

PERKY EDGERTON

Procession, 2016
Oil on canvas, 37 x 43 in



HANK LAWSON

Summer Night

Tug-of-war starts at twilight. I finish quickly setting up the two card tables for their bridge party so Vern and I can get out of here in time. Maybe Venus is out there right now. At least when our parents have guests there's none of their fights that go off like bombs. Lately, Mom's been crying. Dad's not cracking jokes.

Their bombs are more real than those talked about on the news Mom's been listening to. The TV is on with that Korea stuff.

Dad's at the wet bar making drinks, something he likes to do, so everything's all right. I have to get his permission before we can leave.

"Ernie," Mom calls from the hall, "what snacks did you buy?"

"Nuts, assorted. To match our guests." Dad winks at me.

"Hush, Ernie," Mom says, coming into the living room. The doorbell chimes. "There!" Mom lowers her voice. "Now behave yourself. Remember, no pushing your Manhattans on Mert."

"Yes, dear." Dad winks again at me.

"And don't push them on yourself, Ernie."

"Yes, dear." Dad doesn't wink.

Mom opens the door. "Mert and Andy. Welcome, welcome. You're first."

Mrs. McKay says, "Well, we wanted to be first in line for Ernie's Manhattans."

Dad walks out with tinkling drinks for them. "I'm the Bringer of Jollity."

Mert sips. "Oh, nice." She dumps herself onto our striped sofa. "I could have used one of your world-champion Manhattans last night, Ernie."

"The fireworks at the park," her husband says.

"Oh, the noise was just horrific. It was this Korea business coming true. Just too much!" She sips again. "I'm going to throw back Ernie's Manhattan and have another at my side and forget about it. Does the TV have to be on?"

Before tonight, Mom would turn it off before guests arrived.

She says, "Don't you want to know what's going on?"

"What difference will it make?"

Dad says, "She won't watch anything else."

"Mert, we'll turn down the volume."

Mrs. McKay sips. Her lips are so tight I wonder how any drink gets in.

Dad heads back to the bar. A knock at the door.

“Pat and King. Come on in. The McKays are here. Ernie! Two more customers.”

“Coming up. Greetings. Here you go.”

The Whites are pretty old. He’s tall and kind of hunched like he’s fitting himself into his coffin already. Mrs. White clinks, on account of her bracelets and rings. Reminds me of Saturn that way. They shuffle from the door and, though there are eight folding chairs, stand looking lost until Mom holds out chairs for them.

“Hey, King, you’ll like this,” Dad says. “Guess what the code for DEFCON 1 is? ‘Cocked Pistol.’”

Mrs. McKay says, “Men got to get their *cock* in there somewhere.”

I’ve got to ask Vern what *cock* is.

“Men and their deadly toys,” Mom says.

“DEFCON 1? We dropped from 3 to 2, so things are improving.”

“No, Mert. It’s a countdown,” Mr. McKay says.

Dad says, “You know, ‘3, 2, 1. Blastoff.’”

I follow Dad back to the wet bar with Mr. McKay, who takes up a lot of space to go around.

Dad says, “A lot of crying here lately, Andy. But then, Edie’s crying sounds like singing to me.”

“Whatya think, Ernie? Is it going to happen?”

Dad’s eyebrows flick up funny. “If we go to DEFCON 1, it’ll happen tonight.”

“Yeah, but we did all we could, right? Korea started it. That unloaded missile they shot at Hawaii. We didn’t strike back. Only a blockade.”

“When the two ‘dear leaders’ started comparing sizes of their clits—excuse me, their buttons—it was pretty much all she wrote.”

“But ours *is* bigger.”

“Not if China backs up Korea.”

“They wouldn’t dare.”

“Another Manhattan, Andy? It’ll take away the gloom.”

Gloom. That’s the word. Adults seem cooped up in gloomy rooms without windows. “Why are you so gloomy, Dad?” I mean all adults.

“Don’t worry about it. Go out and play.”

Venus! I jump to the hall. “Hey, Vern, we’re excused,”

I yell to him in his room. Maybe I was a little loud for the guests because Dad tells Mr. McKay, “Sorry about that. His head’s in the stars.”

