THE NIGHT THE SKY PALACE BURNED TO THE GROUND

Frank Haberle

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By Frank Haberle
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George's Boys

The bar is a couple of blocks down from the town square, down a short flight of stairs. A regular old guy occupies a bar stool by the door. He sits in a funny way. His legs are all twisted up in the stool and his elbows hold him up on the bar. There is something written across the back of his frayed nylon jacket, like an advertisement. He wears funny black boots like welding boots with his jeans tucked in. When you walk in he gazes at you, quickly, like he's going to ask for something. Then he turns just as quickly back to stare down into his glass. He holds a smoldering cigarette an inch from his face. He moves his mouth, not like he's saying something, but like his jaw hurts. When you paddle out some hours later he looks you over again, like you just walked in. He is always there, in the bar, by the door.

You guess that he owns the place. But he doesn't look like a guy who owns a place.

This is a time when you are sleeping on a floor in the ice houses. The prior tenants, ex-friends who put you up for a few weeks, skip out without paying the last three month's rent. They leave you with a box of canned foods- peas and onions, creamed corn- and mountainous piles of newspapers that flutter when you walk through the old place, like tired ghosts.

The owner of the ice houses has two boys, George's boys, who are looking for you. George hasn't thought to lock the place up yet, but he has his boys out looking for the overdue rent. George's boys look like hungry confederate soldiers, but they are slow-moving. Once, when you hear them out front, you slip out a window; another time, when you see them on the street, you shoot down an alley.

This goes on for a few weeks. With an eye out for George's boys, you spend the mornings circling a payphone in the town square, making some calls, following up with somebody about a job somewhere. You don't have a phone, so you can't leave a number; you have to keep calling them back, which leads to all sorts of questions. Then you come to this bar in the afternoon to plan your next move,

drink some beer, smoke some smokes. George's boys don't seem to know about this bar.

Time passes, but time is irrelevant down here. You sit on your bar stool at one end of the bar, and the regular sits on his. And then your time comes, and you go on your way. You exit the bar and stand out on the street. The light outside has changed; night is near. You can smell rain coming, coming across the ridge and blowing over the burnt cornfields to the west. You stand there for a while, looking up the train tracks. The night comes, and then the next day, and the cycle starts again.

The money starts to run out. Twenties become tens, and then singles, and then change. One afternoon you are paying for a mug of beer with nickels. As you're exiting, the regular looks up at you, and he speaks to you in a surprisingly kind voice.

"You know," he says, "some boys was in here a while ago, looking for you."

"Oh," you say. "I don't know who they are."

"Well, they said they'd be back some time later. Say," he says. "You look like you are in need of some work. You in need of some work?"

"Maybe," you say.

"Well it's like this. My son needs some help tonight. He's got a carpet cleaning operation. I used to help him but I'm no goddamned good anymore. He needs some help. On account of his arm. You want to help him?"

"Well, sure," you say. "But what do I do about those boys?"

"Tell you what," the old man says. "You take care of my son. I'll take care of them boys."

Billy the One Armed Carpet Cleaner

At nine o'clock you lean on a lightpost in the town square. The afternoon beer is wearing off, and you are gapingly hungry. George's boys turned the gas off, and you couldn't bring yourself to eat another can of cold creamed corn. A battered van slows down in the square, then speeds up again, pulling in right in front of you. The words 'Absolute Carpet Cleaning' –the same logo as the regular guy's nylon jacket- are written in a scraped-paint logo on the windowless side of the van.

The driver waves for you to climb into the van. He leans over to unlatch the door. There's something funny about him. You climb in. "You better get in then," he says, but you're already in. The van smells like chemicals. Piles of pipes and tubes and buckets and hoses rattle around somewhere in the darkness behind you. As the driver backs up and swerves the van around the circle he says, 'So I'm Billy, but I guess you know that.'

The road straightens and the van plunges under a few streetlamps, then into the darkness. 'Nice to meet you,' he says. He reaches out to shake your hand with his left arm, from the far side of the van, which is when you recognize that he's only got one arm. "Yep. I'm Billy. Billy the one-armed goddamned carpet cleaner. Which, as you can imagine, makes the carpet cleaning business a little complicated. My old man used to help me. But he's no goddamned good anymore."

The van has one working headlight, and swerves naturally from left to right on the wet spring pavement. You realize he's looking at you, not at the road, and gesturing with his remaining arm.

"Does this thing have a seatbelt?" you ask.

"See, the way I lost my arm was this," Billy cuts you off. "First I lost my hand over there in 'nam, picking up a grenade I threw myself, only it bounced off one of them branches they got over there, right back at me, and not thinking square, I thought I'd pick it up and throw it again. But I came back and I could still do lots of stuff, you know, and my old man got me working. And then about five years ago, I was out

hunting with my pals, deer hunting out in Catoctin, or out by Pine Grove Furnace, I can't remember. But it was this little place called Dead Woman Hollow."

A car passes, blaring its horn, either because of the broken headlight, or because Billy was driving down the middle of the road. The headlight scans the side of the road- waves and waves of green cornstalks blowing away from the road's edge.

"Why'd they call it Dead Woman Hollow?"

"Beats hell out of me," he says, scratching his head, then grabbing the wheel. "They musta found *something* there. Okay, here we are now," he says, swerving into an empty parking lot. "First stop. Ladies and gents! The General Buford."

The General Buford

Billy pulls up under a flood lamp in front of a diner. He climbs out the driver side, and you climb out the passenger side. The air smells salty, musty, like the sea, but you are many hundreds of miles from the sea. Billy unlocks the van's back door, and swings the doors open. There's a huge silver machine-thing, with red cable wrapped around it, and two prongs, like handle bars, or antlers. Billy pulls the machine-thing out with his one arm, and as it tips out, he hugs it against his chest, then looks at you. "I suppose you could give me a little help here," he says. You take the un-antlered end, which is extremely heavy, and has a big bristly thing attached to it which cuts into your forearms. Together, you wrestle the machine thing up the steps to the diner. Billy rests his side on his stomach-arm or no arm, you realize, the guy is built like a jackhammer- and pulls a huge roll of keys out of his pocket. "Hold on, now," he says. He turns the key and pushes the door open. We set the machine-thing on the floor and he flicks on the lights. He pulls a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, offers you one, and pulls one out with his mouth. He fishes out a lighter and lights them both. You take a long drag and look around at a dozen red tables, four dozen chairs between the counter and the booth. You say," So I guess I can start stacking chairs?"

