

## BEAT THE DUST

September 2008

Heidi James is interviewed by Adelle Stripe



AS: Which one writer first inspired you to start writing?

HJ: I've always wanted to write, was fascinated by language. I remember being four and standing under the kitchen table listening to my Nan and Aunts talking about deeply personal things and having the realization that there were so many ways to use magical words.... I come from a very unlitrary family; we had few books, though I was always desperate to read more. My mother would moan that my nose was always in a book.... I learnt to read early and couldn't stop.... I started stealing penguin classics from WH Smiths (I figured they must be the right thing to read) when I was 10 and fell in love with Joyce.... Didn't understand it, but knew it was extraordinary....

AS: Is it true you were kicked out of GCSE English? Did that affect your desire to become a writer?

HJ: Yes, the bastards.... Wouldn't let me submit my poetry so I lacked enough course work. The teacher concerned took great pleasure in denying me entry.... Bitter old cow....

AS: Who was your teenage pin-up?

HJ: Lou Reed.... Boys in eye liner....

AS: What would be your Death Row meal?

HJ: Venison in red currant sauce, a bottle of Amarone.... good cheeses, Italian ice cream.... Sounds good....

**wounding**, the first chapter of a new novel by Heidi James

*There is no gratitude in mercy and in medicine*

*Gertrude Stein, Tender Buttons*

She is reminded of an early love. Her feet are tucked behind the legs of her chair. She leans forward on to a small round table, just big enough for two, child-like, her elbows either side of her cup of tea, her hands folded into a fist. A large menu is tacked to the blue painted walls, listing everything the café has to offer. Simple and ordinary, nothing to confuse, no secret ingredients, no unknown terminology: sandwiches, tea, coffee, full English, jacket potatoes, shepherds pie, cheese salad. The door is wide open. It is summer outside, people walk by with sunglasses blanking out their eyes, their arms and legs exposed to the sun. A radio plays rap music in the kitchen behind the counter. At the table next to her a teenage girl reads aloud a text message to her friend. The girls look alike: inconsistent, tired despite their youth with black rims around their mollusc-damp eyes, their faces interrupted by makeup and spots, thin yet padded with puppy fat, they are plain yet alluring. She glances at them; she wasn't even listening at first. Cora was waiting.

'That was his last message. I haven't heard from him since.' The girl's friend mumbles comfort and reaches an arm around her shoulder as she wipes her eyes. 'It's been five days. It doesn't make any sense.'

They both have a layer of gloss sticky on their thin lips; their teeth are dull and gritty by comparison. Starkly real against the plastic flexibility of their lips, the teeth and tongue seem almost obscene, fleshy and imperfect as they are. The teeth, almost yellow, like ivory, tea and nicotine stained, are stout, small labourers grinding down behind which the tongue, muscular in its thick membrane, is ugly too, a teller of lies and truths, flatterer, slanderer, but whilst quiet, it slumps in the mouth like an animal, a moist creature, testing the air; it guards the dark entrance into the body, guards the mind and its secrets.

What it is to remember. Memory, with its grooves and paths, well worn furrows in the brain, along which an impression: shadows, scents, tastes; are dusted down, shook out like a rug by a sharp electrical pulse and ferried to the projector-like lobes, where they can be watched over and over. A gloss, a sheen on each of the reworked clips, they are... what's the word? Restored? Rehabilitated? Perhaps just edited will do, by time and good will in the synaptical archives. It's all dust, potentially anyway. A nothing, so what does it matter if each reminiscence is worn shadow thin and patched up. Who will test the veracity of our memory? Prodding and poking about, digging with honest white hands - bone-white hands - to ferret out a lie or untruth, half-truth, no truth. Bone white hands, dig and dig. Exposure. Exposing what was submerged,

bringing it into the scrutiny of the open air. A good clean blast of oxygen and light, that will do the trick, get to the quick of it, the nub. Perhaps it's best to forget. There is nothing to see anyway, best to forget. The future will be shaped by all that came before, no need to re-examine the past, it is plaited into the present, filaments that bind. Truth or not, there is no escape, it's always there, nudging you forwards. Best to forget.

Her first boyfriend: Darren. She dips her finger into a drift of spilt sugar; it glitters against the brown Formica table top. Absently she tastes the beguiling sweetness, the grains dissolving on her tongue, leaving behind no lasting impression. She remembers the pale length of him, over six feet tall and romantically stooped at the shoulder, his head cocked to one side as if always ready to listen.

A waitress, her stained apron wrapped over faded jeans, brisks over to her table and takes her empty cup.

'D'you want another tea? Or something?' She has a reassuringly English accent.

'Yes, please. A tea. Thank you.' The apron has a stain shaped like a bird with folded wings, a bird that won't fly. The waitress wipes the table down, removing the glittering sugar in one sweep, flicking the rag to the floor and leaves. Darren. The pale length of him, unfurled like rope across her bed. Listening to the tapes of music he made her, music he thought she ought to listen to as he judged her music tastes to be dull and unsophisticated. She remembers him playing her a CD of a Mahler symphony, watching her closely as she laughed at the unwitting recording of an audience member sniffing and coughing in the background, barely concealed by the flexing of the strings. She liked the incongruity, the bad mannered body muscling in on the music, fixing it to a specific moment, disallowing the notes their inhuman transcendence. He didn't find it funny, just continued stroking her with his girlish hand heavy on her breast, fingers quick on her expectant skin. He is remembered mainly as sensation – colour, taste and the drowsy scent of his short brown hair. Long kisses, her lips closed over the darkness, her parents downstairs, the clang of supper being prepared, her father's weight on the stairs - his tread, coming closer as clothes were straightened, bodies pulled apart, regaining particularity, unmerged.

They took long walks, cutting through the woods at the edge of the town, hand in hand, stumbling over tree roots like lost children in a fairy tale, the swaying branches over head shifting the shadows. Rain lurked in the darkening clouds, unpredictable, unlike the lovers who were as predictable as stones. He, Darren, would slow his pace, blocking her momentum, pulling her closer and she, feeling his intention in the shortening of his steps would pick up speed, with nervousness needling her stomach, she'd speak, too quickly and senselessly, her mouth a moving target, delaying the first penetrating press of his lips. Those few seconds delayed, suspending

time – cupping it in her hands, a futile grasp, like a magic trick, now you see it, now you don't – those few ripe seconds in which the idea of the kiss, so much sweeter than the real thing, the shallow breathed eagerness, riveted her body. Her fingers pressed in the yielding flesh of her thighs, she dug in her nails, the small pain fixing the moment, pinning it down into her body before his pointed tongue investigated her mouth and she was back, dulled, the moment of suspension pierced. Her feet in loyal contact with the earth, she didn't move.

