

Tuning

Preface from *The Winter Room*

Gary Paulsen

If books could be more, could show more, could own more, this book would have smells . . .

It would have the smells of old farms; the sweet smell of new-mown hay as it falls off the oiled sickle blade when the horses pull the mower through the field, and the sour smell of manure steaming in a winter barn. It would have the sticky-slick smell of birth when the calves come and they suck for the first time on the rich, new milk; the dusty smell of winter hay dried and stored in the loft waiting to be dropped down to the cattle; the pungent fermented smell of the chopped corn silage when it is brought into the manger on the silage fork. This book would have the smell of new potatoes sliced and frying in light pepper on a woodstove burning dry pine, the damp smell of leather mittens steaming on the back of the stovetop, and the acrid smell of the slop bucket by the door when the lid is lifted and the potato peelings are dumped in—but it can't.

Books can't have smells.

If books could be more and own more and give more, this book would have sound . . .

It would have the high, keening sound of the six-foot bucksaws as the men pull them back and forth through the trees to cut pine for paper pulp; the grunting-gassy sounds of the work teams snorting and slapping as they hit the harness to jerk the stumps out of the ground. It would have the chewing sounds of cows in the barn working at their cuds on a long winter's night; the solid thunking sound of the ax coming down to split stove-wood, and the piercing scream of the pigs when the knife cuts their throats and they know death is at hand—but it can't.

Books can't have sound.

And finally if books could be more, give more, show more, this book would have light . . .

Oh, it would have the soft gold light—gold with bits of hay dust floating in it—that slips through the crack in the barn wall; the light of the Coleman lantern hissing flat-white in the kitchen; the silver-gray light of a middle winter day, the splattered, white-night light of a full moon on snow, the new light of dawn at the eastern edge of the pasture behind the cows coming in to be milked on a summer morning—but it can't.

Books can't have light.

If books could have more, give more, be more, show more, they would still need readers, who bring to them sound and smell and light and all the rest that can't be in books.

The book needs you.

The Limited

Sherman Alexie

I saw a man swerve his car
And try to hit a stray dog,
But the quick mutt dodged
Between two parked cars

And made his escape.
God, I thought, did I just see
What I think I saw?
At the next red light,

I pulled up beside the man
And stared hard at him.
He knew that I'd seen
His murder attempt,

But he didn't care.
He smiled and yelled loud
Enough for me to hear him
Through our closed windows:

"Don't give me that face
Unless you're going to do
Something about it.
Come on, tough guy,

What are you going to do?"
I didn't do anything.
I turned right on the green.
He turned left against traffic.

I don't know what happened
To that man or the dog,
But I drove home
And wrote this poem.

Why do poets think
They can change the world?
The only life I can save
Is my own.