"No big rush or nothing," Billy says. Suddenly he leaps over the counter, using his one arm like a pole vaulter, and bumps straight through two swinging kitchen doors, holding the power cord from the machine thing in his teeth. He starts rummaging around for something. You finish your cigarette. Music clicks on somewhere-the local country western station, still rummaging-clicking porcelain, something whirling- he starts singing along with the song on the radio:

"I got some friends in some low places
where the whiskey drowns
and the beer it chases
my blues away-
and I got nothing to say…..say buddy, you want a hot chocolate?"

"Sure," you say.

"Okay. Cool. You done stacking them chairs yet?"

"Oh, yeah." You stack the chairs quickly in one corner of the room. The whole place smells like french fries. The interior of the diner is reflected in the picture windows- chrome and chrome, tables and chairs, booths and stools repeating themselves again and again. The silver machine-thing shines in the center of the floor. The afternoon beers are fading; you feel more shaky with each movement. You pick up a chair and look in the glass and see your clothes hanging off your skinny frame, a shell of a shell. The chairs click rythmically together into the corner. Billy comes out just as you finish, holding two hot chocolates, in steaming mugs, in his lone hand.

"You needn't of done that," he says. "Normally I start of there. I stack the chairs, over there," he says, tilting his head toward the other side of the room.

"Sorry." You put down the hot chocolate, take a handful of stacked chairs and carry them across the room.

"That's okay," Billy says. He rolls the machine-thing over to the place where the chairs were, pushes a button, and foam spurts out onto the blue carpet. He starts dancing the thing around the carpet, a one-armed tango. "We'll get it all sorted out."

The Otisburg Family Buffet

You load up from the General Buford Diner. You drive out to an auto mechanic shop, where you scrub the bathrooms while Billy cleans out the waiting room. Then there's a Chinese restaurant sitting in the middle of the cornfields. The big silver machine-thing sweats and hisses and the bristles reach out and slather the rug in front of it, leaving a trail of clean, almost shiny carpet behind it. After the Chinese restaurant you load up again and think, maybe we're done for the night. The road seems to wind around the town; the lone headlight looks for clues to where you are, but there are none-just fences and rocks and more waves of corn. It has grown colder and now you have been working hard, wrestling the big silver machine-thing around, or mopping, or moving tables-now the beer is completely gone, fizzled from your pores, hot then cold, and all you are is very hungry. You start thinking about the forty dollars.

"One more stop," Billy says. "The 24 hour Otisburg Family Buffet, up Route 15."

You unload the van. The bristles on the big silver machine-thing burns red marks into your skin. Inside is a dining room with white formica tables and chairs and a row of buffet tables under heat lamps. The buffet table is active with heaps of turkey and stuffing and pork roast, and apple fritters and potatoes, and macaroni and cheese, and some kind of fish, and some kind of shellfish, and all sorts of other things that have been standing in steamy water all day. An old woman in a ruffled apron stands by the buffet, mopping the stainless steel counter, and glaring at you through cat-eye glasses. The night shift manager comes out from the kitchen, all moustache, with a fat tie flapping around a blue short-sleeve shirt.

"Billy," he says. He looks at you, on your knees, unwinding the cable from the big silver machine-thing. "How's your paw?"

"He's no goddamned good."

"Sorry to hear it. This here your new one?"

"Yeah."

"Where you find him?"

"Paw found him in that bar of his."

"Figures." The manager says, scratching his moustache and pulling it, with his thumb and forefinger, down his fat lips. "He don't look much better."

"Naw, he's alright," Billy says. "He's a worker."

"We'll see about that," the manager waddles back toward the kitchen. Billy points you toward a row of tables, and shrugs. "Now the thing here is, you got to unscrew all those tables at the base. So if you can figure that out, I'll get her plugged in." Billy disappears. You pull out the chairs of the first table and climb underneath, the carpet covered in crumbs, kernels of corn, rumpled paper napkins, strings of spaghetti. You keep your back turned to the buffet, all that food just sitting there, the glaring eyes of the lady. You turn a set of wingnuts and the table comes off the floor. You crawl forward to the next table. Then you hear a voice above you, on top of the table; a soft voice, almost a whisper.

"Young man," the voice says.

Something settles on the table surface above you. You poke your head up; the old woman has put down a plate piled with roast beef and mashed potatoes with gravy, corn, green beans and two dinner rolls. She's setting a napkin and fork next to it. You look at the food, eye-level,

"What's this for," you ask her.

"This is for you," she says over her shoulder as she walks back to the buffet table. "A little something for you."

"Thank you," you say, looking at the food.

"You're very welcome," she says. She disappears into the kitchen and never returns.

When you leave the restaurant the sun is just starting to come up over the cornfields, pink-lighting the sky under a low string of clouds. The corn is everywhere- waving at the tips of the stalks- green and yellow and stretching out from the parking lot in every direction, sparkling, soaked with dew. "I could sure go for some breakfast," Billy says when you close the steel doors to the back of the van. "What do you say I buy us some breakfast. You up for some breakfast?"

Full from the roast beef dinner, you still can't say no. Billy swings the van out into the center of the road, still too early for traffic. He drives you back to the Battle Ground diner. When you enter his father, grimacing in the morning sunlight, waves you over to one of the booths you cleaned 8 hours before.

"How'd he make out?" He asks Billy.

"He made out just fine," Billy says, pulling his wallet out as he slides into the booth and handing you two twenties. "Looks like we're back in business."

“What about George’s boys?”

“Aw, don’t you worry about them son,” he says. “I took care of all that.”

He smiles, a row of silver teeth which remind you of the machine-thing.

“They’re a whole lot more scared of you now, then you is of them.”

The Billy Yank

It takes a few weeks, but by the time you figure it out, it's too late--everybody you used to know has left toen. The town is the same. It's a little more than twelve blocks of brick and wood-slat houses, bunched tightly together from the Indian raids of long ago, with the little square in the middle. Six state roads converge at the square, but this is the year that everybody's cars get repossessed; there are very few cars on the road, and those that are, are all beat to hell. Cables and wires hang from telephone poles everywhere, making strong whistling noises when the wind blows. The town square is framed in by the town's biggest buildings, 4 to 6 stories tall- the bank and the court house and the hotel and the abandoned department store. The hotel dominates the square, although it is clearly abandoned and has been for some time; there are pillars and decorative bannisters that once encircled a restaurant. In front of the hotel, in the middle of the square, a flagpole in the little traffic circle commemorates some cavalry officer who rode in once from the south, took a quick look at the place, and rode out to the north to where the battle now lies sleeping.

You find another place to live, and you clean carpets a few nights a week, look for work. When you are not looking you start spending hours in bars like this one, the Billy Yank Lounge. The Billy Yank has big picture windows staring out at this little town square, and its dilapidated hotel and its boarded-up department store. Most of the working population of this orchard town migrated south right after the September harvest, and now The Billy Yank is almost always empty. You can sit here and drink dollar pitchers all day, until it is time to go look for work; or after looking, when it is time to go home.