He wrote her letters, at once grand and vague, detailing his passion for her in his tense handwriting - a script that looked as if it were jerked out by a captive hand - the love he felt that seemed to them both immensely singular, unlike anything anyone could possibly have felt before. But mostly, she remembers the raw pulse of blood to her head, the giddiness aroused by him, caused by his little torments while his kindnesses did nothing for her. The letters would come after these small cruelties, usually petty things: he would ignore her when he was with his friends, or perhaps hint that his feelings were waning, causing her to doubt his love and her capacity to keep him enthralled, pushing her away from him, dropping the sucking weight of her hand and in the rush of her pain, her tears, he would console and reassure, seeming to wallow in her misery, reassured himself of his potency, his guilty hands folding around her face, rubbing her tears into the plump flesh of her cheeks and the passion, the fluid weakness he caused. The pain was love to her, it made her real, she was nothing without the words he used to know her, to hurt her.

The waitress puts down her tea, spilling some into the saucer. Sweat decorates the waitress's brow, without air conditioning the café swelters in the summer heat- a few fans push the warm air back and forth, making no difference to the temperature. Cora feels nothing, is neither too hot nor too cold.

The last time, the last perfect pain, neat and bloodless, came when he was quite sure he couldn't love her anymore, now that he was going to art college in the city. Spoken politely, firmly without any force as he sat in the pink space of her room on the smooth sheets of her bed. Behind his head, a poster of a horse was tacked to the wall. He had taken down and carefully rolled up the poster of Picasso's Guernica, before turning to her and saying 'It was just a loan, you know; I never said you could keep it.' He leant back against a cushion, his hands palm down, an index finger teasing a loose thread in his jeans. Fine black hairs guarded the back of his hands, she hadn't noticed them before; he was less of a boy, becoming more a man. He crossed his legs at the ankles, revealing the worn soles of his trainers, ground down on just one side, showing his imperfect stance, his sloppy walk. Her feet were bare.

'I don't fancy you anymore. You can't kiss. I've moved on, we've outgrown each other. There is just no point.' The space of her heart - livid, enormous - contracted, before flexing and punching against her ribs. The colours of her room: the pinks and whites, the splodges of blue and red hanging in her wardrobe, the square of light pressed out of the sky by the window, the green of his shirt, rushed into her eyes, eluding the shape of their objects, colour welling up in her tear ducts. The outside diffused whilst inside she felt all her processes realign, shift into a new symmetry, clarified by one hot moment of real agony. It thrilled her.

Darren stood, 'Don't cry, I knew you'd cry. I hate it when you cry, I'm sorry. I'm sorry but I'm leaving now. I have to go.' He stood and watched her cry for a few seconds, as if fascinated by his affect on her before heading down the stairs, the poster and his tapes stuffed into his bag. She heard the front door close politely. She waited, eyes closed, the colours oozing from under her eyelids, her toes curling into the floor, as precise tides of sensation invaded her body. She waited before running to her father; colourless tears now on her face, wrapping herself in his arms, and in his scent – of soil, a mushroomy tang of dark spoors, of scotch.

'My poor little girl, my Darling, has he hurt you? Has he hurt my baby? What did he do to you? I swear if he touched you...' She shook her head.

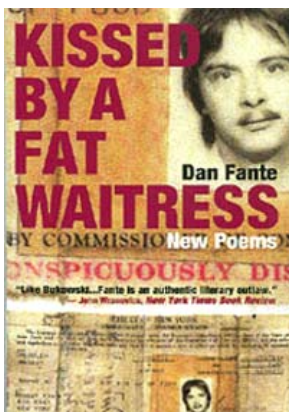
'He finished with me.'

'Did he? Stupid bastard. How dare he! Well, that just shows how stupid he is, doesn't it? You're mine, my little girl. Don't mind him, Sweetheart. I'm here. You'll be fine, I promise. Daddy will always be here. I love you and I always will. I won't let anyone hurt my little girl.' His hands firm around her waist. She was all light and air, delicate and protected, the pain hot and comforting in the pit of her chest. Alive. Her father stroked her back, smoothed her hair, his large fingers confirming her shape, the carpet burning a nylon heat into her feet. Behind them, sealed off behind the glass of the window, her mother stood in the rectangular garden, a rake in her left hand, the bright flare of pink delphiniums eclipsing her face.

She finishes her tea. Leaves two pounds on the table for the waitress to collect. The waitress has thick lips, naked over crooked teeth.

It's mouths that she notices, she feels surrounded by mouths: breathing, gasping, sucking, chewing, biting, ripping mouths. Like a mother bird, precarious over the nest edge, she is surrounded by questing mouths. Mouths that tell, ask, shout, demand, whisper - mouths that swallow whole. She must go home. To the mouths there. She has waited long enough. Nothing happened. Nothing changed.

Dan Fante is interviewed by BTD's ed



Q: How did the collaboration with Hollowblue come about and what's it like working together?

A: I met Hollowblue through the singer Anthony Reynolds (of Jack fame). We do concert tours where I read two poems and they play two songs. It's a lot of fun.

Q: For those who haven't yet read 'Kissed by a Fat Waitress', what can they expect from your latest collection of poems?

A: Readers can expect honesty. And intensity, I suppose. I'm always told that my stuff is intense. They're recent collected poems, so, in terms of where I'm at, they're pretty current.

[Ed's note: Dan's opening poem in 'Kissed by a Fat Waitress', *mom at eighty-nine*, featured in the first issue of Beat the Dust in October 2007.]

Q: Obama versus McCain - which way do you feel the American people will vote in the Autumn and why?

A: Ralph Nader said if the Democrats don't win the election by a landslide then they should change the name of their party. I agree.

Q: What poem, novel, play and song do you wish you'd written?

A: 'Long Day's Journey Into Night' by Eugene O'Neill. Damn brilliant play. 'Last Exit to Brooklyn' by Hubert Selby is the novel that changed my life. Brilliant. Lucille by Little Richard was an amazing rocket from Mars to me when I was twelve. Richard was sooo out there. So extreme in 1956. He rocked my world. Poetically I like Hank Bukowski as the best contemporary poet. But there's a line from W.B. Yeats that kills me: It goes like this:

*...and bending down beside the glowing bars  
murmur a little sadly how love fled  
and paced upon the mountains overhead  
and hid his face amid a crowd of stars*

Q: Tell us something about the poem we're featuring in this issue of Beat the Dust.

A: It was written a week ago [beginning of Aug 08] in my grandpa's home town in Italy, Torricella Peligna.

