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The burned out plain stretches
toward me like the arms of a thousand tumbleweeds
untangled, motioning me home.
The wind finds its raspy voice to chant
my name out of whispers,
to spin me around, around,
and leave me staring into the sky.
It is dark near me,
I stumble across the cabin
that my brother built,
kneeling in its own ruins.
It is not the only abandoned house
to be brought to its knees
rolled across by tumbleweeds
and wind.
PARTED

My eyes are slow to drain
but you rock patiently
on the other end of this letter,
listening to the beat of the percolator
on your counter,
an artificial heart pumping
blood through your limbs
as I pump word upon word into this letter,
confused puffs of air
colliding recklessly inside this paper balloon.
I seal the envelope to the corners
hoping the words will not be flat
when they reach you,
having been pressed in stacks
and bunched in rubber bands
that leave a bent or broken word
bloodless,
airless,
translucent next to your parted lips.
NIGHTS

Couples pause to add breath
to the night
with the gentle rain of a promise
upon rose-scented mouths —
spilling words into a private air
as if the night called only their name.
And I, like the sad dreams
of young girls
who never stay long at a dance,
linger in the shadow of evening
as a long, white candle without a flame.
LAST MOMENTS

("Rain or steam turned ash to mud, hardening around fallen victims, leaving molds into which plaster was poured, preserving the Pompeians' final postures")

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC - 11.61

these plaster citizens will wear
the resurrected skins
now given them. three families wait that ruined noon which rained hot stones till clouds of crow-thick
ash caused them like animals
to stare into the eyes of death.

they ran till darkness blistered them.
it swallowed clothing long abandoned for a cindery pain. it left no space
for breathing.

frozen, white-hot in those ashy masks,
they waited
for us where we find them cracked
like roof-tiles, dingy
as the moon; the servant, sack curled 'round
his shoulders like a charred fur-merchant,
sitting
upright, one arm pressing rubbled earth, bending as he tries for nineteen centuries, to rise, call back the severed pulse that fled his wrist. his children lie, face up, asleep,
as if they understand
this ultimate departure cooked like gold
in each small hand.
Spiders spin webs against the moon,
Couples gather beneath streetlights,
while I lie alone in a crowded bed
where no degree of suggestion
could wrinkle the sheets.
The circus acts have long been over,
only the taste of warm vanilla
keeps trickling down
the back of my throat.
BEGINNING OF SUMMER SEPARATION

Dead insects chronicle my lawn
Sunskin is falling to the floor
While I plod along to the tick
    on my wrist,
The streets walk the dog.
As I read the reflections in
    windows,
Wind bloats my mouth,
The blight has begun.

AT THE HOSPITAL: DAY 3

visitors do not come
to stare out these fog infested windows
I read a novel of hospital nonsurvival
and paint the walls green with voices
unattached to faces, trying to forget them.
the phone rings, slurs, "Janice!?"
I throw it back from the wrong bed,
and pray for Nembutal to take me where I'm expected.
Russ was disgusted. The snow had changed to rain, and though the weather had given him a day off from school, he had so thoroughly enjoyed being by himself that he wanted more. He was doing as he pleased, that is he was curled up in the old, soft chair in the living room, the one with the spring in it that made the funny noise, reading the Boy Scout Manual and listening to the radiator hiss. At Sacred Heart, he would have been all day at a hardback desk, afraid to ask to go to the bathroom, while Sister Catherine droned about martyrs or mathematics. Russ was thinking about joining the Boy Scouts. No one had ever called him brave or thrifty or reverent before.

As he was going over the requirements for Tenderfoot, the doorbell rang. Fortunately for Russ, who never liked to interrupt himself in the middle of a sentence, his mother was rushing through the living room on her way to the kitchen. "Answer it, Ma, I'm reading," he said, without bothering to lift his head from the page. She clicked her tongue, opened the door and snapped, "Well, you might as well answered it yourself, 'cause it's Joey."

Joey, a neat, mature-looking ten-year old, walked into the house, pulled his wool hat off, and ran his fingers through his blonde hair. He dispensed with his usual greetings and, as soon as he had pushed the door shut, blurted out, "Father Reilly's dead!"

"Oh, my!" said Russ' mother, who stopped short and turned to face Joey.

"He's dead?" Russ, charged with curiosity, put the Manual down, walked over to the door and asked, "Was it from that heart attack?"

"No, no, that's the worst part—see—where's your sister?"
"Jeanie!" bellowed Russ. "C'mere, fast!"

Russ' sister, who was two years older than he, sprang from the bathroom trailing drops of nail polish and panted, "Joey, Joey, what happened?"

Joey leaned against the wall near an oak cabinet, and found himself circled by three expectant faces. "Well, uh," he said nervously, "y'see, it wasn't because of the heart attack at all—he was almost better, in fact—but it did happen in the hospital. He was in his bed, and he wanted a cigarette, so he went to light it, but he must have dropped the match, 'cause his sheets caught on fire and he got all burned up. All burned up in no time!"

They were silent for a moment; then Russ' mother said, with a gasping sound in her voice, "That's terrible! He was such a nice old priest, but he was old, and I hope he didn't suffer too much. What they won't do for a cigarette..."

