

Millennium

Spring 2000

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Suzanne Hoogendoorn

Down

What he told me, when I met him, was this: I can see you. I know where you're from. Listen: I see your mother, standing at the bus stop across from the elementary school, her knees creaking out a beat as she shifts her weight, left to right. It's like a dance you might do to keep warm, but for her it's just a dance to keep moving. The yellow flowers on her dress are dancing, too. If you listen carefully, you can smell the petals falling to the grass, falling from your mother. A few years later, she'll give you that dress--soft from the wash now, but hard from wear--for a date with her boyfriend's son. He'll head straight to the door to pick you up, all combed and gentleman-like in his best jeans, but you'll run out and hop right in the car. You won't let him in. That night you'll rip the dress hopping a fence. A few years after that, you'll wear it to your mother's funeral, and her sisters will cluck and whisper behind you. Later, in private, you'll burn the dress in effigy. You won't remember this bus stop dance that you watched from inside the fifth grade. But you see her from the window, and she's waiting at the same stop, in the wrong direction. She's not going home. She's smoking now; she thinks you don't know about that. Can't she see you watching?

Bitchy Mrs. Burns slams her ruler on the science table, snatching you inside: the slippery blacktop of the table vibrates the air, the bones in your hands. Your neck snaps around and into its dutiful place for a scolding, first thing, first day of school. Your head faces front, but your attention stays outside. Your grades will never improve, just as Mrs. Burns says, because you'll never stop gazing out the window

at ghosts. Soon you'll take up smoking behind the gym, but here in the fifth grade you still twirl the pencil you're sucking on, twirl it on your tongue like a straw stuck in a glass of gray air. You like the taste of lead.

The bus chugs to the stop and steals your dancing mother, leaving a shroud of exhaust where she was standing, and in it you can still see her yellowing face. Only you, only a believer.

What I saw, when I met him, was this: When he was nine years old, his father taught him how to buy groceries. At the 7-11 around the corner, the balding elder Somerville showed the younger how to squeeze the whitebread to pick the freshest loaf, how to pull the newer milk from the back without knocking over the other cartons, how to carry a twelve pack with one finger without ripping the cardboard, or dropping the rest of the groceries. At nine he was not so good at this last thing, but by fifteen he had it down.

That other year, when he was fifteen and no longer ripped the cardboard, and anyway, had given up on the rest of the groceries in favor of leftovers from the twelve pack for lunch, his father took him out to Death Valley to teach him how to drive. The trick, he said, was to never, ever lose control. The only rule. The elder Somerville took the wheel first, careening through the valley, stomping down the dried brush and the few hopeful flowers, doing wheelies and donuts, and even a cream puff. The younger held tight to the sissy bar, but discreetly, and watched every move of hand and foot. His father's moves seemed mapped, and pure nerve, like with a woman: you might see a snake hole or a dusty rock in one light from a ways up the road, but once you get there, sometimes it changes shape, multiplies before your eyes, and you have to rethink your tactics quick-like or else get sucked under, or knocked to the sand.

When it was his turn, the younger Somervelle knew what to do, but he wasn't sure where to go. He headed first for the flattest expanse he could plot. No, the elder said. Over there. He pointed to a stack of sun-smoldered rocks, piled in the steaming sand like jail. The younger complied, and conquered, hand over hand, his feet singing along with the flowering cactus and the dusky shadows, guiding the truck in a reckless dance, tracing circles in the sand, in the sweating sun.

"That's my boy," the elder smiled, as he ripped open the cardboard from the top, and handed the younger the next test, easily mastered-drinking from a longneck while shifting the howling gears of the sandbagged pickup. Just when he had it down, the younger Somervelle turned sharp to miss a rabbit, and the right front tire hit a soft spot of loose ground. The truck slid only a few inches before he gained control, just enough to tip a few sips from his bottle onto his jeans, but he was sure his father didn't notice. He believed he was doing all right.

What we did, when we met, was this: I ground out my cigarette on the callused flesh of his tattooed hand. He licked my eyelashes. I rode tandem with him out into the flowering yellow sand, out where only two wheels tied us to the ground, out farther than death. He squeezed aloe on the tender inside of my ankle, where I burned it on the exhaust pipe of his bike. I traced his scars with my tongue. He rode me out to the ocean, to the salt spray I had long smelled but never seen. He held me while I shook my patient mother into the water, watched with me as she landed dancing on the waves, watched with me as she whirled away. Back at the campfire, I took his hand in mine, looked straight down into his eyes, all the way down to the brown of the earth, where I could see the rocks of the valley and his father fifteen years

back, and I laughed; he didn't flinch.

I did not do this to impress you.

What I said, when I met him was this: Dance with me here on the shore. Listen to the ghost waves murmur invitation, listen to the wind scrape the salty grass with sand. Listen to me.

Hunter Robertson

POP

He's standing here, over me. This dark shape that moves in front of my Winnie the Pooh nightlight. It's like that eclipse we saw at school the other week. There is this noise, maybe the front door, and he disappears into the darkness near my closet.

"Martin?" Momma calls.

He reappears in the door and down the hall. His footsteps clattering against the wood.

"Where the hell have you been?" I hear him yell.

"I told you I had a Woman's Club meeting tonight," Momma says.

"Yeah," there is another noise, glass breaking or something. "Who are you fucking?"

"What? You drunk?"

"You heard me."

"Look, I'm going to bed." Momma's shoes click on the wood but it stops. "Stop it," she says.

"Look here, I know you've been fucking around on me."

"Don't turn this shit on me," Momma says.

Pop, I hear a slap.

Momma clicks again. She's getting closer. I pull my blue blanket close and stare into the darkness looking for a monster. I see her for a minute, in the light of the hall. Beautiful. She shuts my door halfway. He yells, "Is that kid even mine?"

"Stop it," Momma says.

"Well, is he?"

"Get out."

"This is my house," he says.

"You wouldn't have anything if I didn't put you through--"

"You're not gonna get my house or my money, bitch."

"Enough. All right. Enough," Momma says, "I can't handle this redneck shit."

"Get out," Momma says. There's this creak and a slam. The door, I think. Maybe he's gone. I can hear Momma crying.

The next week, we're at Meema's like usual. I'm watching Transformers and Pro Wrestling This Week. The phone rings. Momma picks it up. She doesn't say much besides, "Oh, thank you." She hangs up and dials. "...Hello, this is Josephine Robertson. My husband, Martin," she pauses and lowers her voice, "Well, the neighbors called and said that he's breaking into my house."

Then I don't hear anything but Autobots and Decepticons. I change the channel and the crowd cheers when "The Boogie Woogie Man" Jimmy Valiant drops an elbow right in the face of Abdullah the Butcher.

"What? Why? Why not?" Click. She hangs up.

Momma walks into the kitchen. She doesn't click on the linoleum as much. I pretend to keep on watching TV, but I hear her tell Meema. Meema cusses the cops and him. Momma asks if we can stay here for a few weeks, at least until the divorce is done. Weeks. Months. Three years. The last meal we eat at Meema's is the Monday night usual: mashed potatoes, Shake and Bake pork chops and ice tea. Christmas break's tomorrow, my last day here.

After I get out of school, we get out of the car and we're back at our old house. The grass is tall. Tall enough to wave hello as we walk up to the front door, but he's gone.

"Damn renters," Momma says, "we need to cut the grass." The trees don't have any leaves. The house smells weird, stale. There are all these boxes. They look like walls, or toy walls. Momma clicks again down the hall and goes in the bathroom. I go into the living room. My picture isn't up above the mantle like it used to be. It's down on the floor, face up. I feel weird in my stomach. The toilet flushes and Momma clicks. She goes and picks up the picture of me with my mushroom haircut and sits it up on the mantle.

I get all the presents for Christmas. I mean everything. All this candy. All these toys. HeMan. G.I. Joe. Transformers. A doll of Ponch from C.H.i.P. s. "I wanted to get you the Dukes of Hazzard ones, but they were out, so I had to get that," she says. I get this dog. I call her Fluffy. Momma says she's a Shit Zoo, instead of the other way you call it.

By October, the toys are buried, lost or stomped into the driveway dirt. Fluffy got matted, knotty hair, missing teeth and is starving. All I want to do is watch wrestling. Momma takes me to the Coliseum almost every other Friday to see the matches. Dusty Rhodes and Ric Flair. Magnum T.A. and Tully Blanchard. My favorite is "The Boogie Woogie Man." He's always fighting Abdullah the Butcher. The place stinks of beer and smoke and these men in tight jeans with mudflap haircuts. As we go to our seats, these guys wearing dingy gray sleeveless shirts and Confederate Battle Flag hats ask Momma, "Hey darling, why don't you come over here and slob my knob," or "Hey momma, what size underwear you got on?" It makes me mad--I don't know what it means, but it reminds me of him. Momma clicks on the concrete and tries to make all proper like she doesn't hear. She doesn't say anything about it, so I don't either. But I stare and stare. Instead of our seats, we go to the t-shirt booth and she gets me a Nikita Koloff shirt.

We can't go sometimes. Momma's got to work. She

tries to make it up to me. More Transformers. More G.I. Joe. Some get buried next to Fluffy in the back yard. Some get put in a box under my bed, broken. Momma pulls out my blue disco looking blanket and lays it out on the floor. She says we should wrestle. Me and her. She's pretty big and I pretend she's Abdullah. She doesn't smell like the Coliseum, just of Adorn hairspray and dry yellow calluses. I'm "The Boogie Man." Pop, one in her stomach and we stop.

"No son, not that way. Not like that," Momma says. "We're not those kind of people."

I keep the disco blanket with me, even when I move to Richmond to go to college. I meet this girl there, Aisha, a few years later. It's right after Meema dies. She kind of looks like that Ananda girl on BET. Well, now she's on MTV, but you know. Almond eyes. Soft lips. Brown skin. We sit outside of the Education Building after class in the afternoon. She giggles when I pull close to her. She smells like hemp oil and cocoa butter, unlike Momma. For Easter I give her this ring of my Papa's I got when Meema died. He made it, right before he killed himself Cut it from the same steel that he used to make that shotgun he did it with. That happened three months before I was born. I ask Aisha to marry me with that ring. She says yes as she's lying on her brother's bed. I put the huge steel ring on her finger. We don't tell anyone. We both still have a year or so left in school. I meet the rest of her family and they're all real cool. I go home and tell Momma all about her. She likes it up until I tell her one thing. "One thing," I say. "She's black."