Stars won’t be out yet. But soon. Dusk hints at dreams to come.

I’m out the door. It’s as good as escape from school. Adults got rules. Chores before play. Play only so many minutes. Clocks and grids. Square homes, square card tables, card play goes clockwise, school desks in grids, square school. The sun, like adults, breaks a day into morning, noon, and afternoon, but at night planets spin in round orbits like dancers around maypoles, and stars wander for the surprise they’ll find. What will I find?

In the twilight, five square houses from ours, where Mayfair Drive curves, Gia yells, “Hi!” from across the street with Hatrack, Jolene, and Trigve. You can count on a big hello from Gia. And a garlicky smell. Maybe there’s a connection. Hatrack got that name because he’s smart, even though his father slaps the back of his head and calls him stupid. Trigve is from a foreign country. He’s got an accent and everything. Jolene’s crooked haircut looks like a saw did it. Her shirts are always stained but she’s sweet. Gia and Jolene do cartwheels. Hatrack and Trigve spin like tops.

We wear the cutoffs and T-shirts we wore in the day. Summer sun lingers in the trees, lawns, and flower beds. It warms the air into a fleece on our skin. To caress ourselves with it, we whirl like planets and bring on the dreamy feeling of falling asleep. At night, adults in their rooms, we play in magical dances. And we will until tomorrow.

“Hey.” I wave back.

Venus isn’t here yet. She and her sister sometimes have trouble getting out of their house. I imagine Venus anyway. The rings around her eyes are perfect circles. Soft though. Like her bones are clay and her skin is frosting. The dark blue of her eyes mists like the moon through clouds.

Vern strolls up.

Before I forget, I ask him, “What’s a cock?”

He frowns at me. “An erection, stupid.”

“An erection like a building?”

“Hey, you guys, take Venus and Bobbi,” yells Hatrack. They’ve just shown up.

Vern grunts.

“Don’t you like Venus?”

“It’s her sister. She’s always in the way.”

The sisters cross the street, Bobbi bounces in front so she hides Venus. Venus, smooth and easy. Her head doesn’t bob. She glides along.

Bobbi holds out something. I don’t see what it is ‘cause I look around her to see Venus’s eyes. Soft and misty. Blue worlds. I take from Bobbi a card with pictures of fireworks: “Hope your Fourth of July is a blast.” She signed it, “Love, Bobbi.” Venus didn’t sign it.

“Why don’t you two get a room?” Vern says.

“Huh?”

Bobbi blushes. “The card’s for you too, Vern.”

“Sure.”

Venus is standing really close behind Vern so I still can’t see her much.

It’s a nice thing, this card. Mom would like it. Bobbi’s lips and nose may be the wrong size for her face, like a planet in place of our moon, but she’s nice to me.

“Car!” Hatrack calls. “Remember, three pulls our way, three pulls yours.”

The four of us line up, lean back, and stretch out our arms before pretending to pull an invisible rope connected across Mayfair to the other kids doing the same. Three steps forward, three back.

The gray sedan stops, its driver trying to see the rope. We won. The eight of us scatter. Vern and others are laughing. I’m a little afraid but excited too.

We hide behind parked cars, trees, and between houses. The car slowly drives off.

“All clear!”

We come out of our hiding spots laughing. I feel plenty good.

“Car!”

We hurry into place.

This time the car, a red sports car, drives right through our “rope.” The driver yells out the window, “Hey, you can’t fool me; I played that game when I grew up here.”

“Here” is Arden Manor in Sacramento. Our neighborhood. A square framed by Watt, Morse, and Northrop Avenues and Hurley Way. The solar neighborhood is not a square but a circle of twelve light-years around our sun. Thirty-three stars. They’re suns too. Alpha Centauri, Sirius, and Procyon, my favorite. It’s the largest. Anyway, I like riding my bike to streets outside the Arden Manor grid just to see what I’ll find. I don’t mind getting lost.

A bad kind of lost is losing to the driver. Outsmarted, we don’t look at each other and we’re quiet.