One night, on your way home from the Billy Yank, you find an old bike in an alley. It's still there the next night. On the third night you take it inside. You know something about bikes. You oil and tighten the chain, replace some spokes and patch the inner tubes. You start riding; around town at first, and then up the dirt roads stretching out in rolling hills in all directions. In one direction there is a battlefield park, crowded with monuments and cannons climbing a steep ridge where

once, long ago, all hell broke loose. The battlefield park is surrounded by different food groups-apple orchards over here, corn over there, pig farms over the hill. Once the bike is in your life, you feel how cramped and narrow your life in the orchard town has already become. The place stinks of rotten apples.

Each time you ride, you ride farther, until you can't ride any more. The orchards and corn fields spread out in all directions. The banks have just swept up the family farms and turned them over to the companies. There are big padlocked steel sheds where there used to be barns, and rows of empty trailers where there used to be houses. Huge wooden crates sit in stacks between the rows of empty trees; piles of burned stumps smolder in the cold grass. You stop in the middle of a field, smoke a cigarette, flick it into the bushes and ride back.

Through November you look for work, you ride the bike, and you drink pitchers in the Billy Yank. The bike rides help you forget some things and remember others. Peddling through the mulchy fields, you start to feel better about this situation. This is all going to work out, you tell yourself. This is all just temporary. This will pass.

Witch House

One day you are riding out there, through a burnt brown corn field with dead stalks reaching all over, when you hear somebody pedaling up behind you. “Hey!” the voice yells.
“Hey!” a voice yells. “Hey there now!”

A giant block of a man with a mass of tangled bright-red hair and beard pedals up to you. He wears a black beret, an afgan scarf, an army coat and knee-high moccasins. He’s riding a three-speed with a big basket on the handlebars, all knees and elbows. It makes no sense, how a man so big can pedal a bike so small. In the basket there’s a backpack, filled with bottles of beer.

“How about a beer?”

“Um. Sure,” you say.

“Hey, it’s like Descartes says. I drink therefore I am! Ain’t that right boys,” He has a bottle opener duct-taped to a bungee cord, attached to a button of the army coat; he cracks open a beer for you and one for himself. “Man’s got to have a beer after a long ride like that, that’s work son! Those are some hills.” He drains the beer in one long chug, foam spreading through his beard. “My name is Randall, Randall Renoir Kaslinsky, but around these parts here, I am Randy the Poet. You ready for another?”

“Where you headed?”

“Well, it’s like this. This good old boy in a bar back there in that town told me there’s an old house out here, a witch’s house. He said it was a farmhouse, and then the bank repossessed it, and then it got abandoned, and then a witch moved in. He told me he was driving his truck out here and saw the house, and went in there looking to pull some copper wire, and a witch come flying out the upstairs window, screaming. He said he done wet his pants. So I figured I’d come Check it OUT!””

“What are you, a witch hunter?”

“Me? Hell, no. I’m a poet. A poet’s got to find his inspiration someplace. What do you say? You want to take a ride out there? Check out the witch’s house?”

"I sort of got to get going."

"I got plenty of beer here," Randy the Poet pats the basket. "And where I come from, when a man has this much beer, and offers to share it, another man ought to help him drink it. Like Balzac said, it ain't gonna drink itself."

"Well, okay. I'll come check it out, I guess."

You follow Randy the Poet who swerves up the road, waving his arms and quoting things—something Thoreau said, a clip from Yeats about a silver fish. He turns right, up a dirt road lined with stone walls and dead logs. A wild tangle of hedges rises around the frame of a crumbling house. Randy the poet stops and points up at a lone window with no glass.

"Behold. The witch's house."

"Alright, man. The witch's house. Cool. So you want to head back to town? Shoot a game of pool?"

"Come on, now," Randy the Poet says. He adjusts his beret like it's a helmet. He throws his bottle out into the field. "Let's check it out." he says, pushing and then disappearing into the hedge. "Oh, man," he whispers from the other side. "Come on, now."

You push into the hedge. Branches slap your face and grab at your arms. They spit you out into a yard, in front of the hollow shell of a house. It looks like it blew up from the inside. All of the windows are broken open. The ground around you is littered with broken glass, and shingles, and mounds of petrified newspapers.

"I think there's got to be some stuff up there," Randy the Poet says. He goes for the unhinged front door. You trip on something. It's a petrified lace-up boot, a woman's, very old and tiny.

"Check that out, man," Randy the Poet says. "It's a witch-shoe."

"Isn't this somebody else's stuff? Shouldn't we be leaving this place alone?"

But Randy the Poet pushes the front door and is swallowed in the mouth of darkness. You look up at the deep gray sky, streaked with wispy clouds, reaching all the way back to the town. Then you follow.

Floorboards squeak desperately under your feet.. You are surrounded by plaster walls, sagging, mutated by dripping water.

Mountains of newspapers throughout the room. Randy the Poet picks one up and reads the browned front page.

"Good news," he says. "MacArthur's returned to the Philippines. Hey! Check it out," he says. "stairs."

"The floor seems really shaky," you say.

"Come on now," he says. "If we don't go up there, we're never gonna know what's up there. Ain't that right boys?" You follow him up the stairs. A long hallway. Empty rooms. A broken chair. A bed frame. Another door. Randy the Poet pulls it open and peers inside. "Check it out! More stairs." The stairs are steeper. The attic. All darkness except for a shaft of light from one corner window. It smells horrible, like fertilizer.

Something creaks behind you. You turn around. A black flutter in the darkness, then another. A huge wave of bats swarms you shreaking to the window. You run down the stairs and fling yourself through the hedge. You pick up that bike and don't stop pedaling until you are a mile down the main road, when the chain breaks.

You flip the bike over next to a pile of empty apple crates. You try to snap the chain back into place. Your fingers quickly coat in red and black, oil and rust. You look up at the darkening sky, the clouds streaking away. What are you doing with your life? Who's bike is this? Who is that guy? You have to stop drinking. You have to get work. You have to get out of this place. You try the chain again, this time by bending the gear. It doesn't budge. You only stop when you hear a bottle cap clatter on the pavement behind you.

"Like Balzac says," Randy the Poet grins and holds a bottle out to you. "Ain't nothing with that bike that can't be fixed by drinking another beer."