Momma bitches me out and I call Aisha and tell her. Aisha says she still wants to meet Momma, but I try to bring her around to my place only when I know Momma won't swing through. Like tonight, I spread the blue disco blanket

out and wrestle Aisha down, unbutton her shirt and lick her ears. I can taste the hemp oil from her hair. I touch her breasts and rub my shaved head across her stomach. The boogie man, the woogie man. There's this noise, a knock at the door. We get up, she halfway buttons her shirt and I see who's at the door. It's Momma. She walks in and stops when she sees Aisha's white shirt halfway buttoned and her hair messed up, I introduce them. My stomach feels weird again. Momma looks sad, says hello, but doesn't make any eye contact really. Aisha tries to shake her hand but Momma reaches for the door and mutters something as she leaves. Aisha stays.

I don't see Momma again for like six months. Or that's what I tell Aisha and what Momma tells the family. I talk to Momma about once a week. Tell her when Aisha and I got married. But I don't tell her that Aisha's pregnant. Not yet, at least. Momma ain't happy, but she still throws me money for cutting her grass every week. I take a break from her half-cut grass and go inside our old house. The fresh cut lawn follows me on my shoes. Momma's fixed me some Crystal Light. That's when I ask her, "Where did my dad start to fuck up?"

She doesn't say anything.

"I just wanna know," I say.

Momma looks down at the beige rug and then at my picture on the mantle.

"You know, Aisha's pregnant," I say.

She closes her eyes and puts down the glass on the carpet. I can smell the grass.

"What?" Momma asks.

"She's pregnant," I say. "If it's a boy, we want to name him after Papa. If it's a girl--"

Momma starts crying, but she's trying to hold it in.

"What?" I yell. "What?"

"I just don't want you to have a bad life," she says. She's still crying, breathing heavy now.

"Forget this shit," I say and put down the Crystal Light on the mantle, in front of the picture of me with the mushroom haircut.

Months go by, it's summer, but it seems like the next thing I know, my aunt calls me up and tells me Momma had a heart attack and died. Unpredictable, just like that. I could also tell you how my aunt dies six months later, but you probably wouldn't care. I'm not even sure I do.

Anyway, I put on my stained green boots and take Aisha with me and we go to Momma's house. No one's there. The trees are full. The grass still half cut. She died trying to finish it, finish what I started, what he started. That noise, the door, it creaks as we go in. Aisha goes and checks out my mushroom haircut picture above the mantle. I go into my old room. The Winnie the Pooh lamp is still there, in a box under the bed beside my half destroyed toys. The same old clicking in the hall. I dust off the Pooh lamp, put it together on this table and plug it in. Aisha's there at the door, a dark shape and not a dark shape. She comes over to the bed, where I'm sitting, and I put my head to her stomach. She feels warm, smells of cocoa butter, hemp and something else. She rubs my head. I pull her tight. Aisha clicking. She reaches over to the Pooh lamp and clicks it on. Pop. The light blows and it's like an empty house again. I close my eyes and listen. The boogie man, the woogie man. Catch as catch can.

Joseph Cates

Nebraska, While You Slept

For you the shade, asleep in the car.
I'll take this patch of sun soak behind
the bar. For a quick bite of whiskey.
Ogallala in January. Nothing
but opaque blue sky. What had lured us
from the road, which sign had pulled us
here "Pony Express Museum" or "Sod House
On Display"? A plaque commemorating
Those who had made what homes they could
From bricks of grass and mud asks
"Were they richer for having had less?
Were they wiser for having known less?"
with uncertain irony. To someone in Denver
I send the apologies I cannot speak
to make right. This morning, my knees
frozen to the dashboard,
waking to wonder at the sleeping body's
persistence in fooling the mind;
the lengths we go to forget
what has turned us numb. Soon
you will wake, stretch a long arm and wave
me back into the car. Will we find
peace for a night driving fast into What Cheer
or Pleasureville? The restless bottle
on the dashboard. The winter stars
tumbling down upon the plains.

Joseph Cates

Simple Pictures in the Night Sky

The night was like one from earlier in his life
when he imagined the clouds
were Spanish galleons
sailing over the Everglades, the sawgrass
and palmettos samba-ed
in the salt wind
as the silhouette of a syphilitic pirate
slid down the belly
of the pregnant moon--
the slingshot familiar in his fingers
as the grove swirled
around his head
smearing inky branches into the twilight.
He appears older now, lying back
against the windshield of his pickup
head lolling side to side
as if the tide had a hold of him; memory
can come on like sea-sickness.
He can read the nautical
maps, the sextant and compass,
but out away from the city it seems impossible
to draw simple pictures in the night sky.
A car engine rolls away over the Seven-Mile bridge,
across time, connecting the Keys
like the dots of some celestial
plan arching over
the sky all the way back to Gibraltar.
He can almost feel himself
falling away
from the earth. And for moment
he looks just capable
of flight.

Bleach Stains

Blue sheets where we danced
barefooted now folded neatly, bleach stains
but soft. We found a New World like those before
Columbus under those sheets, dark and electrifying.
Games we played like children making forts and sang,
and Santa Fe was similar but you were
on your period always on your period
those last months, folded neatly and bleach stains,

those sheets blue, now tucked neatly into a dresser drawer
in an attic. We turned off overheard lights
but street lamps still prove the blueness of the unfolded
soft sheets, "My eyes are hazel,"
you told me once in soft breath. But I still

remember the blue sheets, azure specifically
folded neatly, now bleach stains but soft
like the first T-shirt you pulled over your
amber hair the moment you first showed
breasts, shirt more powder than azure but nipples
red, I remember like the sheets, stained in Santa Fe.
"The red sheets of Santa Fe," we mused down Interstate
40 shifting slowly into fifth gear in the rusted-out Toyota.
And we slept our last night on bleach stained, soft
unfolded blue sheets under the guise of growing
old together.

Desire

Midnight. White light pushes into the room as the door swings quietly open. Claire wonders if she is having a visitation, the Virgin Mary descending at last to lift her out of the bed high and into the clouds. She tightens her body, waits for the light to penetrate her, ignite.

"Claire honey...you awake? I thought you might be having trouble sleeping again." The voice is barely a whisper.

But, it's not Mary, not Jesus or the host of angels. Claire turns toward the voice, toward the sound of rubber soles shuffling into the room. It's only night Nurse, the one assigned to Claire's ward. Claire watches her sway slowly towards the bed, balancing a tray against her large body.

"Claire...are you awake?" Her lips brush against Claire's ear. She smells Nurse's warm breath against her cheek, breath laced with coffee. "These will help you sleep...."

Claire nods as Nurse sets the tray down beside her. She hands Claire a plastic cup holding two tiny pills, one white, one red. Obediently, Claire swallows them along with a sip of orange drink. Tang, she thinks.

"Sweetie, let me check your IV." Nurse works her fingers down the clear tubing. Claire turns to stare at the shadows stretching up and down the opposite wall. Nurse seems massive to her, unidentifiable, like a large shaggy beast moving in the dark. Claire shivers, feeling the chemicals enter her, as Nurse squeezes the bag between her knotted fingers. She pulls at the tubing a second time. The movement is precise, efficient.

Claire feels Nurse take her arm between her ponderous hands and knead slowly, deliberately, around the needle. An image of warm bread dough comes to Claire, powdered and sour with the smell of milk.

Finishing her work, Nurse strokes Claire's forehead and turns toward the lit hallway. Claire watches her. If she could speak to Nurse, she knows she would plead with her to stay, to touch her forehead again with her massive misshapen hands. But, she is tired now...terribly tired, already easing into dreams.

"Claire, one last thing, I...I brought you something. I hope you don't mind. I thought maybe it might help some.... " Nurse urges a wad of crushed tissue into Claire's outstretched hand.

Alone in the dark, Claire presses the tissue paper to her mouth.. It tastes faintly of cigarettes. She pulls back the tape with her teeth and tongue. Inside is a tiny metal crucifix. So light, though, Claire thinks. She tries to turn it in her palm, but the cross slips away and falls to the floor.

Claire walks barefoot on the cold tile. She leans in darkness against the antiseptic walls and rocks the phone over a bony shoulder.

"Where are you? I thought you were coming...."

On the other side, he is thick-voiced. It is difficult to cut through his words to their meaning.

"I went to have dinner." Ice cubes tinkle in a glass and the sound of laughter, high and filthy, fills her ear. "I didn't know how long they'd keep you. I ran into some friends...."

"I left three messages."

"I haven't had a chance to check my machine." More laughter, plates breaking from behind. Claire hears someone swearing in Italian, something.

"The doctor says I can go home this evening. They're just waiting for the last blood work to come through. They took a lot of blood...." Bruised skin pools inside her bent elbow, black with a soft ridge where the vein rolled over. She fingers it. The vein is like a fat worm throbbing beneath her skin.

"They gave me another IV, saline...for dehydration... just to be safe, I guess."

He breathes. Claire hears the silent condemnation.

"Oh...well, you really should eat more," he says.

She could see him--red lips pressed to the receiver, eyes scanning the room, hungry. Brown fistfuls of hair hanging over opaque eyes, staring like an animal.

"Do you think I should pick you up?" His voice dissolves into the laughter all around him. He is fading. She imagines the light around him dimming.

"No. I think I'm fine now."

"Well, you know...whatever...."

"Okay, I guess I'll see you later. I'd better let you eat...."

In the white room. It is quiet. Claire takes off the rough gown and pulls on her clothes--the jeans and sweater she came in with. Nurse looks away while she does this; they are both uncomfortable. Claire signs the papers thrust at her. The doctor has written something unintelligible across the top and Claire thinks it looks like Latin... Corpus Domini nostri...the Body of our Lord. She doesn't say anything though. Instead, she grins to herself and thinks of her mother kneeling to take communion, her slender neck bent beneath the heavy black veil. A thought comes to Claire...If I die, she will bend her head for me. Just like that.

Claire shoves the release deep into her pocket and walks stiffly through the smooth sliding doors. Raw air meets her as she bends into the night.

Claire's Papaw had loved her, She had seen it, seen it glisten in his eyes every time he swung her high into the summer air. That summer she turned six and he took her fishing at Talley's lake. They went every day. He taught her how to stand spread-legged on the dock and reel in the slimy catfish that lived at the bottom. Papaw would lay them out on the planks and Claire would trace their silver sides with her hands. The looked different in the sunlight. When she finally caught one, Papaw laid it on the dock next to his own. Its gills pumped heavy with the hot Tidewater air. At the end of the day, he took her hand and helped her scale the fish, cut open the soft white belly. He guided her fingers inside and together they pulled out blood-shiny bowels and cut off the silent, open-mouthed head.