**august 2008** by Dan Fante

Up here in Torricella Peligna  
a thousand years from Rome  
where you can almost kiss Mt. Miella on the lips  
every year comes the John Fante Festival

and I ride mister Boeing's best, most-trusted silver bullet  
twenty-one hours just to be in the audience  
suffering jetlag and putting off vital deadlines  
and not writing my crazy books  
to celebrate the life and work of my old man

Because - see -  
after twenty-five summers I still miss him  
and his bad temper and his genius  
and his ability to reduce any smug Hollywood producer  
to tears  
in twenty words or less  
or throw a drink in his face

Those memories allow me - make sure I still understand  
- that -  
as a man and an artist,  
if I don't have passion and I don't have truth  
then what is left  
is the rotting wet crotch of complacency and death

So here in my heart - today -  
John Fante lives again  
bigger than shit

My God - my inspiration - my best friend

Ciao Papa!

Barry Graham is interviewed by his Dad



DAD: I don't like the title of this novel. What's so fucking obvious about it?

BG: They were all eating cream of wheat, get it, cream of wheat.

DAD: Your mother's not dead. Why are you pretending your mother is dead? You know that shit's gonna make her cry. She's always crying. Is that what you're trying to do, make your mother cry?

BG: I know she's not, but you remember that one day don't you, the train tracks, the macaroni and cheese? All the ants surrounding our picnic table.

DAD: What did I tell you about picking your goddamn nose and writing stories about it?

BG: You told me it was ok to use my brother's hamster as a basketball and shoot him into your old shoeboxes we set up all over the living room floor. We stopped when its little eye popped and bled on the carpet and mom was boiling water for tea.

DAD: I just told you to stop talking about your mother, and her tits, why are you mentioning her tits in this novel?

BG: You never said no to me. Not even when she potty trained me. I shit my pants until I was 10.

DAD: At least you had pants. Who bought you your fucking pants?

BG: Mom.

**a summation of all things obvious (atlantic city blues)**, first chapter of a novel by Barry Graham

I was picking my nose and rolling the boogers into little balls and listening to whatever stupid shit was on the radio. I usually roll the window down and stick my hand out and let the wind blow them off the tips of my fingers but it was raining. I tried to flick one on the passenger side floor but it wouldn't come off so I wiped it on the bottom of the seat instead. It was *Crazy* or *Amazing* or some other Aerosmith song that nobody knows any of the words to except for the chorus. The rain was slowing and my wiper blades were screeching across the windshield every third or fourth time, so I turned them off, along with the radio and hoped for the best. The night was quiet and it smelled quiet and I almost forgot where I was headed.

I should have unlocked the door and went in, but I didn't. I stood outside beating on the glass just to see how long it would take until I was acknowledged. I took the place over a few weeks ago from a guy I knew since high school. He bought it off a friend of his father's with some money he stashed away from a series of armed robberies. He took three quarters of a million dollars in rings and necklaces and diamonds from seven different jewelry stores in the metro Detroit area. The police caught on and all three of his cousins flipped him and he served two and a half years then got out and opened Backwoods Bar and Grill. He was medium height, shaved head, scruffy and thick like a grizzly bear, so that's what everyone called him. He had a

tattoo of Jesus on his right forearm. Jesus is bleeding from his crown of thorns and the blood drips over his eyes and down his cheeks.

I met Grizzly working at McDonalds the summer I turned sixteen and managed his restaurant for a month before I took it over. Now I had to stand outside in the rain for ten minutes until someone let me in.

"Derek? What the hell are you doing out there? Why didn't you use your key?"

"Make me a cheese steak hoagie. Lots of cheese, mushrooms, onions, all that shit."

"Why are you here so late?"

"I'm on my way outta town for a few days. I need you to open up shop for awhile."

"That's fine. Who's gonna close?"

"I pulled Jalen from morning shift. He's gonna come in and close, you're gonna open. No bullshitting around while I'm gone. You're in charge. I'll call twice a day."

"Is everything okay?"

"The safe is gonna be short tonight. When you're done counting that last drawer just set it to a hundred bucks and pocket the rest. Where's my sandwich?"

KC is an alright kid for being a fag. He used to bring in some really good shit and smoke it with us until he got pulled over and searched by the police then he started leaving it at home. One day we smoked a joint in the stock room beside two boxes of Worcestershire sauce and he offered to give me a blow job. I was high as a goddamn redwood and almost unzipped my pants, but I told him I wasn't fucked up enough and he never asked again. He's had better luck with some of the other guys back there in the stock room. It really was some good ass weed.

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I put some Italian dressing on the cheese steak hoagie and it scorched my tongue when I took a bite. Two half chewed mushrooms fell out of my mouth. They landed on my t-shirt and I picked them off, ate them, and washed them down with a bottle of Miller High Life. I took two cases from the cooler and four thousand dollars from the safe. KC asked me again if everything was okay and I told him again not to bullshit around while I'm gone. The rain slowed back down and 90s rock was still on the radio. At least it wasn't 80s rock; puffy haired douche bags with mascara and lipstick and blush smeared all over their faces, wearing band t-shirts and spandex, singing love ballads to groupie whores and letting their guitar solos last longer than they should. I had that to be thankful for. I drank another High Life. I stopped for gas just before crossing the state line into Ohio. I filled up with premium and took a piss before I paid. There was a pink piece of gum in the urinal and a bloody snot wad stuck to the freshener. I flushed twice, once before and once after, and washed my hands but didn't dry them. The register girl had curly red hair and freckles and big tits. She had brown eyes and thick hips and I wondered if her tits were

big-firm or big-droopy once she unbuckled her bra. I paid for the gas and bought a lottery ticket and a pack of Swisher Sweets. It looked like her name tag was pinned to her right nipple. Women pretend not to like it when guys talk to their tits. Her name was Sherry. My mother's name is Sherry. She died when I was twelve. I came home from school and she was sitting at the table wearing just a pair of red panties, thongs, and her face was head down in a bloody bowl of cream of wheat. There were clumps smeared into her dark brown hair. Should I say *was* instead of *is*? My mother's name *was* Sherry? I never know how to say it. My mother's tits were big-firm.