The Dead Pheasant Lounge

When you are not looking for work, not on the bike and not in the bar, you are home in the Dead Pheasant Lounge. The Dead Pheasant Lounge occupies the top of a three story building that leans against other wood-framed buildings, all tilting at ten degree angles over the street facing the seven-eleven. The rent is $55 a month plus heat, but the heat never works, so you never pay for it. As November blows through and December settles in, you pile a mountain of laundry on top of your sleeping bag. In the morning, when you have to get up, you run into the kitchen and turn the stove and the gas burners on. The clear plastic sheets you stuck up over the windows billow inwards as you stand over the stove, rubbing your hands. The little kitchen heats up quickly, and you get your layers on, and you stand there a minute, drinking instant coffee, leaning on the hot stove. Through the plastic sheets the lone tree partially blocks the parking lot and, behind it, the plant; but the plant is boarded up and the parking lot is always empty.

There's this thing about the Dead Pheasant Lounge—there is an expanse of sky about the place. From your bed, shivering under a pile of dirty clothes, you can look out over the roofs of the ice houses to blazing sunrises draining up into the winter sky. Beyond the houses there is the field, and then the orchards—bare apple tree branches, miles and miles of them, reaching up into the sky. Some mornings, you listen to the clacking hooves of the horse-drawn wagons of farmers turning into the Agway parking lot, behind the seven-eleven. The silver flat rooftops of the surrounding tangle of buildings shimmer and blow puffs of steam into the cold air. All this surrounds the hotel, a full three stories higher than the Dead Pheasant Lounge and everything else. Somebody lives on the top floor of the hotel—you know this because a light is on in one window most nights- but the rest of the windows are black, curtains pulled down on the outside world.

Randy the Poet

The Billy Yank is no different from any of the other bars on the square, except that someone hand-painted images of union soldiers behind the bar shooting, leaning on their guns, and riding their horses around the cavalry fields, whooping and hollering. The mural adds a rowdy quality to the bar which is otherwise poorly lit and always empty. Big, streaked picture windows stare out onto the town square. A bald man with an 1860's black bow tie and suspenders sweats and polishes glasses behind the bar. Tonight he seems happy to see you when you swing in through the fake saloon doors, if only because Randy the Poet, like a huge red bear squatting on a bar stool with an empty mug in front of him, has clearly been talking for an hour.

"There he is!" Randy the Poet announces. "There's the man! What did I tell you? Did I tell you he was coming? I tracked you down, man. It took some time. You are elusive. But I been asking around, and here you are. I knew it. I just knew it. Well, like Plutarch says," as the bartender puts the pitcher and two mugs down, "let's drink some beer."

"Why are you looking for me?"

"Well, it's like this, old friend." He wipes the foam from his red beard with the sleeve of his army coat. "We've known each other some time now, and I can tell you are an enlightened soul- which in this town, is the rarest of currencies." He pours another beer and gestures that he'd like to pour you another; you drain your glass. "I can tell, I can tell. I only need you to read something for me. It's my manuscript. I need you to tell me if it's good, or tell me if it is suckful. If it is suckful, I can take it. But if it isn't suckful, I need to send it on its way. Only, I got to send it soon."

Four dollars later, Randy the Poet has rolled out his story. He followed his high school sweetheart out west, where she quickly outgrew him. He ended up flat broke in a college town, where he worked as a dishwasher in a restaurant and took a class, his one free night, in poetry. The teacher, who had hung out with one of the more obscure beat poets earlier in his life before becoming a bitter, bellicose

tenured professor, took a liking to Randy the Poet, signing him up for open mikes at coffee houses and encouraging him to submit his work to magazines. A magazine somewhere back here, while turning down his submission, encouraged him in their return letter to submit a collection to their annual contest. The Theme: Ghosts. The deadline, Randy the Poet tells you, pulling his beret down over his ears, is a month away. "It's my time, friend, I just know it. Pound and Cummings destroyed poetry, and I've been sent here to bring poetry back. I know its gonna happen. I'm gonna win this contest and then its just gonna blow up. Frost. Yeats. Shelley. They all did it. My time is here, ain't that right boys?"

"Shelley entered a contest?"

"Hey, man, you gotta start somewhere."

"Oh." You finish the pitcher and wave down another. "What brought you to this town?"

"What, here? I was passing through, and I was looking for a place to hole up, and you know, complete my manuscript. And to be honest, I was here when my car got repossessed. But then that very day, I walked right into a job opening on the night shift at the hotel." He turns and looks over his shoulder at the hotel, across the street, its front door bolted shut, its windows dark and silent. "All I do is sit and watch the back door of the place at night, make sure nobody comes in or out. The thing is, I work for the old owner who closed it a few years back, and is still trying to sell it. They think some people might try to burn it down and build something else there, so they hired me to keep an eye on things. Five bucks an hour and a heated suite on the top floor. I can work on my manuscript all night long. They never check in on me, man."

You look out the windows. The long shadows of late afternoon are creeping across the town square, and up the walls of the hotel. "Don't you get freaked out? Hanging out in an empty hotel all night?"

"Freaked out? My good man, you miss the point," Randy the Poet says. "This is what my work is. This is what I need. The hotel, that old house, the battlefields. I need to be freaked out. It's my inspiration. For I am a ghost poet, a poet of ghosts. Say, man. You ever been out on that battlefield? You want to come check out some ghosts?"

Ghosting

Here's something you've started to notice about this orchard town, as autumn drains into winter—it's dead silent until 3 pm at which time, each day, somewhere in the huddled buildings, church bells clang wildly for five minutes. The sidewalks that time of days are empty, the few people who do move around dress in greys and browns and huddle against the building walls, trying to cheat the cruel winds that sweep more and more forcefully through the streets. And then, suddenly, at 3 o'clock sharp, the bells start up, like some congregation from some denomination somewhere, hidden down some side street, is wailing for its sons and daughters who left town long ago. The bells startle the herds of pigeons who huddle invisibly in the cornices around the town square, conserving their heat, like the humans. They leap from the ledges together, streak in silver formations above the hotel, and then glide back to their perches when the bells stop, like nothing just happened.

The bells ring, and the pigeons circle. You follow Randy the Poet, by bicycle, up a long alley-way, lined by little one-car garages and piles of gutted appliances, which leads out to a back entrance he knows to the battlefields. Along the way, waving a beer bottle he holds with his free hand, he tells you stories of the ghosts he's learned of and that he hopes to encounter one day.

"Why, now, there's a whole story about a union sergeant named bull-whip Charlie who used to lead a wagon train, who done got his head taken off by a federate shell whistling right up over the ridge. Some nights, they say, you see him standing in the middle of that trail behind the ridge, snapping his whips and, of course, headless. And then there's Crazy Annie," he continues, "walking around with a pitchfork. They killed her and her cows with a single shot, hiding in her stone barn and, word has it, she wanders the fields looking to avenge her cows."