Claire sits on the floor of her apartment. She bends her head and rests it on a bony knee. Outside the window, snow piles high along the paint-cracked ledge.

"All I'm saying is that I think we need to take a break for awhile."

Claire rubs the bruise inside her elbow, a full week healed, now yellow. The skin rustles like folded tissue paper.

"Are you there? Claire...."

"I'm here." Her voice sounds waxy. She wants to take a hot shower, stand under the spray and let the water bum through her skin.

"Look, Claire...things haven't been right for awhile. You know that." He breathes thickly on the other side.

Mewy rubs beneath her bent knees; a wet puff rumbles deep in his throat. Claire wipes the saliva off the floor with her palm.

"No, I don't know that and I don't know why you want to end things," she says. The wall feels rigid and cold, like the planks of a forgotten footbridge. She leans forward,

reaches back and touches the grooves of her spine. The knots of bone are familiar, constant. Claire thinks of a dark sky with stars dancing along a string.

"Claire, I didn't want to tell you this...I don't want to hurt you. I still love you...."

The air stretches between them, a spider's thread linking the space between two things.

Outside the snow piles higher and Claire wonders if it could eventually bury the whole building, every building, and the entire world; it would be like the tide rushing in to cover sand castles along the shore.

When she was eight, Claire went to the beach for an entire summer. The entire family on vacation--mother and father, Mamaw and Papaw, even Mars, the arthritic cocker spaniel.

Every morning, alone, she walked down the oat-lined path to the shore and spread a towel on the damp sand. She collected crooked shells in a plastic yellow pall and watched the dolphins swim like flat black triangles against the sky. Slowly, the beach would fill with tourists--over-weight mothers in one-piece bathing suites, lanky teenage boys and girls carrying transistor radios, men in swimsuits that reminded Claire of underpants.

One morning, two girls laid their blanket next to Claire. They turned up the radio and sang, Oh Baby, when I take you in my hands and hold you next to me, I'm gonna love you baby, I'm gonna rock you baby, you're gonna see what it means to be free. Oil glazed their skin peach-colored as they warmed in the sun. Claire could smell them when she turned her head, mango, shampoo and nail polish. One of the girls reached into her bag and pulled out a tube of pink lip-gloss. She rubbed it across her lips and slid them back and forth like Claire's mother did before her father came home.

Claire rolled onto her back and faced the cloudless sky. Her bathing suite clung to her stomach in dark, wet pools. She stared wide-eyed at the sun, watched as white halos gathered above her. Sweat began to collect in her armpits, between her legs. It ran off in salty little rivers that tickled. She spread her arms and legs open wide into a giant x. The sun seemed like a glass ball, throbbing in the waves of heat. Beside her, the girls began to sing.

"If I have to force feed you I will." Claire's mother stares at her. Claire can hear the click of glass beads turning in her mother's nervous hand. She is a small woman, dressed plainly in gray and brown.

Claire pulls her tattered robe tight around her and folds her legs close to her chest. They are sitting on the sofa, the only piece of furniture in Claire's apartment, besides the bed.

"Claire? I'm talking to you."

"No mother, that won't be necessary. It was just a fainting spell that's all. I've been cramming for finals, working too hard. Really...."

"Claire, how many times have I told you? You just don't look pretty this way. Your cheeks are too hollow. You'll age before your time, honey."

Claire reaches out and touches Mewy's smooth fur. He sleeps on, twitching as he moves through dreams.

"Mother, I'm fine."

Silence. "Well, how is school going?"

Claire looks at the calendar hanging on the refrigerator door. She hasn't been in over two weeks.

"Fine mother, don't worry...everything is fine."

"And Jamie? I haven't heard you mention him yet...."

Claire thought about the last two phone calls. "Fine Mother, he's fine too."

"Father Kelly asked about you. He said he'd remember you in mass next week."

Claire listens as her mother continues to finger the beads. She wonders what had ever happened to her own rosary, a present given to her when she made her first communion.

"Mom, I am fine. Tell everybody it's nothing... please...."

"Everyone is worried, thinking about you honey."

What about you mom? She couldn't say it though. Words like that were deadly, disrupting the dead language that Claire and her mother had resigned themselves to. The prayers, the soft-petaled silence, Claire wasn't willing to give this up. She looked out the window instead.

Hail Mary, full of Grace, the Lord is with thee.... Her mother crossed herself as she finished the last Hall Mary. It was a whisper that Claire could follow in her sleep...Glory be to the father, Son and Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

"Everything will be all right Mom." Claire reached for her mother's long fingers. They were always so cool to the touch, like marble.

"I'm your mother Claire, I love you." World without end.

"I know Mom."

World without end. Amen.

At night, when Claire stayed at the trailer, Mamaw let her wear her pajamas to bed. They smelled like powder and lilacs and they were always soft. Mamaw would wash them so often that the flannel felt like air against Claire's skin. After her bath in the iron red water, Mamaw would brush out Claire's long straight hair and then braid it into two shiny plaits. She would help Claire into the pajamas, roll up

the arms and legs, and tell her that each plastic white button was a tiny pearl., straight from the sea.

Claire slept on a foam palette in Mamaw and Papaw's bedroom, by Mamaw's side of the bed. Mamaw would dangle her thin arm down beside her and rub her eyebrows until she fell asleep.

Early gray morning. Claire stands in front of the full-length mirror, her skin nubbly with goosebumps in the frigid air. It feels good though, she thinks, to stand naked like this, to feel the winter morning slip in and curl around her body. She touches her hips, presses hands deep into the caverns that lie between belly and bone. She caresses each rib, counting, lingering between each indentation. Her palms meet the concave breastbone and hesitate. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death... she rolls the words in her mouth, lingering on the familiar taste of each.

When Claire stayed over, Mamaw always made a big dinner. Even if Claire stayed for a week, she could always count on eating something new or elaborate every night. Sometimes she had a steak, tender and juicy with the insides just a little bit pink and fat charred slightly around the edges. There would be mashed potatoes whipped up with cream and spoonbread dripping runny pools of glistening hot butter. Or, she might have chicken and dumplings floating in pale yellow broth. Each time Claire emptied her plate, Mamaw would fill it again and smile and say how happy it made her to see Claire eat. For dessert, they had pineapple upside-down cake crusted with brown sugar and maraschino cherries.

Papaw would wink a knotted eye as he passed her the

cake or biscuits or gravy. "You'd better be careful, that stuff will put hair on your chest. Just look at me."

Claire pulls the blankets across her chest and wraps her hair around her neck for warmth. She doesn't want to leave the bed, leave the warm hollow carved in the shape of her body. Mewy is insistent though. He pushes his portly body into bed and licks her eyelashes, her eyebrows, her chin. Claire ignores him and burrows down deeper beneath the comforter. Mewy moves to her stomach and starts to kneed his paws deep into the blanket. He gurgles up a raspy purr and starts to dribble spit all over the bed.

"Okay, okay..." Claire sits up stiffly and takes in a sharp breath of air. She imagines ten thousand microscopic dustmites crawling down her throat. Drab light the color of ashes seeps in through the closed blinds. Claire watches the dust disseminate as it passes through each beam. Beside her, Mewy rubs his wet chin against her hand.

Outside, it takes Claire half an hour to scrape the webs of crusted ice from her windshield. Mewy watches her from inside the apartment, from his spot against the window. His tail snakes back and forth between the philodendrons as she pulls away.

Inside the A&P, Claire looks for the cat food aisle. Florescent-lit groceries line every shelf and Johnny Cash drifts from the loudspeakers. As she looks down them, Claire thinks the aisles seem like train tracks, razor sharp lines converging somewhere in the future. The store is crowded, and Claire remembers that it's Saturday--everyone must have gotten paid on Friday.

As Claire turns down the Juice aisle, a woman in pink foam curlers and a nylon sweatsuit shoulders past her, push-

ing a lopsided cart. The woman leans the bulk of her body against it as the broken wheel screams. A sticky-looking baby with matted hair sits in the seat, chewing absently on a box of macaroni. Claire watches as the child shakes the damp box back and forth like a rattle. The woman moves to the back of the cart and pulls a crumpled envelope and a pen from her pocket. Suddenly, the baby drops the macaroni and it explodes all over the tiled floor. He starts to cry. The foam-curlered woman moves quickly around the cart and slaps him on the head. "You want something to cry about?"

Claire turns sharply and makes her way to the crowded checkout lines. In front of her, an old man with a case of beer stamps the snow from his boots.

"So, where are you?" Claire juggles the receiver to her left shoulder, takes a drink of coffee. Her father's voice is removed, a searchlight sweeping through static.

"Wyoming...Laramie. I'm delivering in Cheyenne tonight."

Claire can see the sweeping plains and tall bending grass. So much sky...

"How's the truck doing? Running okay?"

"Seems all right, had some rough going around Douglas. The snow's so thick out here... I'd hate to get stuck somewhere. Could last for maybe a week, two at most."

"You haven't seen anybody stuck though, have you?"

"Just a few empty cars. Slim called me over the radio last Night and told me the State police had rescued some kids out on 87. Said one of them had frostbite so bad that some of his fingers had broke right off Hold on a minute...."

Claire hears the groaning shift of gears. Wyoming in snow, blue white.

"What about you? You okay? You need me to send you a little pocket money?"

Claire remembers that when she was ten, when he left for the last time, she'd slipped her sock full of saved pennies into his suitcase.

"No Pop, I'm...."

"Hold on Baby, I'm running into a low patch here...."

Between them, the air thickens with interference and breaks. Claire pushes her ear harder into the receiver. She can't bear him though. She counts, one-one thousand, two-one thousand...she holds her breath.

"You still there? Claire?" His voice ebbs back to her, carried by the static, fades and dissolves again.

"Pop? Poppa...I can't hear you." Her voice echoes through the hollow line. "Poppa....," then it goes dead.

That night Claire dreams. Long shapes seem. to reach toward her, to pull at her arms and legs. In the dream, Claire screams, but they won't stop, they won't stop scraping her skin with their bony hands. Her skin shreds as they examine her, explore the surface of her body. They push her high into black sky and under silent water, into a narrow passage of yellow-colored blood.

Claire opens the door when she sees David standing in the hallway, his hand in his hair.

"Claire, God Claire...you won't answer the phone. I didn't know how else to reach you." His face is red from the cold, snow wets his coat.

Claire looks at him standing in the dim red light. She hates the hallway. One day she would change the bulb, change it to glaring white, she thinks.