Joanie put a pained look on her face and said, "My God! That's so—awful!"

But Russ was still under the influence of the Boy Scout Manual, and all he could think to say was, "Were they first-degree burns or third-degree burns?"

"Russell!" his mother said indignantly. "Father Reilly just passed away! Can't you understand that?"

"But Ma, I just asked a question! Can't I even ask a question around here!" He stormed back to his chair, picked up the Manual and flipped through it, looking for the section on first aid.

Russ' mother sighed loudly and said, "That kid, I dunno about him anymore—Joey, take your coat off and sit down before you get all sweated up."

"No, thank you," he said, his composure returning, "I've gotta go home and tell my mother. I just found out about it over at the church. See you all later."

"Goodbye, Joey, and put your hat back on so your head doesn't get all wet," she called after him as he
Paul W. Levesque

went out the door.

"G'bye, Joey," muttered Russ. He was absorbed in
the Manual, intent on finding the passage he remem-
bered that told about burns without looking at the
table of contents. Finally, after having gone past
it twice, he found it. He could see now that third-
degree burns were the worst, were the type that could
kill a man even as he lay in a hospital bed. This
was obvious from the illustration. There were no pho-
tographs in the Manual, and the drawings were done in
a sort of crayon, but nothing could mask the horror
of this mutilated hand drawn over the caption, "A
THIRD DEGREE BURN." The layers of skin were tattered
and black, like the edges of a hole burnt in a news-
paper, and in the center of the hand, where there was
no skin left, scorched muscle and sinew were revealed.

Russ stared at this picture for a minute, then
closed the Manual and placed it on the end table. He
could not picture Father Reilly that way. He could
not picture Father Reilly any way but the way he was.
In the five years Russ had been going to the Child-
ren's Mass--held in the church basement, under the
watchful eyes of the nuns, while the adults heard
Mass upstairs--Father Reilly had always served it,
and had never done anything different. He always
lumbered into the room and behind the folding table
that served as the altar with his back arched at the
same painful angle. His hair never seemed any greyer
or thinner, and his rotund belly neither expanded nor
contracted. Nobody could ever understand half of
what he said when he read the Gospel. He always
coughed twice, loudly, before consecrating the host.
It was hard for Russ to believe, just based on the
picture in the Manual, that all this was gone.

Excited and perplexed by his discovery, Russ went
to the kitchen, where his mother was making lunch.
"Ma, I just found out," he said with childish pride,
"third degree burns are the worst!"

His mother turned from the soup she was tending and said, "Russ, dear, we know what kind of burns Father Reilly had..."

"Then why didn't you say so?" said Russ petulantly.

"Forget it, Ma, he's a jerk!" said Joanie acidly. Russ, in his anxiousness, had not seen her sitting at the far end of the kitchen table.

"Tell her to shut up, Ma! No one said nothin' to her!" Russ shouted.

"Tell her to shut up, Ma..." said Joanie in a naso-parody of Russ' voice.

"Everyone, be quiet! Now!" said Russ' mother. She glared at both of them until they wilted, then went back to her cooking. She lifted the cover off the pan and poured in some salt.

Russ remained standing beside her, though, and after she had replaced the cover, he tugged on her dress and said imploringly, "But Ma..."

"What is it?" she said, in her long-suffering voice.

"What about Father Reilly, Ma?"

"Listen, Russ," she said, without turning to face him, "Father Reilly's dead. He's gone back to God. Now do you understand?"

"Sure, Ma," he said instantly. "What's for lunch?"

* * * *

The next morning, Russ got up and looked eagerly out the window, but all the snow was gone, except for a few piles filthy with sand. He said, "Shit!" under his breath, then took off his pajamas and got into his school uniform. First he put on the grey slacks, then he buttoned up the white shirt and stuffed in the tails, and finally he clipped on the blue tie
with the Sacred Heart emblem on it.

At school, after morning prayers, Sister Catherine rested her folded hands on her chin for a minute and looked silently at the class. "As you all probably know," she said, "Father Reilly passed away early yesterday morning. I'm sure you're all sad because of this, and would like to pay your respects. This afternoon in the church at four o'clock, a group of priests from the diocese will gather to read the Office of the Dead together. You may all come and offer your silent prayers if you'd like. Yes, Louis?"

"Sister, what's an Office?" asked "Louie the Lunkhead," who was called this by his classmates because of his talent for aggravating Sister Catherine with sincere but stupid questions. Usually, she answered him with a sarcastic remark, but even though the class had been told about the Office twice before, she said patiently, "A priest's Office, Louis, is a long prayer which he says every day. There are many parts to this prayer, and one of them is the Office of the Dead, which is for all departed souls. When a priest dies, other priests gather at his wake and read this prayer together. Is this understood by everyone?"

"Yes, Sister," came the low, scattered voices.

"Fine. Now turn your geography books to page 115." It went like this all day long: Sister Catherine didn't raise her voice once, and the class was strangely quiet, even at recess. Russ didn't share this subdued feeling, though, and to him the day seemed to end minutes after it had begun.