"Where are you getting these stories?"

"What, are you kidding me? These aren't just stories. You hear them everyplace. And like the man says, what you don't hear, you feel.

I'd investigate them myself and I will one day, but I am a working man, and I work nights, and as you know, I am on deadline. Come on now," he says, signaling that he's turning off the road to the right. You ride behind him for some time, the woods closing in around you. At a break in a stone wall, he stops and leans his bike against a tree; you proceed by foot into a rocky gorge, climbing between boulders beneath a high ridge.

"This is the place they named something, I don't know, satan's lair," Randy the Poet says, climbing to the top of a boulder and peering out over the rock-strewn bowl. "Now, one of my favorite things about this here spot is the rooks up yonder." You can hear branches cracking up in the pine grove where he waves his bottle. "There's hundreds of them up there. The man told me they flew here from hundreds of miles away for all the dead horses, and they stayed just because they liked the smell of the dead horses. Now on over here—" Randy the Poet drops over the other side of the boulder, which you walk around—"over here we have an important historical site." There is a pile of stones filling the cracks between two boulders. Randy the Poet squats down next to it, holding his beer on his knee. "This is where they found him, lying here with his rifle, just like he was sleeping-the federate sniper boy. Hole right through his forehead. Damn. Ain't that a shame. Come on now," Randy the Poet says, "one more stop today. We're going up that hill. Forward, march."

You scramble up a sea of large rocks. At the top, there is a row of monuments-statues of generals swinging their swords in the air, surrounded by cannons. Behind the ridgeline there is more deep forest. Turning, you look down at the rocky ledges below, the farms spreading out toward the mountains, the sun just starting to slip down under the clouds. "Yeah, pretty much, they all came up here charging, charging like dead men, charging like fools."

"Is that one of your poems?"

"No, it is not. Come on now, one more stop."

You follow Randy the Poet into a stone tower, up a circular staircase. From the top you look down into the woods below. Darkness is creeping up the hill; black shadows fill the gaps between the boulders

below. Suddenly, there is a cough—a series of coughs- and then they die out, somewhere in the rocks below.

"You think somebody's out here?" you say.

"There ain't nobody out here."

From the woods behind you, you hear footsteps crunching in the leaves, coming up the hill. You search the woods, but you see nobody. There's a second set, and then a third.

"You hear that, don't you?"

"Yes sir, yes I do."

What should we do?"

"Well, I'll tell you what we should do. We should walk down those steps like nothing's going on, then run like hell for them bikes." You follow Randy the Poet down and run after him through the woods. Speeding down the hill, a rook, which has been feeding on something on the forest floor, sweeps up and takes flight right in front of you both; he screams in a high pitched wail. You run and then pedal up to him, catching up just as you both reach the safety of the first street lamp.

"Man, you scream like a girl," you say, laughing.

"That wasn't me screaming, Randy the Poet says. "That was you screaming."

The Sky Palace

You find work on the outskirts of the town, breaking down mountains of apple crates used by the pickers during the harvest. The work is not bad work; there are space heaters set up in one corner of the warehouse. A truck brings the crates in which you unload, and then you use hammer saws to pull the nails out, carefully, to stack the wood for other uses. “They are taking the whole operation apart,” one of the field hands tells you between crates. “They’re automating the whole damned operation. Them pickers come back next summer, they’re gonna find out they been replaced by rows of silver apple-sauce trucks.”

You start hanging out in another bar, an overheated, smoky roadhouse with a pool table and a juke box near the warehouse, and your whole orientation shifts. The work is exhausting; after a few drinks in the roadhouse, you start to dread the cold ride home alone, by bike, to the Dead Pheasant Lounge. One night you ride past the town square and someone calls out to you—Randy the Poet, leaning on a pole, smoking a cigar, which you’ve never seen him do before, by the front door of the hotel.

“Hey there,” you say, riding up to him. “How’s that manuscript coming along?”

“All in good time, my good man,” he says. “Right now I am working. Man’s got to work, ain’t that right boys? I’m on my rounds. What do you say? You want to come on in? You want to check out the sky palace?”

He’s holding a flashlight in one hand, and a box on a leather strap hangs over his shoulder. You follow him into a darkened hotel lobby-he turns a key from the lobby desk into the box- and then up a wide, carpeted stairway, winding up to a second-floor balcony. Wicker table and chairs line the windows facing out to the street, coated in dust. “The breakfast room,” he whispers. He pushes open a swinging door. From the brief glint of light seeping through curtains from the lone

street lamp, you can see a large, high-ceilinged room with a stage at the far end.

"The ballroom." Randy the Poet whispers. "They say on some nights there's a federate general who sits there in the corner, feet up on the table, surprised to see you as you is to see him," he says, pointing the flashlight. He turns another key on the stage. You follow him out, up another flight of stairs. He starts flashing the light into the rooms. "So here's the deal I got here—the man is counting on me to keep an eye on things. He thinks his brother's gonna send some boys over to torch the place. So I got to be here at nightfall and search the whole place, once an hour. Sort of freaky, isn't it? They say it was used as a field hospital right after the battle, and when they dug up that gas station next door ten years ago, they found a bunch of arms and legs where they buried them. Course, now the gas station's closed. Everything. Everything closed. All boarded up. Come on then," he says. I'll show you the best part." He leads you to a back staircase. On the top flight he jiggles the key. "Here it is, my good man," he says. "The sky palace." It's a large square room, with windows on all four sides. Radiators hiss steam up at the windows, creating little flowers of condensation on the black glass. The walls are embroidered with fake lattice work and faded murals. There's a single bed, a trunk, a full size refrigerator with cases of beer piled next to it, and a desk with a typewriter. Next to the desk is a file cabinet. "That there is where my manuscript is living," he says. "I'm just finishing it up. I can't wait for you to read it. Only, you'll be straight up with me, won't you? You'll tell me if its suckful, right? Because I don't want to go kidding myself."

You are staring beyond him at a full moon rising about the fields, casting thin white sheets of light out over the cornfields, the orchards and woodlands, stretching out beyond the flat black rooftops below you.

"I'll be straight up with you," you say.

"Phew! That's a relief," Randy the Poet says, running thick dirty fingers through his red beard, then patting the file cabinet. "I'd hand it to you right now but it isn't-quite-ready-yet. It's almost done though." He swings the refrigerator door open, revealing rows of tall brown bottles. "Say," he says. "You need some beers for the road?"

Dickheads

One late morning you wake up to the sound of a windstorm banging branches against the building. You lay there for a minute, trying to make smoke rings out of the condensed air rising from your lungs. And then you bolt upright: somebody is stomping up the stairs.