"Claire?" His voice startles her.

"What are you doing here? It's late...besides, I thought you wanted to take a break or something...." She is amazed at how calm her voice sounds, icy and remote. He flinches at the sound of it.

"I've been thinking...Claire, I'm sorry...I think I made a big mistake."

She notices that he has snow in his hair. Claire restrains the impulse to brush it away for him. She wraps her arms around her waist instead.

"Hey," he says.

"I don't know David," She looks over his shoulder down the long, narrow hall. I don't know anything anymore." Her voice is a whisper. She looks down at Mewy circling tight around her feet.

He bends down and rubs the cat in long strokes that make Mewy's fur snap with electricity. Claire closes her eyes as he looks up.

"Claire, please...please let me in... "

She stands back as he steps into the apartment. "I don't know anymore...," she repeats. In his eyes, she thinks she can see her reflection, briefly, a miniature version of herself moving backwards.

"Claire," he steps forward and brushes the back of her hand with his own, "I can't do this. I miss you...," His voice trails away. Staticy.

Claire bends her head. She feels the air moving around them, through them. Nothing...say nothing, she thinks. It would be so easy to let him into her again, into the space surrounding her.

"Look at me," she says, "look how ugly...Don't look at how ugly...."

He takes her fingertips in his hand. "We need sleep Claire. Let's go to sleep...."

One autumn morning, Claire stayed home from school. She hadn't felt well the night before. "Let her stay home," Papaw had said to Mamaw as he winked at Claire over his

plate of beans and ham. "Second-grade can survive without her for one day." That night, after dinner, she'd slept in the bed between them, tucked into the bend of Mamaw's elbow.

When she awoke, Claire was alone in their bed. Heavy light warmed her face. She turned on her side and burrowed deep into the pillows. On the nightstand beside her, the electric clock hummed. Claire watched as the block red numbers turned over, one after another. She could count them now; she was good at counting.

She thought she must have fallen asleep again. When she cracked open her eyes, she saw her Papaw's face close to her own, watching over her. He hadn't shaved; she could see the rough black and gray beard speckling his face, thick under his nose and across his chin. He smelled good to her, like bourbon and corncakes. She closed her eyes. There was plenty of room for them to both sleep in the bed.

Claire felt his hand on her back, rubbing in slow circles. She thought she might fall asleep again.

His hand moved around her shoulders. He pulled her in closer to his chest. Claire tucked herself into his arms and drifted.

Then it came over her. Pain--black and red made her eyes fly open and she felt her belly rip. She thought, I'm sick...where is Mamaw? She must be sick. Papaw was behind her. She said his name. She was on fire. She felt the pain sharpen, felt it break over her in waves. Mamaw's pajamas were around her knees. Claire tried to roll, to move, the pain was in the bed. She wasn't sure what Papaw was doing. But his hands held her belly and her neck, and she couldn't breathe because the air wasn't air anymore... it was mud, thick and hot. She clawed the sheets.

Papaw held her neck back. The bird, remember the bird that fell on the grass, tiny neck tangled behind it? Don't touch, he said, it may have a disease...there were stars. The stars would come and go, flash, fade.

Claire refocused her vision. There were tiny grains in the fake wood walls, up and down, spiders running up and down. Then she was floating in darkness. Under the lake, no sound, only fish swimming by in the silver light. Everything above her rippled bright, but here, at the bottom of the lake, it was black and she went to it.

Afterwards, Papaw helped her run a bath. He changed the sheets while she soaked and told her through the cracked door just how much he loved her. "It's okay...", he said. Later, he guided her hand as they cut paper-dolls from the Sears catalog.

That same night, Claire, Mamaw and Papaw went to a deer skinning. Papaw and his friends had caught fourteen deer with the spotlights that they kept in their trucks. Mamaw told Claire that she would bake a venison roast with potatoes, carrots and pearl onions.

They drove along the back roads farther and farther into the country night. Claire could hear the cicada singing and she thought about the empty shell that lined her dresser at home. Finally, Papaw parked the truck and they all walked into the woods together. Claire could hear far-off voices laughing.

The clearing was illuminated by fire. Several trash cans lined its grassy edges and flames reached out of them towards the stars. Men stood around drinking from thick glass bottles. When they saw Papaw, they yelled to him. Claire watched as he turned up the bottle that one of the men offered him.

"Look Claire." Mamaw held her hand as she pointed to the trees in the clearing. "Your Papaw killed the most of them."

Claire focused on the tree closest to her. Hanging upside-down by its hind legs was a large deer. A long, jagged

cut that started between its back legs ran the length of its stomach, a blue-white hollow space like a giant oily shell. The deer had been gutted. Blood matted the white fur on either side of the divided flesh. Claire watched as the flames of a nearby fire cast its light across the animal's body. Then she looked beyond the tree.

There were six more deer, slit from tall to head, hanging in a circle around her, like things from history and myth. Their heads dragged the ground. Claire saw that their tongues had fallen from their open mouths. They seemed to stare at her with eyes that shifted in the firelight. They seemed alive, even though their bodies had been sliced open and their insides lay piled beside them. Claire knew that they could see her. They could see everything--what had been and what would be, forever.

David sleeps curled deep into Claire's body. Claire shivers as the air closes in around her. In her sleep, the dream returns. Fur-lined throats open to the sky. But this time they breathe; the deer are alive. They breathe through their open throats. Their sides pump in and out, their pelts flutter caramel brown in the night. They lie in the tall grass and breathe. Around them, the purple wind gathers up frozen molecules, air and ice and snow. In the dream, Claire moves among the deer. They smell like earth after rain, after it's been turned. The deer multiply, growing like mushrooms around her feet. Claire stoops low and caresses a velvet mound, curls her fingers inside the open throat and watches as the blood rises around her into the sky...underwater. She opens her mouth to laugh, calls out a name, but no one answers.

Rashard J. Wright

Get Money

I died yesterday being black,
inside, strapped to the chrome
patty-wagon bench, exhausted
In the calves, heated from the
swift blows I took to the back
and shoulder, that black stick,
and bruises they were, crying
for the rewind button on the
remote control, since I live
a movie.

I was starring in...

The film with the educated
theme, the community will stay
corrupt, poverty pockets in dense
cities. I probably should clean
up...my Lexus GS 300, detail
the inside...of the cell that awaits
the reason for baby
daddies, the paper chase, crowded
prisons, a cellular phone and
pager stereotype...

Of that Mandingo warrior that provided...

An emptied household trash barrel,
professional shoes shines, janitorial
specialties, then again, you liked

your hamburger, didn't you?
I'll be back on the block in two
hours. I ran out of plausible
options, so I live for today,
and get money.

Rashard J. Wright

Tidewater Surveillance

Jake is scarred up from too many
run-ins with my fellas, so
he won't be subtle, and I know
my capability of startling his adrenaline
I'm fast enough to bend him over with fatigue.
Jake plays a coyote, but catching a black man
has never been easy, especially on foot
The room was dark ... from

Jake's projector screen slides
on community awareness, neighborhood
watch updates through officer efforts ... blending
my skin to flashbacks of camouflaged danger
for him on the urban streets, the fellas...but
I'm listening to his lecture now and

Jake is attempting to convince
me he ain't corrupt. A retrieval game came
about because I scare him and fear is
in his face. I am stiff a menace from his standpoint
so the lecture will be swayed. I move from
side to side in the chair and keep the black shiny shoe
heels rocking like uneven platforms,
testing Jake's heart rate.

Jake's assistant in the back of the lecture hall pushed
the silent alarm, as my hand went into my suit
pants, reporting that the chief was in trouble
and local Jakes are deployed from twenty counties around

to be unlawful in their uniforms, and test out
brand new billy-clubs...a dispatch to Pembroke
and Nickerson, an alleged group
of young seven thirties, not far
from the Hampton City Jail,
still running from this Jake.

Game, Set, Match

"Out," yelled Jerry from beyond the net on the other side of the court. Peter saw him bend down to pull his sock halfway up his shin and rub scuff marks off his shoe while waiting for Peter to stand. He was on the court, falling after reaching for Jerry's powerful forehand. Peter volleyed it but missed the point by two or three inches. Tennis, he thought was a game of finesse and precision but maybe he had lost touch.

"Double match point," Jerry reassured Peter.

But maybe it wasn't his game, though a feeling of competitiveness overcame him. The same feeling he felt when he won the state championship in high school many years ago. He could come back.

Peter began bouncing the yellow tennis ball on the green court, inching his sneaker parallel to the white line. Trying to catch his breath, he looked up and saw through the fence, a handsome, dark-haired boy waiting to play. The boy spun a racket on his fingertip like the world on its axis. Another boy appeared from behind a water fountain, wiping his lips on the back of his hand. He said something into the ear of the dark-haired boy, causing him to keel over laughing, dropping his racket. Peter saw their bright eyes, and noticed, for the first time when he looked toward the sky, that the clouds were blanketing the sun.

Reaching back, his racket almost touching the court, Peter threw his weight into the ball. A grunt came from his mouth. The ball landed in the service court and Jerry returned it with a backhand. It was a winner. Peter had no chance to return the well-placed ball. His step was slow.

"Game. Set. Match," said Jerry as he ran to the net

with the enthusiasm of a Wimbledon champion to meet Peter who walked, slowly to the net, wiping the sweat from his flushed, damp forehead.

"I've never beaten you," Jerry smiled, trying to contain his excitement, reveling in his triumph instead, through his eyes.

"Congratulations," Peter said.

The clouds moved slowly and an opening exposed the sun for a moment. The shadows on the court jumped. As Peter and Jerry walked toward their bags, they picked up loose tennis balls. Peter looked for the dark-haired boy, seeing him as the boy lifted his racket bag. Jerry placed his hand on Peter's shoulder while they reached for their bags.

"Don't worry Peter," he said. "It was your first match since your fall."

"Maybe I still haven't finished falling," Peter said. "Maybe I never will stop falling."

His knee hurt and there was pain in his lower back. Peter never felt a pain in his body before he fell down those steep, slippery steps that led to the attic. He had fallen on his fiftieth birthday, spending the celebratory night in the emergency room. "What a birthday present," he confided to his wife. Peter had broken his femur and the cast he wore for eight weeks fit tightly around his damaged thigh. Bed ridden, he gained twenty pounds, though he knew that wasn't the reason why he had lost today.

The boys came through the gate and pulled their rackets out of their bags, leaning them against the fence, simultaneously stretching at the hips and extending their arms above their heads.