When he got home, he took his tie off, threw it on the top of his drawer, and unbuttoned the top two buttons on his shirt. Sister Catherine had forgotten to assign math homework, so he celebrated by sprawling in his chair and reading a comic book while eating a dill pickle. Just as he was getting comfortable, though, the doorbell rang. Joanie answered it, and
let in Joey, who strolled over to the couch and sat down directly opposite Russ. "Well," he said, "you ready to go to the wake?"

"Wake?" said Russ vacantly.

"Yeah—that thing over at the church for Father Reilly. C'mon, you goin'?"

"I dunno..."

"What are you, afraid?" said Joey mockingly.

"He's a baby," sneered Joanie. "When we all went to my grandmother's wake last year, he was too chicken to go into the room where they had her."

This was true. But Russ recalled that he wasn't afraid, really. He was going to go into the room, but he caught a glimpse of her lying in the coffin and he just didn't want to see her that way. She looked like she was sleeping, not dead, and sleeping more peacefully than cancer had let her for months. So he sat by himself in an anteroom, and felt keenly embarrassed as his younger cousins filed past him.

"C'mon," said Joey. "Let's go."

"But it's cold out," said Russ obstinately.

"Aahh. I don't even know why I bother with you sometimes," said Joey with a tone of disgust in his voice.

"Okay, wait up a minute," said Russ. He had to go now. Without Joey's friendship, he would be alone. He went into his room and picked his tie up off the clutter on the drawer. As he buttoned his shirt and put it back on, he felt as if he were slipping into a collar. He went back into the living room and shouted, "Hey, Ma, I'm goin' to the church with Joey."

"Okay, dear," responded his mother, who was in the kitchen. "It's very cold out, so don't forget to wear your scarf."

"Take that scarf off. You look like a fag," said Joey when they had gone less than a block from Russ'
house. "And Jesus Christ, you walk funny. My father says that you're pigeon-toed." He laughed sadistically. He liked having Russ for a friend; he could do almost anything to him and get away with it.

Russ ignored the insults and tried to change the subject. "Uh, do you think that when we get there the coffin lid'll be open?"

"I don't think so," said Joey. He was an altar boy, and so was somewhat of an expert on the death ceremony. He also knew lots of funny stories about altar boys overturning Bibles, dropping candles, making obscene gestures behind the priest's back, and about old women who would scream uncontrollably, some of them even pounding their fists on the coffin lid.

"If he was all burned up, he must look gross. If the lid's open, I don't think I'll go in the church."

"Why not?" said Joey sharply. "Don't be a baby! They look real good when they're dead. They usually got their hair made up and everything. You should feel 'em, though. I touched my aunt when I went to her wake. She felt like a rock that's outside on a real cold day.

Russ picked up a rock, cringed, and dropped it. "That's really gross," he said.

In about three minutes, they reached the street on which Sacred Heart Church was located. As they walked down it, they faced an insistent north wind that robbed their breath and blew it down the sidewalk like a candy wrapper. Russ wanted to get in out of the cold, but Joey led him first toward the CYO baseball field that bordered the church. They went behind the dilapidated backstop, where Joey cupped his hands and lit a cigarette. He offered it to Russ, who took it and puffed gingerly on the filter. The smoke set his mouth on fire, and he coughed it out rapidly. Joey took the cigarette back and sneered, "Baby!"

Russ leaned against the backstop and looked out
THE TREE'S LAMENT

The aging trees in the glade...
the moss centuries deep
the bodies of wood-land, swamp-land,
air-land beasts
mingled with the loam...
spoke in rustling confidentiality,
their slumber fitful and broken
with the news of winds passing,
cold thoughts,
tired thoughts,
reaching to the north the wind was,
reaching to the sky the trees were.

The trees opened their bark eyes
and their root tongues,
and whispered damning tales to the nut hoarders
and the flying nesters,
of ice and of sap stopping,
of steel bladed killers and fire
licking low branches,
charring center souls and outer
skin/sap/blood/life holders,
of clanking,
crunching,
screeching,
clunking,
steel rollers,
over youngsters and oldsters alike...
of man's singing steel arms of DEATH and paring
bones to house this evil creature of DOOM.

Of man they whispered.
CHANGING PHASES

This room was once blue
It was five years ago Clarence the painter
changed it to green
I had many good cries here
The windows are all lined up on one wall
The other bedrooms get much more light
My sister can see the sun rise
Her walls are burnt orange
I used to envy her,
but I became attached to the gloominess
of my room
My parent's room is next to mine
It was good this way
I'd run there when I was scared at night
Their room was always white
I felt secure there
I am thinking now
The house is not mine anymore
The memories and growth remain
A changing phase in a growing child's life
Ilene Miklos

MORTALITY

Your coarse hand
Tense upon my unsteady shoulder
Sympathetic, but resolute words
Telling I must accept it
No...No
Echoes within-

She is standing
Dove white hair
Polished cheeks
Blue flamed eyes crinkled
Gnarled fingers accustomed to work
Wanting to sit with me
Tell me stories
Bake poppy seed cake
Knit slippers