"Hey, now, hey now my man! Now where you at?" Randy the Poet turns the corner and peers into your room. "I've brought you breakfast libations," he says, waving a silver thermos and two cups. "A little thing we call a red hot mudslide."

"How did you get in the building?"

"Little thing called a door knob. You left it wide open. Come on, now," he says, "Like the man said, awaken! It's the break of noon. The north winds are calling. It is time for another ghost walk. Man," he says. "What do you have to do to get some heat in here?"

You show him the stove trick. You both stand over the burners, warming your hands and drinking the hot beverages—something chocolate, and something alcoholic. The wind is blowing through the walls of the building. In the ice houses out back, a screen door bangs repeatedly against its frame.

"So what's up?" you ask. "You bring me that manuscript?"

"All in good time, boys. Just a few little finishing touches." Randy the Poet peers around the apartment—the broken kitchen chairs and the propped-up table, the plastic window sheeting billowing inwards, the damp Dead Pheasant Lounge. "Now, friend, I will tell you, this will not do at all, this will not do. As soon as I send this thing off, I'll be moving on. What do you say you move into the Sky Palace? I'll talk to the man. You can have it all-the job, the palace. The heat! You just got to move into the place and it will be yours. Best set-up in this popsicle stand. I'm just saying."

"I don't know man," you say. "What about the ghosts in there? The general."

"Don't you worry about them," Randy the Poet says. "I'll have a word with them."

Out on the battlefields, the wind is really howling; it nearly blows you down. As you enter the forest, it rips around the cold trees,

hugging close to the ground, shaking the dried and tangled cornstalks in the field behind, and ripping the wet leaves from the ground in front of you. Randy the Poet leads the way, bottles clinking in his coat again. He points to the leaves below, where there is a dark wet spot on the earth. “Look! Blood,” he bellows. He’s visibly swaggering; he was in the Billy Yank working a pitcher when you got there at noon. “Look!” he points dramatically up at a round knob where a branch broke off a tree. “It’s a head nailed to a stump!” Randy the Poet is in his spell; he’s waving one arm wildly in the air while holding his beer bottle in his mouth, the thumb pressed against the front of hid beret to keep it from blowing off his head. You cannot hear a lot of what he is saying against the wind. You follow him onto a clearing, down the ridge a ways from the last trip. You climb over a stone fence into a little clearing.

“Right on this spot, right here,” Randy the Poet says. The wind stops for a moment; you are standing in a small indent in the ground. “Right here on this spot, a whole bunch of federates crawled up here one night, thinking they’d catch a bunch of yanks coming straight through these woods in the morning. But if you just take a look up there.” He waves a fresh bottle up toward a split between the trees, where you can just barely see the rocky ledge you climbed to the last time, then opens the bottle and hands it to you. “Some badass artillery dude dragged one badass cannon all the way up that there and here only had one badass shell but he lobbed it right onto this spot. At night time. All he saw was a little ember of one of them federates, thought he could smoke a pipe out here. Like a badass.”

“Wow,” you say, blowing the foam from your bottle, which the wind then returns suddenly to blow back into your face, “that sounds pretty badass.”

“Yeah you right,” Randy the Poet says, “like the man says-you gots to know when to hold em and you gots to know when to fold em. But when you stand here you can smell it! You can smell that pipe! Can you smell it?”

You can’t smell anything. The wind is really whistling again, burning your ears. And then there is another sound-sharp and hollow-a gunshot, somewhere on the other side of the woods.

"Goddamn you to hell, you goddamned poachers!" Randy the Poet yells out, bursting into a sprint straight into the woods. You chase after him. "What are we doing?" you yell. "Shouldn't we be running away from the gunshots?"

"These poaching bastards come out onto the battlefield shooting the deer, they got no right. This is a national park, man. This is a sacred place! This is my battlefield."

"But what are we going to do if we find them?" you ask, huffing the cold air; half your new beer has spilled on your pants.

"I ain't planning on finding them, I just got to scare the deer away."

There's another shot, much closer, but hidden in the woods around you.

"Hey, you missed!" Randy the Poet stops and yells into the woods. "You missed, you stupid, poaching sons of bitches!"

Now you are walking, trying to catch your breath, following Randy the Poet up a narrow game trail. A line of low, thick bushes appear in front of you. Out of one bush, a little man in a camouflage suit steps out suddenly right in front of you, with a double-barrel shotgun pointed at your knees.

"Woah, now," you say, stopping suddenly.

"Hey friend," Randy the Poet says, smiling. "You want a beer?"

The hunter reaches out with his free hand-his eyes still on you, and his other hand still on the gun- and then looks at the bottle label.

Yeungling," he says. "What's this, some sort of Japanese crap?"

"No sir it ain't," Randy the Poet says. That there's a Pennsylvania beer, brewed right here in Pennsylvania."

"So," you say, frozen, still watching the gun. "Had any luck today?"

"Nope I ain't." The hunter takes a long drink of the beer; the foam gets caught in his grey whiskers. As he tilts his head back, the gun comes up, straight at your stomach. He blows the foam from his moustache, spraying Randy the Poet's knee-high moccasins. "Been tracking a buck all morning, Now I ain't tracking crap."

"Well, it's like Plato says," Randy the Poet says, chuckling to himself. "It ain't the destination, it's the journey."

“Plato who?” the hunter asks. “What are you, some kind of college boy or something?”

“No sir, not me,” Randy the Poet says proudly. “I am a self-taught ghost poet. I am the unofficial ghost poet of this here battlefield and its immediate environs.”

“Don’t matter to me what you are. You ask me, you’re just a couple of dickheads.” The hunter tilts his beer bottle back, and drains it. “We’re all a bunch of dickheads, man. Life’s a freaking joke.” He tosses the beer bottle into the bush to the left, then steps back into the bushes on the right, and completely disappears. You turn and hurry back out of the woods. A few minutes later, you step back into the clearing. The sun splits through a ring of brown clouds bubbling up just past the blue ridgeline to the west; a lone sunbeam lands in a cornfield where a dozen half-starved white tails pick at the corn stalks.

“Well, it’s like Lao Tzu says, ain’t that right boys? The flame that burns twice as bright burns half as long.” You look at Randy the Poet now. His big round face is redder than his beard in the cold, and his eyes sparkle with tears in the wind. You have an urge, for a moment, to tell him to stuff it with the wisdom quotes already. But then you realize that he isn’t talking to you. He is talking to the deer.