Peter was still trying to catch his breath, wiping down his face and under arms where he felt another ache. Jerry maintained a smile. They picked up their bags and approached the gate. The dark-haired boy caught Peter's eye and smiled at him.

"You play well, " he said. "Do you play her often?"

Peter laughed to himself and shoved his Slazenger deeper into his worn out bag.

"I used to play well," Peter said, smiling at the boy, pulling at his black, now graying mustache. "But after today, I don't know if I will be playing again."

Jerry pulled a pack of filters out of his bag, shaking his head as he lit. He patted Peter on the back.

"He used to play here quite often," Jerry said, pausing to exhale. "He used to be quite good."

The boy smiled at Peter again, and ran toward the green boxes surrounded by white lines. As Peter walked through the gate, leaving the court, the clouds moved away from the sun. The sky brightened. The shadows disappeared.

Peter walked to Jerry's car and turned to look again at the dark-haired boy practice his ground strokes. The fluidity of the two-hand backhand and the certainty with which the dark-haired boy approached the net was familiar. He hit every ball inside the white lines, never missing. He kept the other boy running, from side to side, up and back.

Jerry shut the car door and fired the engine, revving it a few times.

"Let's go Peter," he said.

Peter waited a few minutes more, watching the dark-haired boy prepare to serve. He heard him yell, "Ad In." Peter smiled at the boy who was running toward the net when he closed his car door. The boy never saw Peter's face as the car drove away. All he saw was the yellow ball meet the head of his racket, hitting it inside the green box, the white lines, one maybe two inches; a place too distant to hit, yet there it was, already diminishing and distant.

Larry Williams

Story with Pictures

I carried a camera with me everywhere in high school. A clunky black Minolta mom gave me for Christmas in '85. She was with Jimmy then and I remember their friends rolling in before dinner already lit, and then hitchhiking to the mall when it opened.

It was a year before I ever pulled the camera out of the box. I guess I was fifteen or sixteen and suddenly decided to tell a story, or keep a journal with pictures. Some visual record. Verification of life happening. That it's not all just some misfiring in the brain.

I was a nervous kid, sure, and photography may have been a crutch at that age, a nervous habit, some mask I could put up, buttons and rings to keep my hands busy. I don't know. Whatever it was didn't last a year but I ended up with more pictures than I ever cared to see. On the bed, the dresser, the floor, growing up the walls, over the windows. When I stopped taking photographs I thumbed through the couple hundred that were developed and threw most of them out. I saved a small pile, buried them in a trunk at the foot of my bed with the camera and left it all there until Cecil and I started running scams together down at the car dealership.

I know why I put the photographs and film away but I'm still not sure why I boxed the camera up. My mom died around that time in an automobile accident and I didn't have to work for a few years. Her house sold quickly and the money from that plus the insurance money afforded me a dangerous amount of free time. I stopped working. Forgot about photography. After that night on the road when mom

died, I can't remember taking any pictures. I remember going home to an empty house that night. I remember stacks of pictures and almost a bag full of film still waiting to be developed. I remember sweeping all of it into this drab green box.

Cecil had been selling cars for a year when the scheming started. Over beers one night Cecil talked about the "feeding frenzy" at the showroom. How the competition between salesmen was bordering on violent. How one of the other salesmen had strung fishing line across base of the doorway to Cecil's office (twisting Cecil's knee and putting him out of work for three days) and how another had locked him in the bathroom during a sale closing. By the end of the night I was hooked. I missed the predictability of office work. Melodramas, rivalries, verbal clubbings. At that point I needed the kind of jumpstart only a really good enemy can give you and I told Cecil that I'd help him.

It was more schemes than scams when we started. I gently pushed customers in Cecil's direction by hanging around the showroom and talking it up on a cell phone, for example, about the quality of the deal and dealer. "No, Dad, it's Cecil," I'd say, "from high school." I was pretty good at it from the start. It was a little like flirting. The subtle announcement of presence. The indifferent allure. The conquest.

I spied on a few of the other car lots, too. Watched to see who was really shopping. What they were looking for. Observing was the most important part of my success and it felt, at the time, like the only job I was capable of doing well.

The Turnston Mercury showroom was a glass horseshoe in the middle of an industrial park just north of Gate 5. Most of the traffic from the amphibious base exited out of Gate 5 so it was easy for me to sit across the street in Hardee's in the mornings and wait for a good northern flow. Taxicabs were a good bet, too and Cecil paid a hundred for

any effort leading to a sale. It was barely work, more of an acting gig where I made my own hours and worked six to maybe eight days a month. I didn't really care about the money. It was an appointment. Somewhere to be. Then Cecil made some friends in the Navy and decided that he wanted me on the base when the boats emptied. Sailors back from a tour of duty were always loaded down with money but it was the first time Cecil wanted me so involved and I didn't think it necessary. I had enough money.

"Bring that camera out with you and pick up this press pass before you go down" Cecil's new friends gave him the pass and tour schedules in exchange for discounts and fair deals on maintenance. Cecil was sure it would pay off.

"Look for the ones without families," he said. "You know the type. Dim and wide-eyed."

"I really don't think it's necessary, C."

"None of this is necessary, buddy."

"We're doing fine as is," I said, "I'm not a con man, for Christ's sake."

"Just pretend you're a reporter, John," he said, "it's easy work. You take a few pictures, say you're from the Dispatch, needle 'em a little. Drop a word or two--"

"You're becoming a sociopath."

"There's no need for name-calling, John," he tried to sound at ease but there was a tremor of intensity and insistence in his voice. "And you, you don't have to do it, you know."

"Yeah, yeah." I set the receiver down and pulled the trunk out of the closet. I inspected the camera, left the pictures alone. I thought about that night on the road, I heard the sound of it again, and when I closed my eyes I saw the flash of lights. I looped the neckstrap around in a familiar way and left the house.

I was late arriving. An apple-faced soldier waved me through the gate and I drove slowly down the thin roads that

led to the dock, by white box buildings and short green grass. I parked the gray Celica in between two proud parents of honor roll students and dragged myself down to the water. The sun cast a sharp light on that morning and I stood apart from the crowd of families that waited for young husbands and fathers. It was the end of summer and the women all wore white. Some shook flags and cried all over their smiles as men in clean uniforms rushed down a plank and onto a flat field of concrete crammed with linen dresses and perfume.

I wiped the lens of the camera with a small rag and looked out over the scene. I didn't know what kind of ship it was. I didn't know anything about the military, ships or wars. I was the kind of kid who sat by himself in the outfield at baseball practice while the rest of the team saluted into the sun and rattled off the names of jets. A nervous kid. A difficult kid. Angry at the fathers who didn't leave their sons.

Whatever it was had giant gun barrels stretching out in threes around a wide pile of gray steel. I watched as the boat spilled with smiling men. I felt like an observer again. In a tee shirt and jeans, uninvited, in the back, quietly crashing the celebration. Preying.

I was riding home with a friend on the night my mom died. When I was out on the water that day, in a mob of families, it rushed back on me again but clearly this time, as if the image had finally freed itself from something murky.

It was after one in the morning when it happened, and the roads were empty. We noticed the car from pretty far back using all three lanes at once. I wasn't sure until we were close. But it was mom. The red Volkswagon convertible. She was drunk.

Kathy blew her horn again and again when we pulled up alongside her. The top was up. She didn't see me. She

couldn't hear us yelling. I leaned out of the window at my chest and screamed. My mom's head was too heavy for her neck and it bobbed as I watched; I was close enough to see her eyes lifting up behind her lids. Her hands were locked on the wheel. She held it just straight enough as the glow of lights grew into a crowded intersection. I grabbed for anything in Kathy's car that I could throw, waving my hands and yelling.

"I can't go any faster, John," Kathy shouted, but the words came to me calmly. I could see what was happening. We followed her fast into three full lanes of parked cars. The light was red. She didn't slow. Her head dipped. Kathy pulled at my belt and stood on the brakes. It sounded like steel beams had been dropped off the roof of a building. The impact glowed white, sparked and everything went red.

That day on the base was the last time I worked with Cecil. I couldn't do it anymore. I went back to the apartment and made out a check for the last two months of my lease. I looked through the photographs a last time, quickly, and stuffed them back into the trunk. I packed bags of clothes and books, wrote a note to the landlord that said I'd be back for the rest. I grabbed the camera, stuffed the note and check into a mailbox and drove straight to the airport.

A couple of years later, on a trip to New York, a friend and I sat on the steps of a brownstone in Manhattan snorting cocaine through a cocktail straw while snow fell heavy around us. It was dark and all the money had dried up, but my brain was humming, playing hopscotch, jumping from one thing to the next.

"So what next?" Mark sniffed again and again, as much from the cold as the coke.

"Porno shop? We could get a taxi."

"No, after New York," he said, "after this." He

spread his arms out around the neighborhood.

"I can't imagine people living here," I looked down the street to that point where everything begins.

"People don't live here," Mark said. He lit a cigarette and jammed a hand back into its glove, rich people live here."

I smiled, "I was rich for a while."

Mark stood up. From my angle he was taller than the line of buildings and I clenched my molars, feeling the band of muscle tighten around my jaw.

"You were never rich," he said and took a cinematic drag, "you just had a lot of money."

"No," I said, "I was rich."

Occasionally Your Thoughts Flock

And cling to your head
Like a weak fly
In your childhood church in the summertime,

While you sit,
Waiting
For the Benediction

To be free from
Your church-starched clothes
And find your way

As fast as your bike can
Past that two-storied yellow house
And then back again,

To maybe catch a glimpse of her
Coming home from church or maybe
On her way to the pool.

So, you ride real slow
Sweeping from gutter to gutter
Peddling backwards

To hear the zipping sound
Of your free-wheel
Crank.
Sweeping
From one side to the other fluidly,

As if this
Was the watercourse way.

Sweeping
Like the stroke
Of a bamboo calligraphy brush;

Waiting
For the two second window,
That chain-like gate
Between the house and the fence,
Where you can see
Her backyard,

Or at least a corner of her white
Patio, the foot
Of a wicker lawn chair
Where she occasionally sits
Sunning, and some grass.

With the right stroke,
Sweeping in the direction of that precious space,
You can see the beginning of her thigh in the sun,
Not knowing...

That you are building that gap

Between her own privacy fence and her yellow house
Onto your own
Oneiric home

And that you'll sweep past that space
For the rest of your life,
And that the sound of free-floating gears
Being spun backwards will remind you

Of who,
At that time,
Was your true and only and
First...