“Car!”

Oh, it’s the Teagardens’ Lincoln Continental. They’re coming to our parents’ party. I can’t say anything about it to Vern ‘cause we’re getting into position.

The Teagardens slam on their brakes. The tires squeal. And smell. If it wasn’t twilight, you could probably see the tires smoke.

We run and hide.

The car door opens. Mr. Teagarden yells, “All of you who were here come out immediately.”

I’m with Vern, Venus, and Bobbi between the Amorfis’ and Morgans’ houses. Vern doesn’t budge, so we don’t.

“Come out now or I’ll go to your parents.”

Hatrack, Trigve, Gia, and Jolene come from their spots.

“That’s not everybody.”

Bobbi moves around me and walks over the Morgans’ lawn to the gutter. She seems brave to me.

I can’t see Mr. Teagarden. I don’t want to. He gets all red-faced like he’s gonna explode.

“The game you’re playing is against the law. You could be arrested. But you know what’s worse?”

Nobody says anything to him but Vern says to us, “That we fooled you.”

Venus giggles. She does that a lot when Vern’s around. He *is* funny sometimes.

“Because you’re children doesn’t mean you can ignore the terror threatening our country tonight. You’re citizens as much as your parents.” He pauses. “If I see or hear any of you playing this game, I won’t hesitate to go to your parents or even to the police. Do you understand?”

Hatrack answers for us, “Yes, sir.”

Mr. Teagarden gets back in his car and drives to our house.

“Big-mouth wanker,” Vern says.

Hatrack says, “It’s too dark for tug-of-war anyway.”

He’s right. Mom calls this the gloaming. Sun gone away, we get the open ocean of night. The king is dead; long live the moon and stars. You step into black silk or it cuddles down around you. You release into space, into outer space. You can’t help but spin your music. It’s a freedom that just sings out of you. Planets spin like CDs. If you listen hard, you hear their bold music. All eight singing harmony.

I pause to look at the Milky Way. Or, it pauses me. Its hundred billion stars glisten like the eyes of laughing friends. I try to draw myself into it, to be swept up by its spiraling at over one million miles per hour. How many stars are in the hundred billion galaxies? How many children dancing in the night look back this way?

But even in outer space, the smell of bombs hangs over every head. Astronauts Hadfield and Jones said space air caught in the airlock after their space walks smelled of spent gunpowder. “Cordite or brimstone, as if an unseen witch was just there,” Hadfield wrote in a book. I read it. The smell of the big bang. It sent the universe spiraling.

Vern says he and I got started with our dad’s big bang. I don’t know what he meant, but I think he was telling me the truth.

He yells, “Hide-and-peek.”

Bobbi volunteers to be “it.”

I have a favorite place to hide. It’s next door to our house, inside the huge pine tree in the witch’s yard. We call her that because she has flyaway white hair except where it’s balding on top. Nobody’s seen her in anything but black. She’s always at her kitchen window and raps the glass if any of us come too close to her yard.

Bobbi starts counting and we run to get behind saplings and mailbox posts, or, if you don’t mind getting wet, lie on the grass. I like to *really* hide, concealed not by darkness alone. I go to the tree’s back side and sit in a secret hollow inside. It’s a capsule on a rocket ship flying into wild space. There’s room for two. Maybe Venus will choose the tree too. We’ll fly high and free.

“Ready or not, here I come!”

Throughout the rounds with different kids being it, I don’t change my hiding place. I’m never found. I hear the kids whizzing about like comets and cupids. Venus doesn’t show. But I can still see her. I always see her. Close my eyes and there she is.

Dad’s car alarm goes off. It’s a chilly clanging. So alien to our games. But we have to listen.

Someone comes out of our house. “Hey, what the hell are you doing out here? Get away from the car.” It’s Dad.

Vern’s voice from somewhere. “We didn’t go near it.”

“Then why’s it going off?”

Dad shuts off the alarm. The front door slams shut. He

almost never yells at me or Vern. Though since the Korea thing started—

Like hot spit on the back of my neck, I feel the witch. I turn. She’s all over me before I can run outta there.