The gas station was big and busy. Three women in Ohio State jackets were standing by the door looking at a map, pointing at Cincinnati. Two of them were thin, twins, brunettes. The other was a friend, blonde-headed, frumpy. Her tits were small even though she was fat. She was eating Funyons and twisting the knob on a bubble gum machine. She bent down to get her gum and dropped two Funyons and a truck driver came out of the bathroom and crushed them with his boot. She looked at his ass when he walked by. I stood beside the twins and pretended to study the map then got a piece of gum from the machine and spit it out before I got back in my car. One of Daisy's postcards was from Cincinnati. It was the first one she sent, three years ago. I had them all sitting beside me in an old shoebox I found underneath her bed. Empty boxes, that's all she left behind. I drank another beer, rolled down the window and smashed the two empty bottles on the highway. There were two cars behind me, a red mini-van and a green SUV. The mini-van swerved to miss the bottles, lost control and drove off the road into the field. The SUV stopped so I didn't have to.

Jack Henry, Poet Laureate of Toad Suck, California, population 23, literate population, 2 is interviewed by Arden Moore



AM: What's your favorite color?  
 JH: Black

AM: Isn't that a shade, not a color?  
 JH: It's subjective.  
 AM: Are you always so argumentative  
 JH: Yes.  
 AM: Are you really this boring?  
 JH: Yes.  
 AM: When was the last time you had adult relations?  
 JH: Thirteen years.

**book of henry, 1:2-5** by Jack Henry

2

i saw  
 christ  
 carrying  
 the Olympic torch  
 in Ecuador  
 on a friend's tv

the hair  
 the robe  
 the whole bit

no one seemed to  
 notice him  
 or really care

3

the route  
 was lined w/riot  
 police carrying  
 AK47s and tear gas  
 awaiting protesters  
 that didn't  
 bother to show  
 up

4

seems to me  
 that only anger  
 and exposure  
 matters  
 any more

if people focused  
 on  
 the world around  
 them and less  
 on  
 snapshots of  
 britney's junk  
 christ carrying

a torch  
in Ecuador  
would mean  
something

5

i flipped  
the channel  
to an entertainment  
news channel  
seems britney's jack  
is no longer vogue  
we've moved on  
to Lindsey being  
a lesbian

i cracked a beer  
and went outside

Heidi James is interviewed by Adelle Stripe (continued)



AS: Do you still practice ballet, even in private?

HJ: Not often enough. I'm horribly unsupple and lazy.... I do love it still....

AS: What is the greatest film ever made?

HJ: Hmmmm difficult.... Herzog's 'Stroszek'.... but I love 'Sante Sangre' by Jodorowsky.... I'm a sick catholic after all....

AS: What book do you wish you had written?

HJ: 'The Aenid', 'Ulysses', 'The Hour of The Star'.... more besides.... So many.

AS: Do you ever return to Chatham?

HJ: Occasionally, to see family.... I hate it, yet it haunts me.... In running away so vehemently, of course, I run head long back to it.

AS: What book is on your bedside table?

HJ: Stuff to review.... Research for PhD and for pleasure, 'On Ugliness' by Eco....

AS: Can we buy any of your B-movies on DVD or are they confined to the vaults of VHS?

HJ: I don't know! I think one or two are on DVD.... I still get royalties (2 quid here and there) for TV stuff.... such a load of crap it makes me chuckle. I was such a plank!

**the pool** by Heidi James

The children lay in front of the television. The breakfast things were washed up. The sun shone blue outside. Though cold, it was a pleasant day. The children were on the thuggish weave of the rug; the weave so thick it felt like lying on interlocking fists.

It was ten am. They were going to go swimming. It was not a school day, though she had thought it was and had got up early, made packed-lunches for both children, dressed them in uniforms, their freshly washed heads bobbing in the brisk rub of her tender hands. She smoothed their ruffled hair, a palmed pleasure. Touching the skin of the children lulled her. They walked to school to find it closed. She had forgotten and they ran back, laughing. The children thrilled to have an unexpected liberty, which ran ahead, beckoning. She remembered that feeling, the future beckoning – smelling of freshly cut grass – the glut of time still to be consumed. The children ran ahead.

She closed the bedroom door, her cup of tea in one hand. She sat at her dressing table and unwrapped the coke she had left over from the weekend. She cut two lines and snorted quickly. She applied moisturizer under her eyes. Faint lines, rarely used paths, were forming. It was ok, she didn't mind. Her tits were still firm. There was still time. She coughed and a thrust of vomit hit the back of her teeth. She swallowed it back down and gulped the rest of her tea. The little dog with the ginger beard stretched out of its sleep and nudged her thigh with its nose. 'Not now, Clarice.' She pushed it down standing to leave.

In the car, her mood lifted, suddenly. She turned the music up and smiled over her shoulder at the children, dancing in her seat. The children beamed back, as if in encouragement, rewarding her for the behaviour they found most attractive. They drove past the river, singing, tourist boats cut between the two galleries, a cormorant hung its wings – a black v – to dry; but none of this was seen by the occupants of the car. She stopped at a red light, the engine ticking over. Her feet pressed the pedals, driving giving her an unexpected pleasure, the swing of the car, her hands on the wheel, her body becoming car, metal, twinned machines adding to the gathering speed in the narrow streets, while the little boy in the back of the car whooped. She felt the flex of her spine as she pressed back into the seat.

She parked and they walked into the stagnant atmosphere of the sports centre. The children wriggled as she slipped them into their swimsuits, their pale lengths, hairless and flat-toed. She undressed, her feet pressed against the wet tiles; she stood firm, resisting the urge to fall. She pulled on the loose swimming costume, black and cut away at the back. Her hipbones protruded like antlers from a skull. 'Come on. Let's go.'

The children ran into the screech of the pool. She stepped forwards, walking on water, as slick as a slip of oil, wading in, the liquid drag on her thighs, the children plunging into the chemical dip of the waves. She sunk her shoulders under, the chlorine burning her nostrils. Other mothers and their children played together, noisily.

Her children, a girl and a boy, paraded about her, sleek-skinned in the slip of time, and they began a game of Piggy in the Middle with the inflatable ball she'd brought from home. Another child, its face a collision of genetic mishaps, a broken doll, sidled up to her. 'Can I play?' She looked at the child, a small girl, it's villainous body a fleshy betrayal, though it was hard to tell just quite what was wrong with it. The woman sniffed out the mistaken biology like an animal. 'If you like.' The little girl stepped into the game, too bold, she grabbed at the ball, shrieking excitedly, her enthusiasm an impolite explosion, before tossing it towards the boy. Her children looked at her, the monster was spoiling their game. 'Where is your mother?' The little girl pointed towards a large woman, sitting on the opposite side of the pool, her feet churning tired circles in the water. She was looking down, as if waiting for a message from the depths. Her large thighs, flattened against the beige tiles, supported the relax of her stomach; it sat on her lap, like a headless child. She paid no attention to her little girl.

