



E. C. Vojik

## THE COCKEREL

(*On the Shores of the Chesapeake Bay—1960*)

Everyone said it was a shame  
but Uncle Charlie, solitary  
in the ramshackle shanty near his coop:  
next year *kohoutek*—the cockerel—would be tough,  
a banned rival in the pen,  
so a tender meal now for a worthless bird  
was not such a bad idea.

They chose me, the callow great-nephew,  
the executioner for my old uncle  
who, with narrowed sight and doddering hands,  
lived a simple life of cigars, Czech newspapers, and chickens.

My uncle, followed by an Airedale bitch,  
stretched the young cock across a tree stump.  
Sunlight gleamed off the sharpened axe  
I poised high for the strike.

“*Ježíš!*” my uncle cried, at the glancing first blow.  
The damaged bird kicked and writhed,  
nearly escaping the grasp.  
Only my uncle’s urgent eyes  
kept me from turning away: repulsed.

The second cut clean through.  
Dark blood spewed like hot urine,  
spattering my khaki pants and my uncle’s frazzled sweater  
as he threw the bird into a basket.  
The bitch went wild with the blood,  
nipping and howling at the still twitching corpse.

I stood quivering,  
barely able to fumble the decapitation  
onto brown paper for crab bait.  
And my old uncle,  
wiping his glasses on the clean of his sweater,  
nodded approvingly.