few inches deep around them.

Soon, a few of my fraternity brothers started to handicap the race by placing empty bottles in the cases. Four or five for the stronger guys, two for some, none for the ones who already looked ready to drop out. I remembered how my anger at getting four bottles had turned to pride when I began to understand the strategy. An empty case meant guaranteed loser, a weakling. "Row, row, row," became a chorus I'd joined.

The year before, somebody had dropped a fifth bottle into my case as the first galley slaves collapsed. "Flat on your stomachs, face down," they were told, a kind of dead man's float because that's what they were now, bodies tossed into the sea. "Drop it and drown," I heard. Drowning felt plausible. A sixth bottle settled into my case. Dave Mazur and Cal Mroz were still left when I collapsed. Face down, I discovered there was enough water to keep me from breathing. I lay there gasping while I wished for those two stalwarts to quit or one of my weaker pledge brothers to drown for real, anything to end Ben Hur.

Now an active, watching pledges prove their desire for brotherhood turned awkward after most of them dropped on their stomachs. By the time a fresh "Ben Hur" was released like Dave Mazur had been when Cal finally drowned, I was in no mood to stand around and watch the pledges resuscitate like zombies to rise and clean up that flooded basement, sweeping up the ocean until there was no sign of a battle except a stack of heavy oars.

## *Townies*

Six p.m. on a Saturday, junior year, the winter we first paid attention to the news from Vietnam, Cal Mroz and I were sober because we'd worked since eight a.m. as part of our fraternity's punishment, collecting trash and shoveling snow. Pairs of fraternity brothers were assigned to a Saturday of work week in and week out until all had fulfilled their obligation. Our labor was intended to give us the humility the Dean had said we needed when everyone in the fraternity had pledged not to name which of us had shot out the lights in our parking lot. "Pledging loyalty to brotherhood," he'd said, "isn't always admirable."

Because it was February, we'd returned our tools in near-dark and stood, for once, among men who worked weekends at jobs they'd never foreseen as boys, laborers who did what was necessary, the work we wouldn't be repeating, not if going to college meant something. Those men huddled inside cars they idled toward warmth, windshields clearing from the bottom in rising moons. From the back of campus, it was almost two miles to where our friends were already lively with beer and music, and whether it was the twilight cold or the simple solidarity of work, one car door opened as an offer, a man who said, "Where to?"

"Two blocks down Grace Street," Cal said, and we crowded beside him on a bench seat, the heater full blast upon our feet while Cal guided the driver. "I'm thinking to myself you boys must be townies," the driver said as we turned into the half mile stretch that would take us to the frat house.

"Yes," Cal said at once, and the man nodded.

"You get along here?"

"Good enough," Cal said, true, at least, for him, since his family really did live in town, not, like mine, ninety miles south near Pittsburgh. "Right here," Cal added, and the man stopped his car three blocks from the frat house where small houses lined the last quiet street before weekend noise took over.

"I have to admit I imagined you boys card burners and the like this morning, the ones who think Vietnam is somebody else's work to get done."

"I'm enlisted," Cal said. "The Air Force first thing after graduation," not speaking for me this time so I kept my attitude to myself.

"That's words for sore ears," the driver said. "You boys take care," and he reached across Cal to shake my hand, then Cal's as I opened the door. "You worked good."

"Thanks," Cal said, and then he grabbed my arm before to stop me from walking towards the frat house. He went to the mailbox and opened it. In the rearview mirror, it would look to that driver like Cal was checking for mail. There were no footsteps in the three inches of snow on the walk from the front door of the nearest house to that mailbox. The car turned around and came back toward us. Cal reached in and pulled out two envelopes and waved them at the driver, who honked his horn.

There was a car in the driveway, so I thought whoever lived here was old, afraid to walk in the snow. If there had been a shovel, I could have done the walk in a few minutes. The snow was light because of the cold. The sidewalk was about half as long as the one in front of my parents' house. Cal returned the mail to the box and headed down the sidewalk to where it was shoveled. "I'm townie for a day," I said.

Cal punched my arm near the shoulder, hard enough to make me skid a quick sidestep to keep my balance. "How does it feel to be loved?" he said.

### *Sentences Full of If*

College down to its final semester, I made a vow that this was my last winter of having to walk in terrible weather. Those mornings when I slogged through half a mile of snow to campus, I listened to every part of my body for weakness and hoped I could hear myself in the near future of beating the draft, shuffling away from the army's physical with the joy of a small, unacceptable flaw. In Florida, where I planned to drink and chase girls in early March, three astronauts were killed on the ground, inhaling the toxic smoke of a flash fire, something as impossible to my mind as the news that my high school classmate had been crushed by a jeep during basic training, all the danger of his part in the war still months away. Televised tributes to Grissom, Chaffee, and White appeared in January. Early February's news filled with speculations about frayed wires, oxygen level, a hatch too difficult to reach.

During a mid-February weekend, stopped by the swirling lights of ambulances and police, I learned that Linda Harbison, who had, a few hours earlier, said goodbye to me as we headed off to different off-campus parties, had died in the car she'd picked to go home in. Whatever else she'd meant to say to me had been hurled through a windshield. She could have chosen our frat party, riding with Cal Mroz and his girlfriend like I had. Right then, just after one a.m., Cal's girlfriend already dropped off at her dorm to meet curfew, Cal and I shared expletives before we began the sentences full of "if" meant as consolations for what seemed impossible—to die so fast despite being surrounded by rescue.

I told myself I wanted to hear what Linda Harbison's driver, a sophomore, had to say about speed and ice and drinking because even after a dozen beers I had known enough to rely on the judgment of Cal Mroz to get me home safely from places where questionable behavior sometimes seemed mandatory.