The boy threw the ball to his sister, who reached the slender twists of her arms to catch the multi-coloured globe just as the other child launched forward to catch it herself. As her feet slid from under her body, she punched forward under the water, splayed out and amphibious. The daughter caught the ball. The future tilted haphazard in the air, drifting, sucked up by cooling columns of space, shorn of gravity, eluding the woman's grasp. It is a butterfly with shabby wings, always remade, or birdsong, repeating, ascending. It is nothing. She looked down at the child, a crescent of unspooled hair suddenly lustrous under the water, its mouth open, muted under the waves, its limbs comic, trying to right itself. She laughed, reminded of her childhood games with her own brother, turning beetles upside down and waiting to see if they could right themselves, tickled by that patient yet obstinate will to live. How absurd, to thrust towards a half-life. She looked about her, at the endless repetitions of love, minor cruelties, all eventual loss. The child suspended in the liquid like a specimen. Her children pulled the little girl to its feet. The child, returned to the air, gasping, choked, her gaping suck a panic that isolated her from everyone else in the pool. Righted, her momentary stutter towards death

forgotten, the child pushed her hair from her eyes and called 'Play again, play again, play again, play again, play again!' They began the game again, the children splashing, whilst the woman watched. The punching fist that was her heart decelerated, returning to its established rhythm, she began to feel the cold.

They walked to the car. Black and shiny, parked under a small stand of beech trees. She hates trees, dominant and burly, hierarchical, the shamed roots denied light, whilst the crown sways in the sun. She preferred the grass, endless green shafts docile in bold repetition; like days after days after days. She strapped the children in. Sitting in the front seat, the key in the ignition, she paused, feels the ecstatic rush and suck of breath for a moment. The disabled girl and her mother walked out of the leisure centre and past the car. The child twisting and dangling from her mother's hand, skipping, her wet hair dripping down her back. Her mother walked on, looking forwards, careful to avoid a puddle.

#### Justin Hyde on marriage, dating and fatherhood



On marriage:

- specious institution rooted in fear mistaken for an untenable plausibility.
- shrapnel in the veins of a storybook day.

On dating women who own tarot cards, books on the interpretation of dreams, or a butterfly tattooed anywhere on their body:

- don't.

On what fatherhood means to him:

- a chance to break a three generation pattern of non-existent relationships between father and son.

**after falling through the camel's eye** by Justin Hyde

you start to understand  
grown men  
tending gardens

&

human shapes  
flinging themselves  
off the top level  
of parking ramps.

you empathize with  
ufo conspiracists

overweight housewives  
with a neurotic attachment  
to coupons

&

the genius apathy  
of water.

after falling through the camel's eye  
an old laotian  
in a five gallon hat  
sitting next to you at south-port  
on a monday morning says:

hey chum pal chum help me with this:

he pours a shot of 151  
over his palm:

you don't hesitate  
plucking the black heads  
of six roots  
out of the wart  
with rusty tweezers  
while he holds the  
flesh open with his pocket knife  
and simultaneously  
tries selling you  
three hundred dollars of counterfeit twenties  
for thirty-five bucks:

or maybe straight up trade  
for those fancy running shoes  
you got there  
make an offer tom-dick-joe,  
he says

smiling through  
no teeth.

### **my first hooker**

mike klausen  
pocketed our five-dollar bills  
told us to sit down  
on the couch  
in his trailer.

guns and roses  
blared  
over the stereo.

his sister barbie  
came out  
in a beach towel.

she was twenty  
maybe thirty.

we were  
ten.

towel  
hit the floor.

her thighs were plastered  
with spider veins  
small open wounds  
crisscrossed  
her arms.

she came closer

swaying her hips  
like a tranced  
cobra.

my stomach turned  
like it did that day  
i saw the retarded woman  
tip her wheelchair  
in front of the grocery store  
and blood ran  
into her eyes.

a white string  
dangled  
between barbie's legs.

jay asked her  
what it was.

she laughed  
and slurred  
go ahead  
and pull it.

he wrapped it  
around his finger  
and tugged.

then  
he shoved it  
under my nose

&

i  
passed out.

### **at the Q on a wednesday afternoon in december**

practising bank shots  
at a table  
in the far corner.

two workers  
were at a table across from me  
taking measurements  
to re-felt it.

he looks like a college boy  
ask him,  
heavy-set guy in overalls  
said to his partner.

they were arguing over  
eight times seven.

fifty-six,  
i said. but  
i hadn't snapped it off rote  
had to work back  
knowing eight and five was forty  
and add sixteen to that:

i'd been in remedial math  
all the way through high-school.

whole episode broke my concentration  
it was pay by the hour  
grabbed the rack of balls  
headed for the bar.

take it easy,  
i gave them  
pistol-wrist.

hope we didn't run you off,  
said his partner  
younger guy  
white-sox pullover  
adam's apple of horse.

not at all,  
i said  
headed downstairs  
handed the bartender  
the rack of balls  
and ordered  
a rum and coke.

i was a college boy - -

didn't feel like it though,  
didn't have that paradigm of ambition  
that supercilious eye  
those base-ten blueprints - -  
but i knew their words  
and liked the women  
at their house parties.

i came from people like those two upstairs  
but wasn't one of them either  
though i preferred their company  
over the other type.

i finished the rum and coke  
thinking how  
i didn't belong  
much of anywhere.

i liked that.

i liked that a-lot.

i ordered another  
rum and coke  
and a  
shot of tequila.

Craig Wallwork interviews God



Craig: You look well. Been on holiday?

God: Yeah, two weeks in Jerusalem.

Craig: Why Jerusalem?

God: I heard they produce a fine cheese.

Craig: Do they even have cows in Jerusalem?

God: They must because I brought you some cheeses back.

Craig: You brought me back cheeses from Jerusalem?

God: Well, I say Jerusalem, really it was Nazareth.

Craig: You brought me back the cheeses of Nazareth?!

[Ed's note: This story is written using the "burnt tongue" writing style, which basically involves playing with the phrasing to make the reader slow down and ponder the true meaning of the story. Think literary speed bump.]

**a neck that's not thick** by Craig Wallwork

The neck I have you could easily feel each finger meet on each hand if you were to choke me. As you might care to imagine, a neck like mine brings with it more trouble than a neck not thin. I have broad shoulders, strong back and quite a large chest. But having such a neck makes me appear less of the man that I am.

I know another neck. It belongs to a work friend, who I will call Mark. It sits on skinny shoulders that hang over a sick dog's body with ribs that you could see if the dog hadn't ate for awhile. Because you would need freakishly large circus hands to feel each tip of each finger should you wish to squeeze the life out of Mark, it has caused him to endure less problems than myself. Or so I have been led to believe.

