

THE SCAPEGOAT

Michael Ives

And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was
the priest of the most high God.
Genesis 14:18

He and his wife referred to their holiday hors d'oeuvre spread, a carefully rounded heap of deviled ham and selected spices, as the *Mound*, the exterior of which was covered with a mantle of processed cheese spread. Though few chose to eat of the *Mound*, neither cocktail party nor moveable feast could be considered complete without it, as if the *Mound* were invested with the power of an idol, as if it were a transgression to eat from the *Mound*, but an equally grave transgression to omit it from the “pre-prandial fare,” to borrow the phraseology of the husband. The occasional adventurer might with nacre-handled cocktail knife penetrate as far into the *Mound* as the lower reaches of its yellowish coat. Infrequently a lusty soul would entrench as deep as to catch on the tip of his knife blade a small bit of deviled ham. Yet the integrity of the *Mound* as a sacred, inviolable tumulus never failed to survive these bruised avatars. For the most part no one dared deface the *Mound's* inscrutability beyond minor excavations, which in any case, constituted a *ritual and hygienic scarification*. Lest anyone should nurture so much arrogance as to allow thoughtful conversation to intrude among the jello salads and pretzel nubs, always there was the *Mound* to warn him away from such extravagance. “Let your talk emulate a curved, sparsely pitted surface,” the *Mound* would seem to enjoin, “dumb and inanimate like unto the moon's.”

The moment the *Mound* entered the room, its near hemispherical perfection, the totemic gravity it asserted into the otherwise moronic ambience, would impel all present to

observe a momentary hush appropriate to sacred levels of admiration. *Ah, Mound!* someone would whisper, pointing at it as if at a hydrocephalic who, for the enormity of his fatal defect, was thought to bring good luck upon the tribe who gave it succor. Signatures of the divine: an aquarium in the skull—a dome of anonymous potted meat. The *Mound* gave off an aura of portent: that it might sire prodigies and miracles, that some token of unassimilated wonder might burst forth, as of suddenly coming upon an image of the holy mother pressed into the deck of an immaculately sealed slice of American cheese.

When, on one occasion, an unaccustomed guest chose unwittingly to drive a knife straight through the center of the *Mound*, everyone looking on let out a collective gasp, for it had remained a mystery whether yet more of the same macerated pork and associated by-products lay at the core of the *Mound* and not some other, explicitly numinous, token—a mortgage document for instance, or a golf ball. Oh, the terrible undifferentiated truth of the *Mound!* The hapless guest might as well have split open an infant's head for the looks of horror his bisection inspired. Like Buridan's ass, starving to death unable to decide whether to drink the water to its left or eat the hay to its right, the guest—similarly trapped between the inevitable injury he would cause his host by restoring the grayish mass to its crevasse under such intense scrutiny and his cresting fear that, on a footing with that very scrutiny, to eat from the *Mound* was plainly inadvisable—he hesitated for what seemed a geological age, *Mound*-encumbered knife in one hand, table water cracker in the other.

He knew what he had to do, had known from the moment he cleft the *Mound*, but as he began to chew, the full force of taboo bore in upon him the grievous error he had committed. *He's actually eating it*, someone whispered. *Sic transit gloria Mound*, another gibed. Even the husband struggled to suppress his astonishment. All then went silent but for the soft clinking

of ice cubes and, issuing from another room, the Hammond organ stylings of Walter Wanderly. People backed away, as if to escape responsibility for having produced a foul odor. An inexorable recognition began to paint itself into the fresh plaster of the guest's face as he swallowed the baneful dollop. The image of its descent down the length of his esophagus, heavy with intimations of sacrificial blades and altars and beribboned yearlings, lodged itself in the sensibilities of all who looked on, and for this act of witness they were drawn closer one to another, and he closer to the congress of furies gathering in his duodenum.