

JESSE LEE KERCHEVAL

The Steeplejack

after Aloysius Bertrand

The steeplejack, Tadeus Szyhalski, is singing, paint brush in hand, standing astride the silver globe that is the water tower of B——, Wisconsin, pop. 603. He is up so high even the soles of his work boots are above the town's two church towers, one Catholic, one Lutheran, in a countryside of towns with two churches, one Catholic, one Lutheran. In the soles of his feet, he feels the town wake, water hums from the tank on its way to fill toilets, coffee pots, to wash last night's dishes, lovers sticky with sex. Below him, the town swimming pool begins, slowly, to fill. In Poland, he painted the pitched roofs of cathedrals, in Florida he painted a water tower to look like an orange. This job is simple, silver paint, then a big blocky red "B".

The high school band, dressed like Hussars, are marching on the edge of town. In the distance, one of their soldiers is drumming. Tadeus Szyhalski sees her tri-cornered hat, her epaulets of red wool, her cockade crimped with a rosette, and her pigtail tied with a bow. He has a daughter, grown, who lives in Warsaw, but she was never musical.

The next thing he sees is a flock of crows, in a still farther field, who, having discovered the scarecrow's not real, settle as one to peck his straw head, to knock off his hat which is blown by a wind from the west where clouds have begun to gather over Iowa, the distant Mississippi.

In the late afternoon, at last, the echoing tower falls silent with the town — taps shut, all clothes at last washed and hung out to dry. Tadeus Szyhalski finishes the "B", careful not to let the paint drip. The last thing Tadeus sees from his scaffold is the tornado as it drops from the clouds like the dark finger of God and heads, spinning, toward the town.