A few days ago, he handed me a book: *How to improve your life in 90 days*. With spread wide lips that pushed his jaw fully into the full girth of his neck, he told me he's going to do it, Improve His Life. I had to ask where he got the book from. "The bank", he said brushing his index finger over his overly ripe Adam's apple. I asked why had the bank given him this book and he told me it was a gimmick to help you manage all aspects of your life productively. If he could manage his life efficiently, he could also manage his finances in a similar fashion. That's what the bank told him.

What eventually led Mark to manage his life and finances more productively wasn't so much the book, but his neck. Mark is skin and bones, but his neck is thick, so he looks a little bigger in jumpers and heavy knit garments, more intimidating you might say. People who are easily intimidated by others go a little more out of their way for those who are less intimidating. While Mark read the author's note, I turned on the radio on my desk and heard a clock chime eleven times. One minute of silence for all those who died in the war unfurled after the eleventh. Slicing through the static hiss of radio silence, a lonely trumpet resonated around some structure I could not see. Without care or thought for the fallen soldiers, the person I call Mark said, "So I'm going to do it: manage my life more productively. But maybe in 45 days. I'll skip a few chapters."

My doctor, who has a lightly tanned and reasonable neck, tells me there is no operation available. I ask him if there's an operation to shave a few inches off my jaw, to give the illusion my neck is much thicker than a neck where you can feel each finger on each hand meet. He likes me so he just tells me to try exercises, or pull in my chin more.

A tripod holds a camcorder mounted on a shelf in a shop window in the local shopping arcade so that everyone who walks past is a television star in a little 14-inch television world. Seeing myself in this little 14-inch television world makes me realise how less thick my neck is than the person who's trying to sell this same camera to a woman holding a child of three in the shop. I try looking at myself side-ways to see how I look in the television and a group of 14-inch young girls dressed in the same jeans and the same socks and the same shoes walk behind giggling at me. I scowl back, once, twice and three times over, but this just produces more laughter and a few derisory remarks I care not to remember for fear they'll make me want to take a chisel and hammer to my jaw. After a few seconds I walk away from the shop in the opposite direction to the way the girls are walking. The journey home I punctuate with my own self-loathing. Stupid girls, I say to myself. Silly stupid girls!

The shaving clipper hum following the contours of my skull sounds like a thousand bees have landed on my head. The big sweaty fat man holding the clippers hasn't any neck at all. The place where his neck should be is nothing but a collar of white shirt that hasn't been clean in days because sweat has stained it yellow. I look down away from the collar and see strands of freshly cut hair clump together on my lap. There's a lovely change in colour from one end to the other. The darker end is the oldest part of my hair, the same that has witnessed the persecution my neck has brought. The freshly severed ends where the newborn hair has just sprouted would have to wait at least six months to witness the same hounding. If it was not for wanting to look more menacing by shaving my hair off, that newborn hair would have grown skyward, free from jibes and mockery, free from witnessing moments like the time I was set upon outside a bar for walking my neck home and two men came out of the bar and one kicked me in the leg and asked if I was a pussy. The friend I was with, who had a good strong masculine neck, didn't even have one word thrown at him let alone a foot. "But this is me, and this is my neck," I said to my friend much later in a cab where all I could see of the driver driving us home was a thick neck and curly black hair spiraling out of its nape like bedsprings.

In the barber's mirror a total stranger stares back. A fledgling's head sits perched upon my neck that's not thick and a wry old smile smiles back at me. I'm reborn. A new man. I pay the barber his money and leave his shop. On the way to work I glare and glower, I snarl and sneer at people who pass me. All of those who pass don't appear scared, threatened or concerned that this stranger who has my face may be a danger to them or that he may take it upon himself to drive his fist squarely in their face and rip their heads from their perfectly proportioned necks should the urge present itself. They can be thankful at least for living in ignorance.

Back in work and the person I call Mark says I look like I have cancer. Even my boss thinks I look ill. I check my reflection in the mirror at work, and sure enough, I look like I'm a bandana away from leukemia, not menacing or surly like I wanted my lack of hair to present my head to the world to look. On the way home I buy a length of rope half the size of my body stood upright and a book on how to tie knots. Page thirteen shows the correct way to bend and curl the rope into a noose and I wonder how small I will need to tie the noose so it fits snugly around my neck that's not thick. Small, I say to myself while threading the rope. Very small indeed.

Steve Ely invites you to guess



this juggler won the lottery and reached out for counterculture gravitas he told the world he wanted peace with the bombs of the ira imagined no possessions from his temperature controlled furarium called right on revolution from his luxury apartment the whole world gaped and he couldnt stop feeding performance protest sex drugs art he fucked a pig in a wimple in the butchers shop window went from geek to speke via radical cheek fooled the brown rice and super noodles worlds but he didnt fool god or holden caulfield lord no hieronymo he had a good run but the karmas virtually instant

**extracts from *dream*** by Steve Ely

*Dream is part five of Steve's epic poem JerUSAlem*

**dreamland**

Between Surf Avenue and the Riegelman Boardwalk,  
 overlooking the restless Atlantic,  
 Bill Reynolds built Dreamland. More genteel  
 than Luna or Steeplechase Parks, the kind  
 of place you'd bring a girl on a Shabbes afternoon,  
 to stroll with ices in the Alps, share five-cent hot dogs  
 in the fall of Pompeii. Ninety thousand light bulbs  
 lit up Dreamland's tower; you could see the glow  
 from East New York, clear across the Canarsie marshes.  
 That night, twenty days out from Riga,  
 the Bialystok program still keeping  
 my orphan mind from sleep, I saw its beacon  
 from spray-soaked steerage and shouted unashamed:  
*Look! Our New World!* The whole ship rushed  
 to for'ard; the skipper yelled the hulk would tilt.  
 It didn't. The Nebo rolled on to Ellis Island,  
 heaving and pitching on the deep Atlantic swell,  
 the crammed deck electric, puddled in vomit,  
 fever-lit with joy. Deloused and rebranded,  
 I made it to lodgings with a tailor  
 from Goniadz. He put me to work  
 for three hots and a pile-of-rags cot.  
 That first summer was a fantasy,  
 riding trolleys and the subway from Williamsburg

to Brighton Beach, exploring the relief  
of the block-built promised land. Come Saturday,  
you'd find me at the Nickel Empire,  
Steeplechase, Luna and under the talisman tower.  
I hung with punks. We rode rides, snarfed wieners,  
picked pockets and fights. One time at Luna,  
I'm making moves on this red-head,  
out of Poznan via Pitkin, and some Pollak  
muscles in. I smacked him in the mouth.  
Before I let him back up, I made him tell me  
where he came from. When he whispered Bialystok,  
I went for him again. The guys had to haul me off.  
Me and the redhead cut the crowd loose  
and paired off to Dreamland. The Leap-Frog Railway  
let me grip her shrieking closer, Fighting the Flames,  
another excuse to hold her tight.  
In the gondola from Venice I told her  
that I loved her and she told me that I could.