I reached to touch her
Your words trapped
Recoiling in my ears
A whispering tone
She is dead
Tears traverse my face
LETTER POEM

Last time I saw you seems like years. I hear talk. The kind that reeks of memories and that which we fear in sleep's hollow moments. Think of where I'm writing from: the place, the heart. The rain falls like tears here, but sometimes I let my eyes do the crying. The winds are violent, but I like to see them dancing with the wrinkled leaves of winter. I met a man who stole your name and made it sweet again. We never stop to think how much we lose, my friend, and with you it was more than just a name. But this is not to say that you have lost your gentle ways. Would the stars be less beautiful if we could not see them? And me? I change with the seasons: with the waxing and waning of the opalescent moon. I do it for you. To give a gift you somehow cannot accept. Autumn falls upon us in sorrow. How easy it is to forget summer when the furry evergreens are its only legacy. I want plenty of soft summers for you. I want someone who's not too intense to scorch you like the burning mid-August sun. You've been through all that. I wait in hopes of reconciliation. I'm wishing you all the best because you matter. I think of you.
INDIAN PAINTBRUSH

it is still in the house
of the flower
the rooms, the leaves
the soft brushstroke
of scarlet paint
the prairie fire flame
that blooms, burns
from spring to early summer
& then is heard no more
Such raucous wanting
brings out the primal.
Our palms peddle need.

We scrawl out missives
to be read as monologues
of habitual comedy.

Not to be scoffed at
the burr on the lip
the pebble in the boot:

a thesaurus of hurts: children
frothing pink at the ears.
The lasher growing more thick-skinned.

Goldenrod will not spare him,
from his guilt, though you sprinkle.
Is it duty, kindness, benediction?

I know not which.
The splurge of color's blinding.
Bethlehem with myrrh, Wisemen, flora

wasn't half such glare & circumstance.
A FLOWER BY ANY OTHER NAME 
in reply to J. Tate's "Peddler"

Here are your flowers 
your mute dark mums 
your only antidote for

insensitivity. The splendor
of meeting depends
on encounter. A wink

can be more exhilarating
than commingling. Aphrodisiac
is not alone the power of

pasqueflower. A blossom
is a blossom
from Illinois Eastward.

There is more sex
in insinuation
than in happening.

The half-clothed lady
is more exciting
than her naked twin.

Something left to
the imagination. For you,
the burning phlox.

For me, passion flower,
Your guise of monkey
doesn't fool me.
When he got home, his mother was glad to see he had been crying. That boy's finally learning how to handle wakes, she thought.
imagine Father Reilly any differently. Russ knew he was in heaven, and imagined him sitting stoically on a puffy white cloud with angels attending him. But would Father Reilly be old and sick in heaven? Would his skin be burned? All the saints pictured in the Illustrated Missalette had died young and vigorous with their pink skin intact, even the martyrs.

It was getting colder, and Russ was glad that he would be home any minute. He took his scarf out of his pocket and put it on, and he remembered something Joey had shown him once. They were in the back yard, just sitting around, when Joey walked over to the garbage pail and opened it. "C'mere," he said, motioning to Russ. "See them white bugs in there?"

Russ looked in the pail and saw the usual swarm of maggots crawling through the swill. "Yeah, so?" he said.

"Well, remember what Sister said about how when you're dead your body is abandoned to the earth? Well, you don't just rot, you know. Bugs, just like the ones in there, eat you all up." He closed the pail with an air of authority and added, "My brother told me so."

Russ now thought of his grandmother at the wake, and of what she looked like at this very moment. The sateen lining of her coffin was a breeding ground for slimy bugs that ate away at her body. By now, he figured that there wasn't much body left, just a skeleton and a few bits of clothing. He wondered if the bugs would eat Father Reilly's badly burned corpse, or if they only ate fresh meat.

He turned the corner onto his home street and quickened his pace. A word suddenly, shockingly, came into his mind—why. Why? He didn't know. All he knew was that he was here. He was hungry. He was cold. He was mortal.

And this time, it was Father Reilly that was dead.
by the confessionals, though, they almost bumped right into Sister Catherine, who had just come into the church. "'Scuse mé Sister," whispered Russ nervously. Suddenly, she stooped down, embraced him, and said, with her voice cracking, "God bless you, dear!" She did the same to Joey, and when she released him and stood straight up again, tears began streaking down her face. She dabbed at them with a torn tissue, and then blew her nose with it.

Russ and Joey left the church and went up the street, now with the wind at their backs, but still they walked with their heads lowered and without speaking. It was almost totally silent outside, except for the occasional dull whoosh of a passing automobile and the distant barks of chained dogs.

When they reached the corner, they both mumbled, "Bye," and Joey crossed the street to go home. Russ turned left and continued toward his own house, and as he did he lifted his head and looked around. The late winter sky was dimming into grey, and seemed to filter down and cover everything with a dusty film. Down the road, he could see one of the few remaining patches of woods, an area which held much fascination for him. Now, though, the trees looked like brown sticks that badly mimicked the telephone poles interrupting the view of them. The curtains, some plain and some patterned, were pulled over all the windows. Russ was reminded of one of his favorite fantasies, in which he woke one morning and found that he was the only person left on the earth. Although he usually thought that this had its good points, he was relieved when he saw an old woman shaking her dust mop out her back door.