But you begin to remember another

The girl who never spoke to you
And instead
Clung to the boy with acute eczema, and how
You'd race to be the other boy
In the boy-girl-
Boy-girl line of Red Rover, even knowing
That when they called her
You'd be left to...

Realize that my life
Has been a cataloguing
Of postmortem love stories,
And that perhaps
This
Is why I have tried so hard
To kill you my love.

Aynsley Miller

Sugar Hollow Boom Town and the Ghost of Johnny Cooper

Johnny Cooper climbs
from the bowels of mountain
up the narrow shaft towards light,
everyday, emerges filthy and wretching,
his hacking miner's cough echoes in the gorge
for miles, mingles with the calls
of crows flapping their wings and fussing
from the top of a crumbling chimney.

He squints in the light and stumbles
down the hill to the river,
crosses the tracks as the six o'clock passes
Sugar Hollow.

The conductor tells whoever
listens how this used to be a mine town,
some shanties hanging off the side of Whiskey Mountain.
He sounds the whistle for no reason and leans back
listening, as the train rockets
through Johnny and disappears
around the bend.
The conductor shivers, blames it
on the sunless gorge.

Johnny never knows the difference,
stumbles on with music of rapids ringing
in his head, he follows the song like a diviner.
He stands among rocks worn smooth, kicks
off his battered boots and wades

out where the sting of water
should have taken his breath away.

He strips off his clothes and steps
deeper, out where the current pushed
at his tired legs. When the ground falls
away, he dives headfirst. Longs to feel
the numbness,
anything,
but resurfaces
as the snow begins to fall.

The Drowning Moth

The starlight was shining down on them. He looked up into the sky, squinting, catching sight of a shooting star. It seemed to leave a faint trail of astral dust across the black curtain.

"Did you see that?" he asked.

After awhile she turned to him and ran her fingers through his hair.

"Yes," she whispered.

His throat clenched and he began to shudder quietly.

"It's okay," she said kissing him on the cheek. "I've already made a wish for the both of us."

He felt the warmth of her body up against his. Putting his arms around her waist, he hugged her. He needed to feel her close to him.

"Do you think it will do any good now?" he asked.

"Yes," she said softly. "There's always a chance of things not being as definite as they seem."

He couldn't fight it any longer. He began to sob uncontrollably onto her shoulder.

"Please," she whispered, as tears ran from her eyes. "Please don't."

He pulled away and looked at her. Her eyes were shining. She was always beautiful he thought. And she was beautiful now as he touched her face, wiping away the tears with his thumbs as they rolled down her cheeks.

He realized that she was wearing the sweater that he had bought for her last Christmas. She wore it often now because it fit her comfortably. He was always bad at judging he size. It used to make her laugh.

He moved his hands down to her shoulders, rubbing them, sliding down to her arms until her hands connected with his. She looked down, unable to look him in the eye. He reached out and touched her stomach, nestling his hands on her belly through the soft cotton sweater.

"I feel like that moth that got stuck with us in the shower that night", he said.

She looked up at him and whispered, "Those things just want to be in the light a bit too much."

They held each other tightly, both of them needing to feel the warmth of the other's body in the unseasonable coolness. They kissed as the starlight shined down on them.

Will Martin

Gentlemen

Finally Caithleen knew this is what her life
Would always be. Children with old men hoping
For a different life. One that didn't entail hunger
At every meal and underpants dyed
To hide the dirt. Even the gods needed to eat.

The grime on the counter was thick, yet
Hidden under the split gin, soiled napkins,
And Dublin businessmen.
Oily youth playing snooker, smelling of loganberry
Helped to hide the impatience of the room.

Outside, men in tartan trousers
Stood in the rain beneath the streetlights,
Smoking and fondling young women,
Country girls looking for their fathers,
Working men looking for nothing.

These men waved their pound notes
For the next round of whiskey and milk
Hoping that from the bottom of the glass
They would become true gentlemen. Gentlemen,
Instead of bogmen from who knows where. Real men.

Blotting her lips, she noticed a pale man sitting
In the corner complete with whiskey and soda. She
Thought, "Maybe this is it," sighing to herself.
He noticed her, paid his bill, and waved to his invisible
Friends, never letting her out of his sight. The look was all

he needed to know, every time.

"There are no innocent girls anyway," she thought
Hoping to feel better about what was going to happen. He
Looked deep into her frightened eyes and muttered,
"Fish or Chicken" and then, "Don't get pregnant on me."
As if she could stop the course of womanhood.

Good Friday wasn't the same anymore.
She remembered the blue cross-stitch
Above the old mantle that hung
Her mother's favorite maxim:
"Weep and you shall weep alone."

Jessica Myers

Seeing Them

Nickel and dime clang in the coin slot
startling me from philosophy.
Oh Aristotle,
too old for our time.
There you are
in this long, lanky Death
figure, soft eyes
reflecting experiments on life.
I can smell your sour spice.
Taking time for the simple things,
you lift that square, metal door
to enjoy an ice cream bar
in February. The sweet, chocolate shell
numbs the Ups, vanilla melts
on the slope of tongue, refreshing
a loved book, known well in youth,
forgotten with your remorseless
stopwatch ticking.
You notice me watching,
look deep through my eyes,
wondering if I know why the light makes them shine
green. A glance at the supple skin of my arms,
longer at the hue of my hair.
You picture bridal white,
flushed cheeks with a full womb,
then the slow, gray pungency that shows
in the strands, but aches,
oozing everywhere else, kidneys, liver
brain.

I smile back
to assure the reception
of your signals. I see you,
not the now dead who rocked me
in rubbery, wrinkled arms,
but for the life that you've clenched with
arthritis-gripped fingers.
The same one you slither from,
Each experiment
Fit simply
into a disintegrating cell.

Darlene Anita Scott

Untitled

angry with abstinence and other reasons to riot
if i was superstitious i would admit
that you got a mojo on me
forget the body rock, i'm feeling the body ache,
dancing a frenzied sway in a rain dance that promises
to bring you to me--
longing for a little late night and long callused fingers
because i can't feel my own fingers own fingers no more.
i've tried to find you in the pages of metered lines,
bury you in alliteration and metaphors,
and offer you the dignity of resting in peace
but tonight you won't sleep and neither can i
so i keep making r.e.m. trips across route 13
because i know how the last leg of the run gets tight
when you're dwb in a BMW with locks your mama said
you never should've grown
Lifestyles of the rich and shameless; some die with a name,
some die nameless.
bass heavy lyrics lullaby me into prayers that try to get me
to lay myself down to sleep because i
have rent to pay, my soul, and my own hustle to keep.

Interior Me

I immediately recognized the voice on the other end of the line. It was the redhaired social worker, what's her name, telling me another woman was on her way down to the shelter and needed a place to crash for the night. I hung up the phone a bit excited, I admit. I was finally going to be at the shelter when they brought someone in. Normally, the women were processed in during the day hours, before I had a chance to check them out.

I was new at volunteering, the whole thing being my husband's idea to begin with. My husband, Max, was an officer in the military, and bizarrely, it was thought that I needed to be more "socially aware" to fit my expected role as an officer's wife. Max was gearing up for a promotion to major, and needed a new angle.

"Jesus Christ, Maddie, " Max said. "I don't give a shit if it's homeless puppies, cancer patients, or domestic punching bags. Just find a friggin cause and join it so my commanders will get off my ass about my socially unsympathetic wife, OK?"

Sometime after that I saw a special on HBO about domestic violence. A few days later I was in the shelter interviewing for a position to answer phones. I was still pissed off from our earlier discussion and resolved to be socially aware even if it was just for his career. Plus, it gave me something to do ten hours a week.

The phone rang again. That time it was a hang up. Another woman losing her nerve. Maybe a wrong number. Social workers were drinking coffee, bitching, and trying to figure out where to put the new arrival. Social workers are a

rare breed. Fix this, save that, and help everyone, but don't get me too personally involved.

I heard the door open. Two police officers paraded in with a woman behind them. The taller cop was in the regular police gear. Blue slacks too short and too small for his big belly. The second cop was shorter, but just as fat. Maybe fatter. They were talking with the redhaired social worker.

Then she walked in and I stared. I couldn't help myself. She had long, curly hair. She needed a haircut. The long curls ended in a frizzy mess around her face. Her face! What a mangled mess! Her busted lip was purple and swollen. Her left eye was barely open. Obviously a punch or two to the face. She fidgeted as I stared at her.

I didn't blame her. I would've too. I looked back over at the tall cop. I noticed a creamy spot on his tight shirt. Residue from an earlier snack, I thought. She caught my eye again when she pulled her hair from the side of her cheek. I noticed the stitches across her forehead, and I easily diagnosed she'd need plastic surgery. How else would this chick regain her face?

The cops finished their discussion with the redhaired lady and waited in the other room by the front door while he social worker and the victim walked into an adjoining room. I sat at my old broken-down desk trying to listen to their conversation. I gathered the victim's name was Gina, but not much else. I couldn't make out the words. Gina and the social worker came out of the room and the redhaired lady left with the cops. The on-call psychologist hadn't turned up at the shelter yet, so Gina was just standing around.

"So," I said, "Can I, uh, get you something? Coffee, water, something?"

"Milk's cool," she answered.

"Milk," I replied flatly.

I walked back to the small, dank kitchen and grabbed the cleanest cup I could find. Milk, I asked myself. I don't

know what I thought she should ask me for, but not milk. I opened the fridge and grabbed the milk. I took a whiff to make sure it wasn't bad. It smelled a little ripe, but whatever, she wanted milk. I brought the milk back to her. Before she drank it she smelled it too. It must have seemed okay to her and she took a long, hard gulp. We stood around awkwardly.

"Nice rock," she said looking at my left hand.

"Oh, thanks," I said, a little embarrassed of the ring. Before Max bought it, I told him that if he wanted my whole life, then I get a whole carat. It made perfect sense at the time.

We talked a bit, routine, doing the form.

"You got a choice, ya know," she said.

I sat there and looked at her. I wondered what the hell she was talking about.

"Just because he gave you that big, shiny ring, sparkling like it do, don't mean you got to say yes," she said, "Just cause he promised to take care of you don't mean he will. You got a choice."

Was she serious? I knew I had a choice. I was sure she had a choice too. She just made a bad one.

"No one told me I had a fucking choice," she laughed in spite of herself. "No one told me shit."

"Oh," I answered. That's all I could say. What could I say? I looked down at my lap and started picking at my nails. I wanted the redhaired lady with me. I wanted that damned psychologist to get his ass to the shelter. Sally, the lady on the midnight shift came in and interrupted us. I admit I was pretty happy to see her. I gathered my stuff and quickly made my exit. I walked over to the time clock and punched out, proving to the world that I donated my five hours to humanity.