The ten o'clock subway throbbed straight-faced  
back to Brownsville, covert fingers popping buttons  
and loosening waistbands, finding flesh responsive  
under coat-draped, squirming laps. Last stop,  
and a quickstep to her tenement stairwell,  
where our kisses came sudden and filled with hot tongue;  
trousers dropped and petticoats lifted,  
we rocked against the landing wall, my palm pressed  
over her careless, whimpering mouth,  
until my buttocks spasmed and thighs gave out.  
A door opened down the landing  
and a head poked out: "Hey, grosser potz;  
keep it down; you and your shmutzig kurveh!"  
We slumped against opposite walls, a flushed  
sweaty rump, panting and smiling,  
unstrung and unbuttoned, discovered.

### **i have a...**

*I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up  
... the Honorable Elijah Muhammad taught me whites  
were devils, created in the lab by Doctor Yakub.  
and live out the true meaning of its creed:  
My experience concurred: crackers claimed me  
all-American when I took the gold in Rome,  
"We hold these truths to be self-evident;  
spat, "Move over nigger," on the sidewalks at home.  
I threw my medal in the river and bounced back dancing.  
that all men are created equal."*  
The whole world, from Kinshasa to Quezon City, agreed:

the Greatest of All Time. Won't ever be another like me;  
*I have a dream that my four children*  
 Tyson doesn't come close. And don't talk up them honkies:  
 even my daughter can whup that stiff Vitaly Klishko  
*will one day live in a nation where they will not*  
 ... I was a gift to those country club GOP bigots:  
 the perfect front man - a jig to the right of Attila the Hun;  
*be judged by the color of their skin*  
 he'll take his panga to welfare, affirmative action,  
 chop single parents and Roe vs Wade.  
*but by the content of their characters.*  
 They said I was under La Scalia's thumb, in awe of the great man;  
 it was a meeting of minds, no more and no less.  
*I have a dream today. I have a dream*  
 Of course, our self-appointed 'community leaders' had their say –  
 I should be pulling more strings for the 'brothers':  
*that one day every valley shall be exalted,*  
 maybe the 'brothers'  
 should pull some damn strings for themselves.  
*every hill and mountain shall be made low,*  
 ... I was wasted, man, fallin' down drunk. Nob'dy'd drive me home  
 so I tole 'em go fuck an' started to walk. I was weavin' an' reelin'  
*the rough places shall be made plain*  
 an' den in dis truck drinkin' beer wid some peckers. Don't know how.  
 'fore I knew it, dey was walin' on me wid tire irons.  
*and the crooked places will be made straight,*  
 Dey chained me to de tow-bar an' pushed it into drive...  
 ... two white guys in a silver Chevy pulled over, asked directions to a club;  
*and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,*  
 one pulled a gun and forced me in. They drove me to the river  
 where they stabbed me and stomped me and crushed me with a log.  
*and all flesh shall see it together.*  
 They hung me from a camphor tree, across the street  
 from the Kleagle's house, between the parked cars and left out trash.  
*This is our faith. With this faith we will be able*  
 ... everything I say, I believe it when I say it,  
 even those things that contradict the other things I said.  
*to hew out of the mountain of despair*  
 I get caught up in the moment, I'm an enthusiast!  
 Steadman understands me, he's a rock.  
*a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able*  
 I might have more money than Reginald Lewis,  
 but don't ever forget my sainted African victimhood.  
*to work together, to pray together,*  
 I'd like to thank my heroes and inspirations:  
 African-American men who aren't afraid to be fathers  
*to struggle together, to go to jail together,*  
 to their children, Alice and Toni, Dr. Atkins and Dr. King.  
 And the white folks? You love me too; don't you?  
*to stand up for freedom together,*  
 ... hey dawg, I'll admit it. I ain't da best role model  
 ever come out Sacramento. I dropped outta school,  
*knowing that we will be free one day.*

racked up busts, done some jail time. Dat day I bin  
 smoking endo, sipping on gin and juice,  
*And if America is to be a great nation,*  
 'fore topping it off with PCP and jumpin' in da car.  
 You know da rest: I made CNN, South-Central went up,  
*this must become true. So let freedom ring*  
 I scored 3.8 million from da LAPD. I blew it on la vida loca, dawg,  
 ended back on welfare. What else a nigga gone do?  
*from the mighty mountains of New York.*  
 What they did to me weren't right, but I ain't complainin':  
 I had my fifteen minutes.  
*Let freedom ring from the snowcapped rockies*  
 ... if the glove don't fit, you must acquit.  
 The brothers came through for me, though I never  
*of Colorado, from the curvaceous peaks*  
 went big on that African thing myself. I was happy enough  
 in Beverley Hills, schmoozing with Spelling  
*of California. But not only that;*  
 and scoring with starlets. That bikini-tan bitch  
 pushed my buttons; in the end I cut the skank loose.  
*let freedom ring from Stone Mountain, Georgia,*  
 Yeah, I slapped her some to keep her in line, but I swear  
 I never killed her. Probably it was some drug thing,  
*every hill and molehill of Mississippi*  
 'round the mobbed-up fags she was with:  
 you know what they say: if the glove fits, wear it.  
*and Tennessee; from every mountain,*  
 ... guess the first sign was writing that song to my rat;  
 after that I seemed to hold it together, 'til Off the Wall went supernova  
*let freedom ring. When we let freedom ring,*  
 and I couldn't get hard for Brooke Shields;  
 Diana was a shoulder to cry on and I fixed on her some,  
*from every village and every hamlet,*  
 got my nose done just the same. After Thriller things  
 got scary; I started to freak; got myself cut  
*from every state and every city*  
 to look like Liz Taylor and bleached out the black  
 from my African skin. Now I sleep in a bubble with a chimp  
*we will be able to speed up that day*  
 and a llama, hold sleepover parties for pre-pubescent kids.  
 I feel like John Merrick, Edward Scissorhands, Jesus.  
*when all of God's children, black men and white men,*  
 ... no Iraqi ever called me nigger  
 but I bombed them anyway,  
*Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics*  
 me and this skull-and-bones,  
 stammering redneck. When you get to the top  
*will be able to join hands and sing*  
 it's not the skin that matters, or the company  
 you keep, but keeping what you've worked for.  
*in the words of the old Negro spiritual,*  
 It's not like I'm ashamed or that I don't know  
 I'm running with closet pointy-heads,

*"Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty,  
but my wardrobe's spilling Chanel suits and the book  
will draw a cool five mill. Who knows, I might get to run myself ...  
free at last"*

### happy days

Where old man Walton turns a billion and Roger shuts down Flint:  
Mr C is doing fine at the hardware store.