Russ kicked a chunk of tar down the sidewalk for a while, but it hit a crack and spun off into the middle of the road. In a way, he now wished that the coffin lid had been opened. He still could not
onto the baseball field. The harsh weather had turned it into frozen mud, but on summer evenings it was the green setting for the Sacred Heart CYO team. Russ liked to come here and stand far down the third base line, away from the cheering parents and girl friends who sat in the makeshift bleachers on the first base side, so he could watch and analyze the game. He knew more about baseball strategy than anyone he had ever met, yet when he played in a pickup game he always misjudged everything hit his way, took too big a lead, and even fell for the hidden ball trick. They always made him play right field against the right-handed hitters and left field against the left-handed hitters.

Russ was startled by the sight of a cigarette butt flying past his nose. "Wake up, Goddamit, let's get to church," Joey snarled. The wind was gusting as they left the protection of the backstop, so they walked the remaining distance to the church with their necks hunched protectively.

The church doorway was draped with black cloth from its base to its pointed top. Joey slowly pushed open the heavy, polished door, and they entered the vestibule. As they dipped their fingers into the oily sponge and crossed themselves, they heard loud sobs reverberating from the vaulted ceiling. Two girls from the eighth grade were crying mournfully and being consoled by the Mother Superior.

Russ and Joey slid into a back pew, on the other side from the crying girls, and knelt down. The church was practically empty, yet five priests were gathered around the altar intoning Latin phrases in an ominous monotone. The coffin was at the end of the aisle, near the communion rail, with its lid sealed tight. This fact, however, now gave Russ little comfort.

They feigned praying for a minute, then hurried as subtly as they could toward the door. As they came
LOOKING OUT FOR MR. GOODBAR

every time i stand on a corner
or sit on a few gin and tonics
in a waterfront bar
i read the faces of all the lonely boys
scared to go home alone.
and i laugh at the
"what are you doing tonights?
what's a nice boy like you..."
but i play along and follow the rules;
be sharp
be attentive (pretend you're listening)
and take all you can get
though a lot of times you can get more
than what you were asking for.
and i'm proud of being popular
i have a name (a few)
and a skill at which i'm good at.
and half the people who can't look me in the eye
(on the way to the theater, on the way back home)
i believe are struggling w/envy
knowing they can be "getting it" each night
fantasizing the pleasure and sometimes the pain
and the money, oh the money you can
buy such pretty things.
and it's good to know you have the power to say no
to dismiss
to turn away and break some hearts
(what i love breaking hearts!)
my name is fire
and you can't put me out
just pull some alarms and run from being burnt.
GROWING UP

When I was so very tiny
that looking up
the sky was miles high
and my eyes unfocussed like a dog's
from staring;
in such a small dimension of being
I could actually catch a flattened raindrop
and watch it pool in the hand,
or snare sun smiles on a tilted toenail
or follow a brown and orange caterpillar
miles and miles across the lawn.
Each day stretched time so generously
it made a zillion hours to play.

In those days people's eyes
were small and far away;
they talked a lot in murmurs or smiles
or in obedience sounds you didn't listen to.
But then one day
I was old enough to see across the dining room table
and suddenly
it was always "Time to go" or "Too late".
The editors give special thanks to Robert L. McRoberts, Geoff Clark, and Jim Cathers for editing the staff section.
RESTLESSNESS FOR AUGUST 1st

At midnight I am awake and a single cricket is lighting in the grasses below my window, it creaks like the constant turning of an old doorknob,

I have stepped carefully down the stairway planning each short movement, brushing the carpet with slippered feet; trying to fill the hour: should I bathe tonight or drive into town and slip inside one of the square dark entrances of a bar; I anticipate the backs of people's heads lined up: they always look like lampshades ordered on a counter at a department store.

Instead I look more carefully at the flowers you sent me, the florist's script on the card makes me feel that the bouquet was delivered to an incorrect address: I do not touch the snapdragons and daisies: my hand leans against my side awkwardly, as if I was in a glass blowing shop and only peering at a brittle bowl or animal display.
Wendy Goodman

I think of the shoes I bought earlier: and wish that my closet was nearer to my reach so that I could feel their new leather.

Bending into almost a half circle position on my bed, I think of myself in the form of a seal on a poster who is curled on some shore in Alaska, before the hunters arrive.
I ran in front of the spaniel tonight
looping the corners of the yard
and hearing her hot gulping breaths
as we sped across the spongy ground.

I noticed a tree by the edge of our road
one thick branch jutted out straight
and my hands clutched the bark,
my arms hung, my body became
a hammock as my feet crossed on the branch.
The street and sky were upside down,
a square photograph, I tried to notice
where the houses were in relation
to the incoming dark.
A heavy heat rushed in my head
and I carefully unlaced my limbs.

I could have spun round and round
like I did as a child
I am no longer twelve.
Sitting limply on the damp earth
I pretend not to be frightened.
Last year I could
Lean back patiently
Count each red rose petal
From terraces of white marbled
Luncheon tables and
Taste the summer green,
A sunlit pleasure,
All the while applauding
An all too anxious
Yellow leaf.