I opened the employee door into the night air. I took a deep breath as I sifted through my bottomless purse to find

my car keys. I pulled out the half a joint I saved from a few days before. I needed it. I never left my weed around the house where my husband could see it, and Max ignored the weed, silently letting me indulge. As long as I didn't do it when I was on the base, he pretended I didn't do it at all. I, in turn, pretended I was naturally horny, versus chemically horny, and we got along just fine. It worked out.

I sat in the car and lit up the roach. I watched the smoke swirl across the dewy glass of the windshield. I took another deep hit and held it in a little longer. I didn't see or hear her coming. Gina was suddenly standing outside my car window.

"Jesus Christ, you scared the shit out of me," I said, a little ticked off. She was staring at my hand with the smoldering roach.

"Can I get a hit?" she asked. Can you imagine? I knew I'd be breaking some kind of shelter rule, apart from the actual law, but I passed it to her anyway. She looked like she needed it. She took one big hit over a couple of small tokes and I saw the rest of the joint disappear.

"Thanks," she said and motioned it back to me.

"No, it's all you," I said waving the roach off. "You kinda need it more than I do, I think."

"It sure don't make my face any better, but at least it numbs my brain, ya know?" she answered. "Got anymore?"

Giving her the hit in the first place was probably wrong. But smoking her out was surely wrong. I didn't know why I told her yes. In my married world, no one smoked with me. Not too many people were up for taking bong hits with the captain's wife. I guess I was just kind of tired of getting stoned alone. I told her to get in the car and I'd roll one up.

I started the car and we drove over to the mall. I figured we'd be better off in the bigger parking lot than the one at the shelter. Another rule I'm sure I broke. We parked

the car and I rolled a big, fat number.

"You sure do know what you're doing," she grinned.

"Thanks. Professional," I replied. "Four years of college paying off." There's something about weed that breaks down the barriers. My eyes were practically bleeding and half mast, but I couldn't stop looking at her, I was so stoned the social barrier of staring was broken. I didn't care that I was staring. I couldn't stop. Her busted face intrigued me. I'm sure she sensed it because she turned her face away and looked out the window as she started talking.

"I wish I could tell you it ain't always been like this, but I can't. He's like fucking heroin. I gotta have him," she said.

"Why?" I blurted out. My voice startled me and I dropped the burning roach on the floor of the car, I felt like an ass as I patted out the cherry into the rug.

"I don't know why," she answered, "I can't figure it out myself. Like something's in my brain. Something mental, I guess. The interior me is all fucked up."

"And tonight?" I asked all stoned. I don't think I would have asked her if I were straight. She hesitated a moment and I saw some people leaving the mail. It was late, and they probably worked there.

"Well," she said, "he came home all pissed off from work. He works over at the bottle factory across town. Anyways, he got laid off because the union sucks there, he says, so he was pissed about that." A car started up a few spots down from us. I nodded, but didn't say a word. I wanted her to continue.

"So, I made some steak for dinner for him. I overcooked it a little bit, but it wasn't burnt or nothing." She paused and lit a cigarette. She inhaled deeply, and offered me one.

I took it.

"--Then he kicked my ass."

The words and smoke mixed together as they came out of her mouth. We sat there awhile, passing what was left of the joint back and forth. The glow from the cherry illuminated her fat, puffy lip as she took a hit.

"Over a steak. Really?" I said.

"Maddie, can you do me a favor?" she asked.

"Huh," I answered slowly. I was super stoned.

"Can you bring me by my house so I can get my shit. It's not far."

"Uh," I hesitated.

"I need clean clothes and stuff," she said.

Well, I broke every other rule tonight, so why not? I started the car.

We drove for about ten minutes. I turned left onto Wellsley Court and stopped in front of number twelve, a brick row house in a perfectly average neighborhood. Green lawns, flower boxes, SUV's, the works.

"I'll be right back," she said.

I turned up my CD player and looked around. From the car I could see a clean yard, green plaid curtains in the kitchen window, and a dumb wooden duck that read Welcome. I was trying to sing along with the music. Anything to keep me from staring at the door waiting for her to come back. I saw her shadow float from window to window. Gathering up her stuff I guessed.

Then the front door opened and I saw his figure through the storm door. He saw me too and he walked out to the porch. Shirtless, sweating in the porch light, all six and a half feet of him standing there. I glanced back down at my CD player to advance the song. I really and truly didn't want to have any sort of situation with this guy. I quickly found the small callous-like bump on the inside of my cheek and chewed on it. I always bit there when I was nervous. Then he nodded at me and went back in. I released the little bump from my teeth and took a deep breath. I started

looking through my purse for a cigarette. I found one, sparked it up, and inhaled deeply.

I surveyed the outside of the house a little more closely. I looked to the upstairs windows and I saw a big orange sticker in one of them, in the corner, the kind that reflect light and say Tot Finder. A flicker from a TV drew my attention to another window. A white sign had a big red hand in the middle. I remembered when I was a kid my mother always told me to go to a house with a red hand in the window if I needed help. How weird, I thought. I wondered what they were talking about inside. I wondered just how hateful the conversation got. I stayed, waiting in the car. I waited, then started the car when I saw her. She waved for me to leave. I sat there a moment hesitating. I looked at her a few seconds more and drove away.

The Ballad of Billy Wayne And Newt

"I'll take a Budweiser, if you don't mind," Billy Wayne said the first time Connie ever met him, and then every time she saw him after that.

Connie popped off the top of a Bud and set it down in front of him.

"Give me a C. C. straight up, too, would you young lady," he said, tipping his head forward slightly in a gesture of please and thank you.

"Starting early--you got the afternoon off?" She asked. It wasn't quite noon yet. The restaurant hadn't officially opened for the day.

"Yeah, raining outside, you know." He said.

She turned around and reached up to the top shelf for the Canadian Club. She had to stand on her tiptoes just a little to get to it.

"Can't do much construction when it's raining outside." He laughed and took a sip of the Bud. "I appreciate your serving me so early."

She set the Canadian Club in front of him. He winked one eye after the other and toasted her with his beer.

She saw him again the very next day. And then the next after that, until the rain let up and then he would come to visit her on his lunch break. Connie couldn't see how a man, so full of Canadian Club and beer, could construct golf courses. Didn't they have to drive pretty big equipment to level out the land or something?

"People are going to have to play on that damn course with climbing shoes and a rope!" someone had said. Sometimes Billy Wayne brought a man called Newt with

him. He and Newt looked about the same age, somewhere on the far end of sixty, although it wouldn't have surprised anyone if they were in their late seventies. It was hard to tell these kinds of things with aging men who drank all the time and worked outside.

Newt looked as if he had washed in ditty water and air-dried that morning, the folds in his face holding more dirt than the rest of him. But to Connie, Billy Wayne's face seemed softer than that. He didn't hold the dirt of the world in it the way Newt did.

"What are you staring at?" Billy Wayne said, winking at her. He stood up and pushed his barstool back squeaking it across the wooden floor. Then he headed to the restroom.

Connie looked back at Newt. His beer was empty. She popped off the top of a Bud and set it in front of him. She could smell how old he was even behind the stale air of his smokes.

"Thanks," Newt said. "Drinking allows you to do the things your thinking about doing anyway." He reached for his pack of Marlboro reds and pulled one out.

"What's that you said?" She asked. She didn't Eke talking to him because he was hard to understand. He just came out with stuff that didn't seem to make much sense. Sometimes she thought he might just be talking to himself.

"Like women and a game of golf..." he mumbled. He talked soft enough that Connie couldn't hear everything he said, but it sounded like something to do with a perfect drive and how that was like wanting a woman you could never have. Connie laughed a little not sure how to respond.

"You laughing at me?" He said.

She stopped.

Billy Wayne's barstool squeaked as he scooted in closer to the bar. "Aw, give me another," he said.

Connie walked away from Newt and picked up My

Wayne's empty glass to fill it.

After that, Billy Wayne came in to see Connie more than Newt. He sat at the bar drinking, never for more than two hours, which was close to two beers and seven C.C.'s. Connie never knew what to expect him to say. He seemed to have a lot on his mind, but only one sentence would make it out at a time. Newt had been different. He was tired in a way that Billy Wayne wasn't, slower, never drinking anything but his Budweiser, and never more than three at a sitting.

"Where's Newt today?" Connie asked as she poured a shot of Canadian Club. She hoped she didn't have anything to do with his staying away.

"Newts to the point he can only have one or two beers and he's got to go home." Billy Wayne picked up his beer and took a swallow, as if his mentioning the word triggered something

"He go home alone, usually?" She set the shot in front of him.

"Aw hell, he got some woman last night," he told her. He picked up the drink, tipped his head slightly forward and winked at her, one eye after the other.

"Did he? Good for Newt," she said, putting a scoop of ice into the blender along with some strawberries and a shot of rum.

"Hell, it was easy. He paid three hundred dollars for a dancer at the Paper Moon. Aw--maybe I shouldn't be saying this." He rubbed his brow with his hand and stared hard at his drink. "She went home with him, though. She sure did." Billy Wayne took a gulp of his C.C. and eyed Connie. She hit the button on the blender. The buzzing filled the bar.

When it stopped, he said, "How about you--you fool around?"

"I'm taken--you know that." She hit the button on the blender again. She was used to drunk men sitting at the bar, saying things they knew they shouldn't be saying, and never would have if they hadn't been drunk. She stopped the blender when the rattling of ice turned into a smooth whirling.

"You said that pretty quick. Must be true," he said.

She half smiled. Nothing seemed to throw him off his train of thought. She poured the strawberry daiquiri into a goblet and some splattered onto her white polo shirt.

"Damn daiquiris!" She grabbed a wet towel and rubbed at the strawberry stain in the middle of her stomach.

"Aw hell, come out and have a drink with me," Billy Wayne said. "It's just a drink, it don't mean nothing. I can buy you a drink, can't I?"

"I would if I could, but I can't. You know that." Connie turned and walked off towards the kitchen, still rubbing at the stain. She hoped this would give the conversation enough air to float up to the rafters and be forgotten. But when she came back out, she had a sense he was waiting for her.

"Well tell me this," he said, getting serious. He leaned forward on the bar like he was trying to get close enough to tell a secret or something. "Have you ever been with a man who can spell Mississippi and dot every I?" Billy Wayne didn't flinch. He just stared at Connie.

"I'm not sure that I have." She laughed a little and looked around for something to do.

