# THE SALT BOAT

*Bob Grunst*

October: Iowa

SOMEWHERE IN THE Rockies the conditions build. An old Indian puffs out the first cloud. Aspen leaves rattle. Livestock from Flagstaff to Keokuk instinctively increase their intake of silage and cracked corn. . . . Three nights ago a gale blew across the prairie. The house quavered and rocked, and I awoke in the morning to find two women in the yard next door, both wearing heavy coats and gloves too big for their hands. Between them they had filled a bushel basket with walnuts. The wind had picked the tree clean. I imagine they had in mind loaves of rich bread or fancy pies at Christmas.

Today a friend of mine, a cheerful woman who loves walking and all the details people hurry past, stopped me and exclaimed, "The ginkgoes! Over night the ginkgoes dropped all their leaves! They're not really out of the way. Just over one more block." I picked up the enthusiasm. I added an observation of my own, that something, some fallen leaf or bleached out swale of weeds mixed in a breeze tinctured by Lake Winnipeg, smelled exactly like fresh fish, not old fish market fish but whitefish, lake trout, or herring just pulled from the lake and packed in flaky ice. My friend suggested the smell might be the ginkgoes, but that interpretation went contrary to all my experience. I walked over the extra street. The ginkgo leaves lay in designs, yellowish shadows beneath the trees, as if they had memorized places they would fall during all the summer's sunny days.

There was no sunshine. A heavy overcast and a few errant nicks of snow twirled in the air. I ate lunch at the Greek restaurant where the lettuce reminded me of the hot lunch program at my elementary school—right up to 1963. I took the hot lunch only in the winter months. Lettuce which has been refrigerated too long tastes like a ten watt light bulb, steel refrigerator racks, unopened institutional size

cans of tomato paste and peaches and the glue which holds their labels on, baking soda, and a dash of Freon. That lettuce reached my hometown in refrigerated boxcars with names stenciled on their sides—Fresno and Santa Fe. . . . The lettuce carried hints of creosote, brakemen, engineers, and hobo jungles. For eighteen years, that lettuce had been lost.

It's that time of year when the lanky accordian player squeezes down to a few last notes after hours and crazy hours of polkas. My legs feel tired. I need a fresh shirt and a strong, hot cup of coffee. Now at any time of the night I may snap half-upright in bed and feel the drafts that pry into this house through innumerable fissures and ducts between boards and hear the infant cry of the wind, of prairie mice not escaping owls, of pigs huddling low to the earth in shelters, of the fluting, glassy shrieks of ginkgo leaves borne aloft by dust devils—all the cries—and our own daughters. Sometimes I smell them in their room like two warm loaves of bread, yeasty and cooking inside in the dark. They cry and my wife and I mix blankets and quilt into a nest in the middle of the bed. One of us turns on the red darkroom light; the basket is there and we comfort them, or by the simplest of reversals, they comfort us. They have not yet acquired the fear we might teach them. We feel ridiculously old with the sense of experience blurring back and back: houses vanish and the oily hiss of late night cars on a street and bells of trollies and the rhythmic four-step of the ice man's horse, a standard that belongs first to our fathers. The wind passes us from minute to minute through the congregation of minutes. Our daughters' twenty fingers are smaller than the little candles you set fire to on a birthday cake, yet every morning I think their fingers are a little bigger as with another thin coat of wax. They are dipped into life day after day. They are burning all the time.

I come from Michigan, a state where some winters measure half the year. My hometown is located on Lake Michigan, and the snows there are even greater because of something known as "lake effect." Little dust particles spume up chimnies and smokestacks in Gary, Burns Harbor, Calumet, South Chicago. On updrafts and downdrafts southwesterlies taxi that carbon over the lake where it picks up condensation. Moisture collects around each bit of grime. When it's cold enough, snow flakes swarm into clouds. They grow heavier and heavier above the waves and finally, hitting the east shore dunes, blow up in squalls.

When I think of snow, I think of salt, and I think of the salt boat. Often I saw that ship while loitering around the commercial fishing docks and watching men in oilskins dressing a day's catch. The salt boat arrived in the harbor—and still arrives—late in October. There

must have been several different freighters that delivered the salt through the years, but the ships all became one. She was the standard seven-hundred twenty foot laker: pilothouse situated high above the bow, the long flat expanse of hatches over which hung the self-unloading mechanism—steel frames supporting a conveyor—and the funnel and crew's quarters astern. Her rivets and welded seams bled rust. Soot crusted her spars. Pushing a bow wave that curled over and over, she'd cut slowly between the piers and follow the navigational buoys up the channel, past Big Bay and past Superior Point, five miles to the sand and gravel docks. Steam trailed from engine room vents. A smoke stain spread out from the dirty stack. Maybe a man would be smoking a cigarette in the open gangway. An old Beaver Island Indian perhaps. A disheveled lot of TV antennaes gangled above the stern cabin. Pushed against the ship's stern railing, directly above the rudder stock, greasy garbage cans would be stuffed with leftovers and used things from the kitchen: wilted shards of lettuce and heads of mops beat up from the best part of a lake season's swamping. The Plimsoll marks aft were discolored after months of dumpings. Pistons and cams vibrated, and the huge wheels' blades drummed. If I was lucky enough to see the salt boat enter the harbor, a lump rose in my throat. I had no romantic ideas about captains and mates then. I thought of heavy coats with hoods, mittens and boots, and the cold depths of winter.

I remember nights in the family car, driving past the docks. The immense arm of the unloader would be swung out over pilings and bulkheads, spewing a blue avalanche. The mound would be shifting and growing. Waves of salt broke loose from the temporary peak. Inundations that might have buried a car rushed and fanned out increasing the circumference of the mountain's base. All of this was captured in beery floodlight. The round lights in the ship's hull shown in white rows. No human being was visible. It was as if the order behind the business reached far beyond the work of men in pea coats and Tigers hats. The ship unloaded herself. The mountain might have spread out and covered the town, but we would be past the site in seconds.

Next morning the salt pile would be covered by a patchwork of tarpaulins. The ship would be gone, and winter lay there in salt. Of course, the salt was a tonic, and once the heavy snows hit, city and county trucks backed up to the pile and took on loads for the streets. Then when we drove past, one or another of us commented on the size of the pile. The measurements testified to the severity of the weather and also corresponded to the wisdom of a few men: meteorologists, a road commissioner, a purchasing agent, the mayor. As the

mountain shrank, spring drew closer. Snow banks turned black, into little ridges of sand and dirt and sodium chloride. The shipping lane opened for another season of navigation. (A few men always lost their fishing shanties through rotten ice.) Finally I wouldn't have to wear an ugly hood. What remained in the sand and gravel company's yard was an odd, eroded monument—hard against the hard kick that would start the crying peepers in the nearby swamp.

Maybe they barge salt into Iowa, and I could find blue mountains of it ranged along Mississippi River docks. But it's not important. We have the ginkgoes, ginkgoes and something that at least smells like the fishermen's fish and brings on that salt. Winter comes in in its old way which is reassuring at last. If we have any fear to teach our daughters, who happen to be sleeping at this moment, it is only that all of this will stop—ginkgoes and salt boats and old lettuce—and if it stops there will be no fancy pies at Christmas, no elusive Indians, and nothing to love and nothing to preserve and no use for salt.