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I remember once, falling nearly fifteen feet down a very steep rock face after losing my grip on a section called “the chairs” at Summit Rock in the Santa Cruz mountain range. I was with a small group of kids in northern California who enjoyed reaffirming the energy of life by putting it in danger. I was not being hanged, and soon slid past an easily grabbed hand hold, but for those few seconds I was sure death was coming. With the help of my friends, minutes later I was safe on the summit overlooking Palo Alto, the linear accelerator, and Stanford University. The sensation of falling is what came to mind reading about Farquhar’s experience waiting for the reaper. An overwhelming sense of inevitability and great power championed any rational thoughts until the falling stopped, and in his case it never did.

The hunger artist touches on the malleability of human interest and perception of holiness. Fasting has worldwide significance as a symbolically god-like act. Most world religions have a story of their focal deity, or chosen people surviving a long period of hunger. The pairing of starvation and piety may have something to do with the neurochemical response to the sufferings of death. A series of chemicals called phenethylamines or phenyl-ethyl-amines (and one endogenous tryptamine) have an interesting effect on the neurotransmitter system by mimicking serotonin and are often responsible for the god-experience. The state of humility one finds himself/herself in when severely hungry is deep and impressionable. It is easy to imagine why starvation and piety share a cell. There was a man in Santa Cruz whom I met on his second of nine days of silence and fasting. He was a homeless man, living exposed where the temperatures regularly dropped into the teens at night. When he did speak, a week after I met him, he told me that I could find many holy people here, that no man who is comfortable knows god.

“The Use of Force” was an odd tale. My father is a family physician, and perhaps that is why I have trouble seeing through the literal plot to whatever lay beneath. The story of the bitter diagnosis can be transposed to almost any setting. Political, psychological, ecological, and many others; almost every system resists change and denies being ailed. The position of healer was the very first occupation, entering the fossil record even before the spiritual leader. It is a duty of great responsibility, and in this society where skills are a commodity we often forget the significance of our jobs. From a lifetime of observing the profession as a doctor’s son, I think Williams wrote the story to release stress. My father, although strong and healthy, seems to have had his mental and spiritual body run over by a steamroller, once for every man he has seen die.

The bitter elder is a wonderfully hate-able character. With age comes wisdom and apparently bitter greed and racism. Of course the relative reality of morality is the foremost talking point brought to the surface by “A Good Man is Hard to Find”, but I speculate O’Connor was also trying to warn women of the future not to fall into the stereotype of the hollow pseudo-pious wretch who swoons over Victorian ideals. The murderous band of outlaws stand for one flavor of self serving man, the libertarian, while the grandmother stands for the viciously ignorant liberal, the type that ruin it for the rest of us. The hero is not the father, he makes no attempt to save his family. It is not the grandmother, that is for sure. I think the hero is The Misfit. His words are the only words of any substance in the story. He represents a kind of honesty all the other characters are afraid to express.

Death is the only thing we can ever hope to experience that is as beautiful and magical as birth.