### *Manual Labor*

My father, now a janitor for the school district, got me hired for the summer after I graduated. "Promise me to remember who you want people to think you are," he said as we walked into the school I'd graduated from four years before.

"Of course, Dad," I said, mouthing the simplest of pledges. By 7:15 a.m., I held a putty knife and lay down to scrape the underside of the high school gym's bleachers. I'd sat on those bleachers more than a hundred times. I'd stuck my share of boogers under my seat during junior high, giving it up when the longing for girls drove me to manners. In three months, I told the foreman, I was beginning graduate school. "Well, until then," the foreman said, and left.

I quickly understood this scraping was the kind of job summer help got stuck with—unskilled and awful—work the full-time janitors would never do as long as there was a budget for summer help. All morning the job carved initials and threats so close to my eyes that *R-H*, *eat-me*, and *fuck-you* were blurred. I thought of urinals and toilets, what might be caked under the rims of each and how I would be instructed to clean them. Summer, my father had told me, was when schools recovered from injuries. In the supply

closet, I found the extra-duty cleaner and a couple of rags because tiny obscenities and the crude names for private body parts were inked in the spaces between the wood slats.

I was making “cock” smear and disappear when I heard the foreman shout my name. I was on my feet before I understood it was my father the foreman was talking to. “We need to get the lead out,” the foreman said, sounding as if he was in the adjacent lobby, but I couldn’t hear my father’s response. “Now,” the foreman added before his voice shut off like a radio.

At lunch an hour later, despite what must have been humiliating, my father looked the same, eating his sandwich and his apple, going to the fountain once for a drink of water. “How’s it going?” he finally said.

“I can see why the teachers never wanted us to chew gum.”

“That job is everybody’s first summer day,” he said. “You’ll be on your feet soon enough.”

All afternoon I lay flat on my back, soundless, scraping gum and snot, erasing wishful thinking. Ten minutes before it was time to punch out, the foreman showed up to inspect my work with a mirror on a stick, grading like a dentist. “See you tomorrow, kid,” the foreman said, tapping the mirror against my chest before he said, “Go and clock out. There sure as hell’s no overtime on this job.”

My father and I punched out with the rest of the crew, the foreman following us through the lobby toward the main door. The foreman, smiling, said “Another day older” to my father, then “See you tomorrow” to both of us.

“Wait for me by the car,” my father said, but I opted, after a minute in the full sun of June, for the shade of the front door’s overhang. Through the glass I could see my father kneeling to take scuff marks from the lobby wall. Before I could be seen, I walked back to the car and stood, waiting with my back turned to the sun that shone over the roof of the high school from a cloudless sky. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?” my father called after what seemed like more than five minutes had passed.

“What wasn’t?” I said at once, but when I turned, squinting into the sun, my father’s expression was fixed as if he hadn’t heard.

“You okay?” he asked, and I laid my arms across the car roof and gave him a thumbs-up sign with both hands, holding them there as long as I could against the heat.

That last summer of manual labor was three months of working with my back and hands among men who were difficult to know. Because I sometimes lapsed into the speech of higher education. Because I would leave in September, and they knew I would not return. At least I believed so, ignorant of their private sadness, but I followed them, some evenings, into bars where they hurried past joy into anger. One man who cleaned rooms where children were taught said he wanted to fuck every teacher, even the ugly, so they would remember him. A man with whom I worked unloading school supplies from a truck wished Hitler a resurrection. And, one night, with a man from maintenance who listed capital punishments as if they were familiar names of football teams. Firing squad, hanging, the electric chair, beheading, and gas. "Which is worst," he asked me, "crucifixion, impalement, or being pressed by heavy stones?"

I answered by saying, "Drawn and quartered, because you'd see your guts unraveling as you were still breathing."

"No," he said, making me think I'd insulted his question, but I heard, then, a man and woman wearing some other working-with-your-hands uniform arguing from six stools down the beer-soaked, ash-strewn bar. They twice exchanged "Fuck-you; no, fuck-you," before the man silenced her with his fist, a short uppercut under her chin so she fell back and slammed her head on the wooden floor, and the man with whom I was drinking stood and started forward while I sat like a fool or worse, someone who watched like a doctor hired to witness the planned death of prisoners. A man who laid his fingertips to the throats and wrists of the executed, bobbed his head, and read the hands of a prominent clock. Or someone who would be moving on to the deferment offered by graduate school, pledging myself to scholarship.

### *Loyalty*

Fourteen months later, I was recently married and about to extend my deferment by becoming a high school teacher. The first order of business on teacher orientation day was reciting a loyalty oath to the United States. So far as I could tell, everyone in the room raised their hand and recited the pledge. On the first day of school, in my homeroom full

of 8<sup>th</sup> graders, every student recited the pledge to the flag that hung from an extended shaft in the front corner of the room.

A month later, my wife and I returned to the college we'd both graduated from for homecoming. The pledges from my senior year, juniors now, were near strangers. The sophomores I didn't know at all. We went to the football game, but by the end of the first quarter, we were ready to drift away. When we stood, I turned and saw that Cal Mroz and the girlfriend he'd married right after graduation were sitting far apart from anyone at the top of the bleachers. He was in Air Force dress uniform and didn't seem interested in anyone who had gone through pledging with him. He looked as sturdy, steady, and reliable as always, about to enter the war that was barely more than a skirmish the night we punished ourselves with Woom! Ball to complete our pledging, the near-future of his death in that war still secretly unwrapping itself in the sky over Vietnam.



**Gary Fincke's** most recent nonfiction book is *After Arson: New and Selected Essays* (Madville, 2025). An earlier collection, *The Darkness Call*, won the Robert C. Jones Prize (Pleides Press, 2018). His individual essays have been reprinted in *Best American Essays 2020* and *The Pushcart Prize XXV*.