You were there, remember?
Beside the watering can.
Pretending you held
Within your fingers
Clovers—
Leaves of four
"THE SILENT CLAM"
(an excerpt from
A PLACE WHERE THE SEA
RUNS UNDERNEATH)

I.

Francie watched the cars pull off the bridge, out of the toll booth, and past them. Passengers' heads were fixed forward ignoring them just as she used to ignore the Salvation Army people when she came out of the department stores at Christmas time.

Stacia followed each car with her thumb and rearranged her fingers into an obscene gesture as they passed by her. A cream colored Cadillac convertible evened itself at twenty feet in front of them and coasted to a silent stop. Two men turned their heads from the front seat and smiled rows of perfectly white grave stone shaped teeth.

"Well Stace, fasten your chastity belt cuz it looks like we're in for a hell of a ride." Before Francie had a chance to bend over and pick up her belongings, the six foot tall passenger had her case loaded into the trunk. Soon after, they were loaded into the back seat and desperately holding their hair for dear life, searching for bobby pins and clips to keep their heads from blowing off.

After a brief conversation, they discovered that the driver's name was Sal and, although Sal was an Italian name, he was not Italian.

"Excuse me if I'm wrong," Francie leaned over and whispered to Stacia while the two in front were busy rolling a joint, "but Sal never did bother to say what nationality he was, did he?"

"Looks Martian to me."

The passenger with the capped teeth, (they must be
fake, Francie kept thinking) was named Kristofer. He pointed out the unusual spelling of his name; both the men concluded that they were all around pretty unique individuals, and wasn't it "lucky" that everyone had the opportunity to meet one another.

"So you're going to New York, huh?" Kris said as he lit the joint and passed it to Sal.

"Yeah! How about that," Francie said in a voice that her relatives used to remark: "How much she's grown up!"

"Well that's funny cuz Sal and I were going to go to New York too. We're makin' a slight stop or two on the way but I guess you were pretty lucky to bump into us, huh?"

"Well, Stacia? Aren't we lucky that ol' Sal and Kris just happened to be going to New York too. Isn't that just something!"

Stacia fumbled with the buttonhole on her jacket. In a desperate attempt to change the conversation, she asked, "Are you from around here?" then cringed as if it were a modified "do you come here often?" Neither of them heard her so she repeated the sentence in a monotone. "Where are you from."

"Connecticut," was the stereo reply.

"Arm pits from the arm pit of the universe," Fran mumbled.

"We live in Newport now. Own a cottage near the beach. It's not bad. It's cheaper than living on campus..."

The word campus jolted Fran's eyeballs wide open and her head turned towards Stacia's equally startled face.

"What school do you go to?" Fran asked through the parted fingers that were resting upon her face and forehead.

"Holy Angels College, why? Do you go there?" Kris asked through his used car salesman's smile.
Holy shit, I'm stuck in a urine yellow caddy with a couple of Catholics. Those brief stops on their way to New York are probably going to be some kind of damn mass or something. Probably going to get ashes mashed into their foreheads. "No, we don't go there. Stacia and I live at Snowflake Arms, that complex over the bridge. We go to—"

"Oh, yeah. We know a lot of people that go to Central. You guys know Robin Tracy?"

"No."

"How 'bout Kim Lyle?"

"Who?"

"Ya know Debbie Webster?"

Both girls shook their heads like pendulums.

"Well anyway. Sal is a Business major and I used to be but I guess I'll just go into biology. What are you doin' at Central?"

"Running away," Francie said, then quickly added, "I'm a Creative Writing major."

"Oh, so you're gonna be a writer," Sal replied and passed the joint to Fran.

So you're gonna be a writer, she thought. Now what kind of question was that? Do people that go to nursing school become nurses? Did she have to answer that question? Did she even have to talk to these people? Did she have to worry about the conversation even though they were still in Rhode Island?

"I'm an Art major." Stacia interrupted Francie's thoughts and took the joint from her outstretched hand. "It'll be easier to talk once everyone's got a buzz on," she said quietly to Fran.

"What'd ya say?" Kris asked without turning around.

"Ah, nice day if it doesn't rain," Francie said.

* * * *
I've got to get out of here,  
I found myself reading  
on the cocktail napkin.  
Happy hour ended two hours ago.  
People shuffle into one another's arms,  
girls perch and pose  
and guys buy them drinks filled  
with synthetic tastes.  
Friday's paycheck talks and talks  
until it becomes a pocketful of change  
and all I can breathe in  
are the insalubrious smells  
of beer and smoke and rhetorical questions.