Apple-Crates

Things start looking up for you; the apple crate job leads to other jobs. Climbing under your pile of clothes each night, the ceiling spinning above you, you start imagining how you can save up a little money to move on to somewhere else. You start dreaming of the desert, that sweet dry heat, the smell of eucalyptus trees, the sound a real tumbleweed makes when it rolls past you. You screwed some things up out there, you tell yourself; but that doesn't mean you can't go back out there and make things right. You set your sights on a spring exit: how much the buses will cost, what is the best route; and who's couch you can and can't crash on when you get back out there.

On your way across town one frozen morning, you run straight into Randy the Poet, standing on the sidewalk in front of the Billy Yank. "There he is," he says "What did I tell you boys." As your life has shifted in this little orchard town, you've grown from a true fondness for Randy the Poet, to trying to avoid him. You hate running into him on the street in town in daylight. Randy the Poet has become a bit of an attachment. It was all kind of funny when you met him—this huge, gallant, alcoholic red-bearded bear-man poet-character-- but once the decision to go came into your life, he just became another wearisome attachment to this place.

"So listen, man. I think I finished my manuscript! Man. I think I finally found my voice. I haven't slept in a week. I got four days until deadline. So I got to get you to come up to the Sky Palace and read my manuscript. I think it's ready but maybe not-quite-exactly ready. But you can help me man, you can come over tonight and look at it. You can come over, right?"

"But I don't know anything about poetry," you remind him.

"Yeah, but that's it right? That's why you're perfect! Listen, we'll meet at the Billy Yank at 5, I'll buy you some beers, and you can come up and read it, alright?" He starts walking off, around the corner; two of the corner drunks who stand in the shadows all day stare at Randy the Poet's outfit, and shrug to each other. "We'll have a few beers and do a little reading. It's like Descartes says, I drink therefore I am, ain't that right boys?" He says this to the corner drunks. You watch

them look at each other, then look away, toward the Billy Yank Lounge, which hasn't opened yet. When you turn back, Randy the Poet has disappeared; in his place snowflakes start fluttering down to the street, one or two at first, then many more.

Blizzard

At five o'clock, a full, blinding blizzard is raging through the town square. Randy the Poet swings through the doors of the Billy Yank, brushing snow from his massive shoulders. "You know what we got to do on a night like this boys?" he asks as he pulls up a stool next to you. Night has fallen outside and the blizzard has started packing itself to the road surface and the corners of the plate glass windows facing out to the mad swirl. You are the only person here-the rest of the bar is very empty, except for the bartender, who's in the back somewhere- " you know, we got to go out into this magnificent night and check out the view from that big monument out there, on the ridge, up there, the one with the arches and the roof way up on pillars, and all that. We got to go out there and bring us some beers and have ourselves a little party out there, and watch this blizzard swirl all around us. They say it's the big one- they say it's the hundred year blizzard. What do you say boys? Are you with me? Beers on me, man."

"Aren't you supposed to watch the hotel?"

"Only a few hours. And no arsonist in his right mind's going outside on a night like this."

"I thought you were going to show me your manuscript," you say.

"Oh, yes! I completely forgot. All that snow. Let's see now. You wait right here now. I'll run back up to the sky palace, I'll get me the manuscript, I'll get us some beers, and we'll head out and read it straight to the ghosts, in their honor. What do you say now boys! Party on the battlefield. Better get me a hat too-" he says, but he's already out the door, a curtain of snow wrapping around him. You watch him walk huddled through the howling snow, under the swaying street lamps, straight across the town square to the hotel, and you think he's never coming back. You order another beer when the bartender comes back up, and light a smoke, and he disappears into the back again. And then you see Randy the Poet coming back again, huddled against the diagonal winds, the big army coat weighed down with bottles stuffed into each pocket. He bursts through the doors again.

"Got the beers. Come on! Let's go!"

"What about the manuscript?"

"Oh, yeah," he says. "I forgot. Oh, well, when we get back." Snow has already attached itself to his shoulders and his beard and his head, wrapped up in the big afghan scarf. "Let's go boys! The battlefield awaits!"

The snow blows directly into your faces. You have a hooded sweatshirt pulled tight around your face and a towel stuffed like a scarf between the hood and your tattered wool coat and old tube socks for gloves, but the snow and wind burn into your exposed skin, they blind you, and they exploit every gap in your disassembling shield of layers. You walk side by side with Randy the Poet, beer bottles clanking in his pockets, straight up the middle of the street; no cars are moving on a night like this. The town falls away behind you and then the empty gas stations follow the town and you enter the dark woods, picket fence rails sticking out of big drifts, monuments to the 21st Massachusetts Infantry and the 108th Alabama Volunteers glaring across the road at each other in granite eternity, and the trees leaning down in the dim light, swaying in the wind. The snow is already knee deep. Randy the Poet is talking about something but you can't hear him over the wind. It is two miles up a dirt road on a good day. But somehow you can make out the faint path of the dirt road that leads you two miles up onto the ridge and the vast stone monument.

"Now this is what I'm talking about!" Randy the Poet yells. The wind is still screeching but the monument creates a little shield. You stand under its massive stone side, a step up and clear from the snow. Randy the Poet pulls loose his belt. "What are you doing?" You ask. "Lost my bottle opener back there someplace," he says, flipping two bottle caps off with his belt buckle. He hands you one. "Now I knew this would be some sort of shelter," he says, but it isn't really. The snow blows straight between the pillars. The cracked stone dome above you creaks, making little whistling noises. The snow wrapped itself more tightly around the towel you now wrap more tightly around your neck. The bottom sole is disconnecting itself from the bottom of your left boot, and you can feel the snow now working itself up and in. You are able to cup your hands against the monument wall and light a smoke.

“I drink, therefore I am,” Randy the Poet says. He takes a swig of his slushy beer.

“Cold,” you say.

“Not too bad,” he says. He stares out into the distance, back toward town. “Hey man,” he says. “What’s that light?”

You follow his glare out into the darkness, across the shifting waves of snow, clouds of swirling flakes whistling around the monument and out into the woods and the trail that separates you from that warm bar you were in earlier, filling your footprints, erasing any sign you were ever here, and then you see it. There is a light, a yellow glow, not too far away; illuminating the rooftops of the little town, a rising star, a beacon.

“I think that’s the hotel,” you say. “I think the hotel’s on fire.”

“Huh,” Randy the poet says. He takes a long drink, drains the bottle, then pulls out another, without taking his eyes off the rising wall of flames flickering way off in the distance.

“I think maybe you’re right,” he says. “I think maybe the hotel’s on fire.”

He looks for a minute at the bright orange light leaping and twisting into the sky above the town.