Where nasty crack-ho mommas trade food stamps for rock:  
Marion keeps on serving up those five-plate sit-down dinners.

Where homeboys in juvie, got two, three baby mothers:  
Richie splashes on Dad's Old Spice, hoping for first base.

Where schoolgirls with chlamydia line up for abortions:  
Joannie loves Chachi in his cap-sleeved T-shirt.

Where 'woods packing nines are running hooch and crystal meth:  
The Fonz and two co-eds share a three-straw shake.

Where tense Korean grocers get caps busted in their asses:  
Arnold and Al each get a Shriner's hat.

Where Eric and Dylan pack .223s and pipe-bombs:  
Ralph Malph just cracks wise – *he still got it, Fonz.*

Where Tommy tapes his blowjobs and Vinnie mainlines smack:  
Potsie wears a woollen cardigan and croons Rock around the Clock.

### Glossary:

*Doctor Yakub* – in Black Muslim anthropology/aetiology, the 'mad scientist' who created the (evil) white race in a laboratory experiment.

*Dreamland* – Coney Island amusement park of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*Eric and Dylan* – Harris and Klebold, the 1999 Columbine High School shooters.

*GOP* – Grand Old Party – the Republican Party.

*Grosser potz* – big dick.

*La Scalia* – Antonin La Scalia – conservative US Supreme Court justice since 1986.

*Old Man Walton* – Sam Walton, multi-billionaire founder of Wal Mart.

*Reginald Lewis* – the first black American billionaire, founder and chair of TLC Beatrice International.

*Shmutzig kurveh* – dirty whore.

*Tommy/Vinnie* – Tommy Lee and Vinnie Neil of the rock band *Motley Crue*.

Lee Mess interviews himself

LM: Yes or No?

LM: No.

LM: Oh. No?

LM: Yes.

LM: Oh! Yes?

LM: NO! NO, NO, NO!

LM: Oh. No.

LM: Yes.

LM: Oh.

**blood on the tracks** by Lee Mess

The wind was hot, but it wasn't the wind's fault. The boy coughed and this irritated me for a reason I couldn't understand. Even still, I had to stop myself from clipping him one, blocking out the imagined satisfaction of the back of my hand connecting with his lip, with memories of his first birthday, the day he was born. A sweet, punctual bundle of goo and need; something both smaller and bigger than I could comprehend.

He coughed again and I forced myself to look at him, at the body I no longer knew intimately; the back I no longer burped, the arse I no longer wiped. Jesus wept, what was he now? Seventeen? All acne scars and razor rash, a haircut that made no sense. At his age I was already out at work, married with a crew cut. But this one? Doesn't know he's born.

"Dad..." He croaked, his peculiar man voice coming deep and rasping from his weedy body, sounding so much like my own echo that it caught me off-guard. I cut him off with a look. Now wasn't about questions, about words. It was long past that. Still, the voice touched me somewhere and I unscrewed the top of my bottle to pour a little warm, plastic water into his mouth, tilting it slightly so that it trickled down his cracked lips, turning them nipple pink. He tried to say something else but I looked away, stood up and drained the rest of the bottle; looked down the tracks.

The sun was out to spite me, too hot by ten degrees for early April, and for all its promise of a summer heat wave, that day stood alone as the hottest of the year, of the decade even. Unforecast and unsurpassable, a premature ejaculate of vitamin D and UV rays birthing sick-days and melanomas before the rains came in and washed out the barbeques, the wedding receptions and the dreams of sixty million seasonally affected dickheads.

The lad started up with the coughing again. It was the dust that did it, triggered the asthma he'd been carrying since he was six. I still remember those long nights when the three of us shared a bedroom, listening out for his wheeze in the darkness, barely louder than the alarm's tick. How I'd leap up in terror each time I woke to find I'd dozed off. I'd creep over ten, twenty times each night just to watch for the rise and fall of his blanket, holding a shaking finger under his nose to check his breath, faint but steadily asleep, oblivious to the prayers and threats I offered God to let him grow up alright; or at least make it through the night.

I walked down the track a little to get away from the noise, fishing out one of the cigarettes I'd found in his jacket: Marlboro Lights, the little faggot. He couldn't make sense of my anger the first time I caught him at fourteen with one jammed in his mouth, stood on the corner with his friends like some goddamned street punk. His face, when I pulled over and dragged him into the car, screaming and boxing him before the door had even slammed, that was the turning point. He just stared at me dead-eyed, refusing to cry out as I hit him harder and harder. In the end it was all I could do to kick him out at his Mother's house to stop me putting his head through the windscreen, or worse. But that expression stuck and from then on things were different. He'd miss my weekends, or when he did show he'd hold his hand out for cash and then split, his face twisted into a permanent sneer as if he found me too pathetic for words.

I took a long drag and peered out at the senseless heat. I could feel the rail throng under my boot but there was nothing on the horizon yet. I turned my ear to the wind and stopped breathing. Nothing. I flicked the butt and walked back to the boy. The gash on his head looked pretty deep and his eyes were closed, though whether he'd lost consciousness I couldn't tell, not that it made much difference. I squatted down next to him and put my fingers in his greasy, hot hair; the hair I used to wash and towel each night so religiously. He didn't move and I was pretty sure he'd passed out.

"I wish..." I started and then stopped. What did I wish? Wishes belonged with prayers; to a long night a lifetime ago. I wished it wasn't so damn hot.

The bell at the crossing began to ring, although there was still no sign of the train. I checked the ropes again. I didn't look at his face. One of his ankles had come loose slightly and I re-looped the rope and pulled it through into a double overhand knot, just as my own father had shown me. Satisfied he was secure I straightened up to see a small dot at the end of the line. Without looking back I stooped under the barrier and carried on round to where I'd parked the

car. I unlocked the door but paused before I opened it. A small cloud, the only one in the entire vastness of that freakish April sky, had passed in front of the sun. For a moment everything dimmed, as if the white balance of the world had been knocked out by some kid trying to tune in his cartoons. If only he'd just asked. A second later it had passed as if it had never been and I lost track of the little cloud, the sky so bright it stung my eyes to search. I got in the car and without looking in the mirror, I drove away.