Sitting in some corner  
I set my first  
drink down  
and flip a coin into the whorl  
of the table.
THE SIX O'CLOCK SNOW

I see the snow
Blinding as I come cold alone
My hands stone frozen pegs

I feel the snow
Dividing air between homes
To your warm legs

I hear the snow
Creaking trees white like bones
Your fiery thighs begging

And the snow
Hears us groaning
The storm sees us edging

Closer to the fire on snow
Closer as the snow stares like stone
In at our liquid embers
"I have to go to the bathroom," Kris said as he nudged his way past Fran's frozen body.
"Go ahead," she said as she pointed to the stall, "but, there's no door."
"Is there usually?"
"Well, aren't there doors in the men's room? I've never been in one."
"You haven't? Well come on then." He grabbed her hand, and dragged her past Sal and Stacia's embraced bodies into the next-door bathroom. Fran froze in her tracks as soon as she entered the men's room, sighed with relief as she discovered that it was not occupied, and turned to leave.
"Francie," Kris said, as she placed her hand on the metal door knob.
"What?" She stopped and spun around losing her balance in the maneuver. Kris caught her about six inches from the floor and brought her back to a standing position. He didn't stop holding her and she didn't know whether to continue staring into his shirt or step back and look up into those movie star teeth. Kris picked her up so that she was standing on her tip toes and kissed her.
"Something about beer."
"What's that," Francie asked being a little shocked by the entire situation.
"It makes me like to kiss people."
"In men's rooms of redneck bars?"
"Well just think. You're the first girl I've ever kissed in the men's room." He hugged her and kissed her again, this time longer, and placed her back down on the floor.
"Now I have something to tell my grandchildren about," she said. "Didn't you say you had to go to the bathroom?"
"Yes, but I'd much rather go in the ladies room. They have better things written on the walls."
different types of perfume for ten cents.

"Darn. I don't seem to have any change on me," Francie said as she held the pipe in her hands waiting for Stacia to locate her disposable lighter. "I really can't believe that I'm doing this. If somebody walks in I think I'm going to turn into silly putty. If this is any indication of how the rest of our little vacation is going to turn out—"

"Shut up and take a hit." Stacia lit the bowl and the two of them just stood there taking and laughing for a while. Fran grabbed a pencil from Stacia's pocketbook and began writing on the dislodged stall door. She read the poem from over Francie's shoulder:

THE SILENT CLAM

The meaning of the afternoon can be found, Within the static smoke that hangs between the leaves Above the bubbling brains.

F.A.F.

"Pretty poor, Fran."
"Piss-poor if ya ask me."
"What's the A stand for?"
"Huh?"

The first F is for Francie, the last F is for Fenway. So, what's the A stand for?"
"Asshole." Francie took the pipe from her and began to choke and laugh at the same time, making her eyes tear and her make-up run. The door flung open and so did Francie's mouth, when she saw that Kris and Sal entered the ladies' room.

"Boy you guys sure are slow. Ya need any help smoking the bowl up, or what?" Sal took the bowl from Fran, and backed Stacia up against the wall, handing her the pipe to allow his free hands to wrap themselves around her shoulders.
Kris called his name, he darted off the bar stool and weaved his way in and out of the scattered tables and rested his body on the booth seat next to Francie. "Car's ready," he said as he grabbed the remains of Fran's salted beer, "but, I'm not!" He drank the beer down without noticing the taste or the girls' snickers, and pulled out a small ball of aluminum foil from his shirt pocket. "The guy at the station was selling black opium hash."

"Any good?" Kris inquired.
"I dunno, let's check it out."
"In the car?"
"In the bathroom. Here, you take this pipe, and I'll take Kris's." He handed Francie a small wooden pipe shaped like the kind she used to buy to blow bubbles out of when she was five years old.
"I'm supposed to go into the bathroom and get high?" she asked as she examined the size of the chunk of hash he inserted into the bowl.
"Yeah, why not. There aren't any girls in here except for you guys. Nobody is gonna walk in on ya."
"Come on Stace. At this point anything daring sounds like fun."
"Oh great, in that case the minute we finish this we can go outside and throw Chinese food at all the cars that go by," Stacia said as she inched her way slowly out of the booth and followed Fran through the creaking wooden door of the ladies' room.
"What a trip this place is," Francie said as she scanned the interior of the bathroom. There was a small plastic door leaning up against the wall that at one time connected to the entry of the stall. An entire volume of names and phone numbers were written upon it, in addition to the various poems and swear words that appeared to be written in laundry marker and crossed off in pencil.
"Oh look, we've got it made now." Stacia pointed to a perfume dispenser that gave a choice of three
"No, that's why I'm going. I've been nowhere except Meriden, Connecticut in my entire life. I plan on never going back there again. If I do I'll end up like everyone else did that stayed there. You see, if anyone stays in that town past the age of twenty-five, a terrible thing happens to them. It's slow but it happens. They just screw themselves into their own little hole in the ground. A large invisible Phillips Screw driver is planted into their sculls at age eighteen and every year God comes out of the sky and gives it a little twist. Eventually they screw themselves into hell."

Kris and Stacia exchanged glances while Francie made her way to the ladies' room.
"Does your friend usually get drunk this easily?"
"Fran? She gets silly on a pony bottle of beer. I imagine she's pretty crocked by now."
"That doesn't worry you?"
"Naw," said Stacia as she folded another sickly piece of pizza into her mouth, "she writes better when she's drunk. Besides, a little beer will do her good." Stacia poured herself another glass and quickly filled Francie's as she made her way back from the bathroom and stumbled knees first into the empty side of the booth.

