

On Falconer
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John Cheever's novel *Falconer* ends with convict Ezekiel Farragut's escape from prison (New York: Knopf, 1977).

"I'm dying, Zeke, I'm dying," said [fellow convict] Chicken Number Two. "You see, Zeke, I ain't afraid of dying at all. I know that sounds lying and when people used to say to me that because they had already tasted death they weren't afraid of death I figured they were talking with no class, no class at all."

The doctor came to check on Chicken. "Call heaven," he pronounced. Veronica and one of the other nurses came in with a canoe-shaped form made of light metal, which contained a long sack. They put Chicken in this and went away.

Farragut unzipped the sack. He put Chicken under the bed and was about to climb into the burial sack when some chance, some luck, some memory led him to take a blade out of his razor before he lay down in the cerements and zipped them over his face. It was very close in there, but the smell of his grave was no more than the plain smell of canvas; the smell of some tent.

The men who came to get him must have worn rubber soles because he didn't hear them come in and didn't know they were there until he felt himself being lifted off the floor and carried. He had never, that he remembered, been carried before. (His long-dead mother must have carried him from place to place, but he could not remember this.) How strange to be carried so late in life and toward nothing that he truly knew, but a chance, something like the afternoon light on high trees.

He felt himself being put down. "Well, where's the hearse?" said the first carrier. "Let's go up to the main building and call Charlie and see where he is."

He was outside the gate or anyway near the gate. By bracing his shoulders and his arms, he checked the stress points in his shroud.

The warp of the canvas was reinforced with rubber. The neck or crown of the shroud was heavy wire. He got the razor blade out of his pocket and began to cut, parallel to the zipper. The blade penetrated the canvas, but slowly. He needed time, but he would not pray for time or pray for anything else. He would settle for the stamina of love and the presence he felt. The blade fell from his fingers onto his shirt and in a terrified and convulsive and clumsy lurch he let the blade slip into the sack. Then, groping for it wildly, he cut his fingers, his trousers and his thigh. Stroking his thigh, he could feel the wetness of blood, but this seemed to happen to someone else. With the blade between his fingers, he went on cutting away at his bonds. Once his knees were free he raised them, ducked his head and shoulders from under the crown and stepped out of his grave.

Farragut walked out of the gates into a nearby street. He could see waves breaking on a white beach and the streets of a village and the trees of a forest. He put one foot in front of another. That was about it. He held his head high, his back straight, and walked along nicely. Rejoice, he thought, rejoice.