“What you do there, *das Schwein*?!”

She’s got a lantern under her chin so she looks like a ghost. Hairs hang from her chin. “Playing hide-and-peek.”

“Hide? You zink you can hide?!” She’s screeching. It hurts my ears. “Koreans just shoot down Americans pilot. Pilot dead. He’s dead. We’re deadt. You stupit littel boy. A tree hide you? Stupit boy.”

“Hey, you old witch, shut the hell up.” Vern. Venus is with him, holding on to his arm.

The witch blubbers. She turns and chops up toward her door. “Get off my yard or I call cops. I call your parents anyway.”

“Call them,” Vern yells after her, “and we’ll tell them you tried to scare us that we’re going to die. But that bomb’s coming straight down on you.”

She waves her hand like in a magic spell and vanishes into her house.

“Flashlight tag!” Vern calls out with a funny look at Venus, who smiles back at him. “Get the flashlight,” he tells me.

The first thing I hear when I open our front door is, “That pilot’s poor wife.” It’s Mrs. McKay.

Dad says, “Nobody’s too happy about it.”

“DEFCON 1. Goddamn it,” one of the men says. “I wouldn’t have believed it.”

After that, they’re quiet. Just the TV going. I’m in the kitchen getting the flashlight. When I pass out the entry, I notice the grown-ups have stopped playing cards but sit at the two card tables watching TV.

Outside, the black thickens. Large as space. Soft as honey. Velvet. Heat rises from the ground and we rise with it. Gravity dozes. Under my feet, the pillowy lawn yawns damp earth into the air. It dampens sound. Every sound sounds farther away than its source. Bobbi’s speaking to me, but she might be across the street.

“Both sides blame the other,” she says. “They’re shooting letters back and forth. My mom calls them the blame letters. Now China says it’s going against anyone attacking Korea.”

Vern’s voice tells me, “You’re it.”

He means me. I count and the kids scurry about. “Ready or not.” I listen. I walk in circles from home base. A sound. I click on the flashlight. Nothing. Someone giggles. It’s Venus. From complete blackness, it’s like she’s singing from outer space just for me.

Flashlight on.

There, one sight lit in all the outdoors: Venus is kissing Vern. Eyes closed, they don’t notice my light. Eyes closed. Lips. Vern and Venus. The first letter of their names match and they’re the same age. I see that now. A clock. A grid. A galaxy’s heart is a black hole, a graveyard of the first stars.

I move the light off them before they know I saw. A noise. I light it up. Bobbi. She’s come right into the open as if she wants to be caught. In the light, she looks at me worried and pained. She’s it. She takes the flashlight.

I don’t feel like playing anymore.

When I get near the front door, the grown-ups are leaving. They don’t chat in the doorway with Mom the way they usually do. They’re almost running to their cars. Adults don’t run. One of them sobs. I wait for them to pass

When I get to the door, Mom says, “Where’s your brother?”

“He’s out there. Doing . . . something.”

“I *know* he’s out there doing *something*.”

She’s angry, but so am I.

Dad says, “Bringing him in won’t protect him now.” He stands watching a baseball game from San Francisco now on TV.

“I want him with us, Ernie. Go find him, please.”

I ask, “Where’s dessert?”

“Before bedtime? It’ll give you bad dreams.”

“I don’t think I’ll dream until the witching hour.” I head for the cake.

“Ernie, please. I’m about to cry. Don’t make me cry.”

“I’m going.”

Mom comes to the kitchen with me. She cuts the cake. “Darling, we sent a bomb to North Korea. Do you know? A big bomb.”

Bright flashes around Venus and Vern. “I know nuclear bombs.”

I take the square cake on a square plate to a square table to watch the Giants on TV. The first bite in my mouth—I can’t taste it much—a huge wind begins ripping

the stadium to smithereens. Then static, then a black screen. Sacramento’s sirens start up, a low rumble at first, then wilder and louder they howl, monstrous and lonely.

Hank Lawson’s short fiction has appeared in *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Ekphrastic Review*, and *Art Times*. He has an English MA and has worked a career in journalism.