Fran lifted the foaming glass in her hands and proposed a toast, "Here's to us, cause nobody else is good enough." The others raised their glasses.
"Well," she said, "sounds good to me." Fran took a sip, set the glass down and poured a teaspoon's worth of salt into the beer.
"What are you doing?" Kris demanded.
"I don't know. I just saw the old guy at the bar do it. I guess he knows what he's doing cause he's been here longer than we have." She drank the beer as if she were inhaling air.

It was about ten to three before any of them discovered that Sal was sitting at the bar. Upon hearing
"Wrong. We're going to drink at The Silent Clam."
Stacia watched Kris walk back to the table with a larger-than-usual pitcher of beer.
"Beer's only twenty-five cents a glass here," he announced as he poured three carbonated glasses of the brew.

"What about food?"
"Why, are you hungry, Stacia?"
"It's twelve-fifteen in the afternoon. If I drink beer at this time, I'll get very toastie."
"I'll get a pizza. Here have some beer." Kris jumped up, downed his glassful and poured another. He then went back to the bar and ordered Stacia's lunch.
"What kind of beer is twenty-five cents a glass?" Fran asked as she placed her nose close to her bubbling brew.
"Free beer," said Stacia raising her glass, "drink up, Dollie."

Two pitchers later Sal had not yet arrived, but the pizza had. Fran, however, didn't notice until almost half of it was quickly consumed by her traveling buddies. When she did look at it, most of the cheese had slid off the dough; the entire object looked like a cyclone had struck it.
"You know, once I went to Paris with my family and we ordered a pizza in a French restaurant," Kris began, "and when we got it, it had a fried egg on top of it. That's the way they make them over there."

Fran looked at the pizza, then looked at the dusty plants above her head. No, it wasn't Paris they were in, but it wasn't as bad as being back home. "Do you go to Europe a lot?"
"No, but my family travels a lot. We've been almost everywhere in the U.S. that's worth seeing, you know, Florida, California."
"New York?"
"Oh yeah, why haven't you?"
"Do I have to make another decision today?"
"Come on, let's go in," Kris decided for them and opened the screen door politely.

They walked past several hunched old men that sat at the mile long bar and stared at the cat food commercials on the television screen. As they made their way to the back and sat at a large pizza parlor type booth, Fran could hear the music of an old Green Acre's re-run. There were no menus, place mats or hired help. There were only booths repatched with black adhesive tape, old men, and several large kelly-green artificial hanging plants that drooped amid no-pest strips from the ceiling.

"What da ya want?" a semi-toothless bar maid yelled from one end of the mile long bar.

The three just exchanged glances having never encountered such unfriendly service in their entire sheltered lives.

"Hey, you over there, what da ya want," she yelled again, but this time slamming an old greying counter rag across the beer spigots to free both hands for repairing the static on the old black and white. Kris told the girls that he'd be right back and went over to the bar as to avoid letting the entire world know what their orders were.

"What are we doing here?" Stacia asked as she examined the crust on the plastic salt and pepper shakers.

"Well you see Stace, it's like this. We are stranded in East Cupcake, Rhode Island, somewhere with two people we do not know and so far they haven't asked us for money or sex. Seeing that they are going to "The City," which just happens to be where we are going—and remembering the important fact that so far they haven't asked us for money or sex—then I figure if we are going to eat in The Silent Clam, then that's what God wants us to do."
Steam had been ironed onto the highway at twelve noon that day. And wobbling off the exit ramp was the cream colored Caddie with a tire that slowly sizzled down to semi-flat condition. Coming to a stop was no problem because the road that converged with the highway exit ramp was supplied with plenty of empty curb. Sal lined his car up an even 6 inches from it, and pleasantly coasted to a stop behind a very newly painted Mercedes. The men hopped out without bothering to open the car doors. Stacia quickly jabbed Francie’s sleeping body awake.

"Is it my imagination or is this another cute way to run out of gas when you have a hot date?" Fran asked as she got out of the all too comfortable back seat and shook her body.

Scattered stores and restaurants lined the street and were built out of the typical old New England bricks that one usually finds in an old shipping town. "Despite the home town appearance, I find little comfort in being stranded in Betsy Ross’s backyard," Fran said.

"Listen, I'll just run to the service station down the street there and see if I can get this thing changed. Why don't you and the girls go get something to eat or something?" Sal began to walk in the direction of the Shell station situated at the fork at the end of the road. Kris helped Stacia out of the car and began walking in the same direction.

After about a hundred yards they stopped in front of a place called The Silent Clam. It was directly across the street from the Shell station on another fork, giving the building a triangular shape that even a clam wouldn't be caught dead in.

"Wanna go in there?" Kris asked the girls.

"I don't care. Do you Fran?"
Andy Dickerman
Edward H. Dorn
P. Guillotte
Karla M. Hammond
Gayle Elen Harvey
Tawnya M. Ison
Margaret MacColl Johnson
Mil Kinsella
Paul W. Levesque
Ilene Miklos
Randy E. Morrison
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Plus: a staff section