"Well then, you haven't been with Billy Wayne." He tapped his fingers on the bar and sat back in his chair. Then he looked at the TV.

Connie reached for his empty glass and set him up another round.

Billy Wayne said he and Newt had been all over the US budding golf courses, but Connie figured that meant they had seen a lot of bars. He liked to talk about alligators and Everglades the most, but he only told half the story when he told his stories, so Connie couldn't really figure out what was the truth or not. At first, Connie didn't bother to get too involved until she got so used to his coming around she was interested in his stories and would ask questions, laughing right along with him. It certainly gave her something to do when business was slow. And it often was.

"This is the Ballad of Billy Wayne and Connie Wayne," one of the waiters sang. Connie took all the crap about Billy Wayne because he only came in to see her.

"Oh, cut it out!" Connie said, laughing with the others.

"Would you sleep with Billy Wayne for three hundred bucks, Connie?" said a friend of hers.

"Shit, I wouldn't sleep with Billy Wayne--or Newt--for a million! It would take me that kind of money to forget about it," Connie said.

"Yeah right! You know you love Billy Wayne!"

"Oh, you know me, he really knocks my socks off," Connie said.

"You better watch it--that man is after you!"

"Oh, he is not!" Connie walked out the kitchen door, still laughing on her way to the bar.

"What's got you laughing today?" Billy Wayne said.

"Nothing. Those girls back there are crazy."

"We're all a little crazy," he said winking, then swallowed the rest of his C.C. in a gulp.

Connie turned her back to him and reached for the Canadian Club, standing on her tiptoes.

"M-i-s-s, i-ss..."

Months had passed and Billy Wayne and Newt were still in town, building the same golf course. The weather had been rainy and there was more time to drink than to build. In all that time, Connie's boyfriend moved out and Billy Wayne had won over five thousand dollars in the state lottery. Friends at work had put the two together and bet Connie would sleep with Billy Wayne for the rent money. Connie laughed. It had to be easier to find another boyfriend, than that.

"You not talking today?" He asked with a half-empty beer and a full C.C. in front of him.

"I'm not sure what's going on today. They got me really busy. My life is one big mess," Connie said. It was that, and the fact that Newt was there. She couldn't tell if his eyes were open or not from all the folds in his face. He was like a Shar-pei, some old dirty dog. She looked at him and thought he was sleeping, sitting up, his cigarette smoldering in the ashtray.

"Hell, I'm to the point, I don't know what to do with a day off anymore," Billy Wayne said. He sat there shaking his head, his blue eyes blank and rheumy. Connie believed that. After all the months of coming by to see her, she figured he must have been tired of the same bar and the same people. She was a little tired of him drinking so much, a little tired of worrying about how he made it home after he did.

"Aw hell, Connie, come out with me tonight. I need to celebrate something," he said.

"I need to work." She said. It was what she always said. But since her boyfriend moved out, she had to work now more than ever. Even though he hadn't been worth much of anything, he had at least paid most of the rent each month...not that she would have let Billy Wayne know it.

"Well, heck," Billy Wayne shook his head, then took a drink off his Canadian Club.

"Some of us do have bills to pay," she said.

Newt picked up his cigarette and took a slow drag before he said, "How much you think you'll make back there tonight?" He hardly came in anymore and when he did he rarely spoke.

"I don't know, a little over a hundred," she said.

"I got a couple that says your coming with me tonight," Newt said. He was already on his third beer.

"Aw hell, what are you doing, Newt?" Billy Wayne reached in his pocket and pulled out a big wad of cash. He threw double that down on the bar.

"What am I a prostitute now?" Connie said, turning to leave.

"That four says you take the night off and have fun with me. It don't mean having to be no prostitute," Billy Wayne said, leaning over the bar. He looked about as desperate for something other to do as Connie was for rent money. He was harmless enough. just another drunk she served. She looked at the money.

"You have got to be crazy," she said, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Aw, it's just some of that money I won," Billy Wayne said. "I got all the money I need."

Newt didn't take any money out. He just went back to looking like he was sleeping. Connie looked from him to Billy Wayne to the money.

He pushed it towards her.

When she picked it up, he sat back in his chair and looked at the TV. She thought about saying she wanted to make this just a loan, but then again, she didn't know how or when she could pay it back. And Billy Wayne really didn't seem to care about that.

Connie put the money in her apron pocket. At least this way, she only had to suffer through one night. Hadn't she already made it through countless other days?

That night, Billy Wayne and Connie ended up at a softball game, although she would have preferred a bar. The game felt too much like a real date. They sat side by side on metal bleachers, watching it. He said a buddy of his was playing in the game. Connie wasn't sure that was true. No one sitting around them said anything to them. Most seemed not to even notice them. Billy Wayne just sat there sipping what she guessed was Canadian Club out of a paper cup. He had the same far away stare he had when he'd come into the bar to drink. They hadn't said much to each other in the last hour. Connie was glad she drove herself to the field. She had paid rent that morning and wondered how bad it would be for her to try to make it an early night.

"Aw, shit, here comes Newt," Billy Wayne said.

Connie looked up.

"Hey," Newt said.

"Hey yourself, Newt." Connie figured they must come out to these games a lot, watching people she wasn't sure they even knew. She looked past the fence surrounding the field to see if there were apartments close by that Newt might have come from. They must get tired of sitting in bars.

"What are you up to tonight?" She said to him.

"Not much. Beautiful night for a game." He didn't ask about the score or about the buddy, and Billy Wayne never told him.

At the end of the game, they got up to leave and Connie slipped into the bathroom before they left. When she came out, she wasn't sure where Billy Wayne or Newt had gone. She could see a few older people trailing to their cars on the other side of the fence.

"M-I-S-S, I-S-S, I-P-P-I," Billy Wayne dragged out the last "I", shouting from somewhere over her head. She

looked up to find him and saw the faint red glow of Newt's cigarette burn brighter as he took a drag. They were hanging out in the announcer's box.

"Are you coming down?" She called up.

"Hey, the party's up here," Billy Wayne said.

"Come on, let's go get something to drink. I'm thirsty," she said.

"That's what we got up here," he said.

Connie left it at that. She wasn't about to go up into that announcer's box with them. She sat down on the bleachers below, listening to them singing into the night. They'd stop every now and then, their voices getting real low, and then they'd burst out laughing and start singing all over again. She couldn't make out a clear word of it. After a while, Billy Wayne came down.

"Let's go up to the Brass Lantern and shoot some pool," he said.

"I could use a drink," she said and jumped up off the cold bleacher.

They walked along not speaking. Eventually, Newt followed behind her and Billy Wayne. Connie realized how quiet the ball field had become. She walked a little faster, wanting to be out the entrance and into her own car.

From what Connie could see when they reached the fence, it was chain-locked shut. Billy Wayne and Newt were too drunk to notice anything. Connie stopped walking.

"What's going on?" Billy Wayne asked.

"We're locked in," she said.

"What do you mean?"

Connie walked up to the gate and shook the thick metal chain and the padlock that hung from it. Then she looked around for another way out, but that was the only gate. The only way out was over the top of the eight-foot fence. She looked at Billy Wayne and Newt, swaying where they stood. "Looks like the only way out is over the top," she said.

"Aw hell, you kidding me?" Bill Wayne went to check the gate himself. She noticed how much he staggered when he walked up to the gate. She knew they were both pretty lit. She looked around at the deserted field. The fence was about eight feet high, but it had about two inches of chain link sticking up over the top bar. Barbed wire would have been worse, but this still didn't look very safe.

Billy Wayne and Newt tried to get one another over the fence. Newt got down on all fours while Billy Wayne stood on his back. He couldn't get half way without falling off. His shoes were too big to fit through the links. And he had too much to drink Although Connie doubted if either one had the strength or the flexibility to get up over the top, even sober.

"We can try to push you up there," Billy Wayne said to Connie.

"I don't think I can. I'm afraid of heights."

They both locked their fingers together to boost her up. She stood with one foot in each of their intertwined hands She tried to hold onto the fence, while they swayed, pulling her feet into opposite directions, as if she were doing a split. The only way over this fence, with the two of them, was with a rope.

"Stop pushing," she hollered down to them. "I'm coming down."

Her fingers hurt from hanging on to the cold, damp fence. Once both of her feet were on the ground, she leaned up against the fence and watched Billy Wayne and Newt sway, standing in the grass. Her heart was still pounding.

"Hey, whatever happened to that girl you met at the Paper Moon?" Connie said, trying to make small talk.

"I killed her," Newt said.

"Aw hell--"

"Shut up. just shut up, Billy Wayne," Newt said.

Connie laughed at first, then watched them. She

couldn't tell if he was serious or pulling her leg. She didn't like it either way.

"What the hell are you doing?" Billy Wayne said to Newt, winking at Connie. Newt had stopped swaying. He stood stiff, his eyes wide open.

"She ain't no different than the rest of them. Women ain't no good. They just want you to take care of them, they're takers--all of them. They ain't going to give nothing back. She took your money quicker than shit. Probably laughed after she did it," Newt said.

Billy Wayne put his hands through his hair and stepped back, confused-looking. Newt just fell silent. Connie stayed close to the fence and watched them both.

Billy Wayne and Newt walked off a little bit. From where she was at, she could tell they were arguing, but she couldn't hear what they said. Then they fell over each other laughing and singing the blues. She heard them both sing out, "You get no bread with one meatball," and laughed some more.

Connie took the scarf from around her neck and tied it to the top of the fence. She tried to put her foot through one of the links, but her shoes were too big. She untied them, looking up every now and then to watch Billy Wayne and Newt. She stuck her socked foot through one of the links. It hurt her toes to put all of her weight on them, but she kept going anyway. When she got to the top she dangled the scarf over the other side and used it to lower herself. Billy Wayne and Newt looked up when the fence rattled from her pushing off of it to jump to the ground.

"I thought you were afraid of heights?" Billy Wayne said.

"Told ya," Newt said. He took a drag off his cigarette, coughed.

Connie stood on the other side of the fence, her socks getting wet from the damp ground.

"You got to help us get out of here. You can get a ladder or something," Billy Wayne said to her. "Come on, Connie, he was just joking."

She pulled off her wet socks and stood there looking at them through the fence. Then she turned and to walk off to her car.

"Aw, come on Connie," Billy Wayne yelled to her. "I'll throw your shoes over to you."

"That's okay," she said. "I have enough money now to buy a new pair. You keep them, one a piece." And she walked back to the car barefoot, singing "...you get no bread with one meatball," the damp grass wetting her feet.