“Tonight, the sky palace burns to the ground,” he says. Then it hits him. “The sky palace!” Randy the Poet gasps. His arms up in the air, he starts running back, back toward town, stumbling in the drifts of snow, leaving a trail of beer bottles spread out in the snowfall, soon to be buried and not to be rediscovered until the spring.

The Starter of Fires

An hour later, Randy the Poet sits slumped in a chair in the kitchen of the Dead Pheasant Lounge. Sirens from fire departments from all six surrounding towns wail as the trucks fight to navigate the snow and the frozen hoses and the broken hydrants surrounding the Sky Palace, now a warm, watery see of orange embers and flames, the shell of the hotel standing while its insides burn down to the ground.

"Sorry about your manuscript," you say, handing him a bottle of beer.

"Hey, I'm not sorry," Randy the Poet says, staring at the floor. "It was not meant to be. What's important is that we honored the ghosts, ain't that right boys? What's important is that they found their voices through me. I still have their voices. I just need to sit down someplace and right them down. Again. Sort of."

"You're welcome to stay here. You know, until you find a place."

"Thank you sir. But as Copernicus once said, I think my time has come."

"So," you ask, before you can stop yourself. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Shoot, brother. Ain't no crime to ask a question."

"You didn't, um, leave something burning in there. Did you?"

"No brother, no I did not. I am not a starter of fires. I am a poet. I am a ghost poet. That is my job." Randy the Poet falls asleep sitting in one of the broken chairs in the kitchen of the Dead Pheasant Lounge, lulling in the heat from the stove, while a blizzard bangs against the side of the building, and a fire still rages close by. In the morning, the whole little town smells like charred, wet wood, and Randy the Poet- and his beer bottle-are nowhere to be seen.

Moustache Guy

Weeks pass, and Randy the Poet never returns. The burnt shell of the Hotel is propped up with girders and stands in the square, staring down at the empty sidewalks. One night at the Billy Yank you meet some guy who talks you into walking down Chambersburg Street to have a drink with him to the Heritage Room. The thing is, you know this guy, but you don't know where you know him from. He's got a neat moustache and one of those blow-dry mullets and wears a polo shirt and chinos, and he works in a plant where they make apple butter. The apple butter plant, you remember, is out in Biglersville. On the way down Chambersburg Street, he tells you they just closed the apple butter plant this morning, and he is out of work.

As you approach the bar the door swings open and an old man with a red face is shoved out onto the street. He stands there for a moment, taking swings at an invisible opponent on the sidewalk, and then turns to enter the bar. An old woman has come out behind him, holding his coat, and hers, black mascara streaming down her withered cheeks. "Let's go on home," she says to him, grabbing him by both shoulders. He tries to swing around her, but she is bigger and madder than he is. "Let's go on home, let's go on home," she repeats, pushing him down the street like a blocking sled. "Let's go on home, you son of a bitch, let's go on home." You watch them disappear around the corner, into the Seven Eleven parking lot. Then you enter the Heritage Room.

You've always been nervous about this particular bar, because when you walk by its noisy and it usually has motorcycles and big trucks with dead deer strapped to the hood during hunting season, but it doesn't seem so bad now that you're inside. It's dark and wood-paneled and still strung with Christmas lights and there's a big saloon-type bar in the back and booths along each side. It seems easy to get lost in here, you think. Your friend orders two beers and two tequila shots at the bar. You knock down the shots, and he buys another round. You drink those down. Then he steers you over to a booth where five or six people are sitting, chain-smoking cigarettes and drinking big, dark, chocolatey-

looking drinks. There is a woman who looks like an office worker in a pants suit and a frilly blouse, and another wearing a Serendipity ice-cream apron and hat, and three or four nondescript men in jeans and t-shirts. The lady in the blouse, the accountant for the operation, explains in slurred speech that they were given two-weeks severance, which is the good news; but that they wouldn't qualify for unemployment because the owner didn't pay his taxes, which is the bad news.

"So, what can you do? You can drink another mudslide," the Office Lady says, gathering up the empty glasses and staggering up to the bar for re-fills.

"I've seen you around," the woman in the Serendipity apron says to you.

"Me too." you say. You've never seen her before. "Do you work at the ice cream parlor?"

"Just for a few weeks," she says. "Just until things breeze over and I can go back to Harrisburg."

"Her boyfriend got busted up there," the Office Lady says when she returns. "So she's just staying with me until the police stop looking for her. Here. Drink a mudslide. Hey, listen," she says to everyone at the table. "What do you say we go back up there and light that factory on fire?"

"Fire? I don't know," your friend who brought you here says. "Isn't that arson?"

"Not if they don't catch us," she says. "Come on, who's with me?"

Everyone stares down into their mudslides. "I don't know, man," one guy says.

"Well, I certainly like a good fire," Ice Cream Lady says, sliding out of the booth. She looks at you. "What about you?"

"I guess I could come along for the ride," you say, downing the mud slide in one burning, chocolatey gulp.

"Okay, let's go," the Office Lady says. "My cars out front. The headlights don't work so good, but that might be a good thing. Okay! So long, friends. It was a real pleasure getting laid off with you. Enjoy your mush slides, um, mud slides. You can read about us in the paper on Monday."

You follow the Office Lady and the Ice Cream Lady out to the car, a little volkswagon beetle. Suddenly, the mudslide and the tequila and the five pitchers of beer all catch up with you. The street scene spirals around you- the people and the car spin out of your field of vision, and the town square and the burned-down hotel and the Billy Yank and the Cavalry Officer on the horse in the middle of the square all start to fall on their sides. You climb into the passenger seat. Laughing, the Ice Cream Lady climbs into the back seat; she's brought her mudslide with her. "Whoo! This is gonna be fun, boy. Nothing like a good fire. Can I light it? I like to light fires."

The Office Lady turns the key, pulls the car out of park and grinds the stick in reverse. The car bangs against a parking meter, and you swerve up Chambersburg Street toward the town square. She turns to the right, and you pass through the battlefield park that surrounds the town, and then you enter the corn fields.

"Isn't Biglersville the other way?" you ask.

"Fine," the Office Lady says. She skids to a halt in the middle of the road, opens her door and falls on her back on the street. She pulls herself up, brushes off her pants suit with her hands, and walks around to your door. She opens it.

"How about you drive?" she says.

"But, um, I don't have a license," you say. "I don't really know how to drive. Um, a stick shift."

"Come on, she says, pulling you out by the arm. "I'll show you how."

"Oh, fun!" Ice Cream Lady says from the back.

You climb into the driver's seat and take the wheel. With the dimmed headlights, you can barely make out the yellow lines, flowing like water beneath the front of the car. You turn on the radio. It feels pretty good. It's tinny country music, from a station down south somewhere. The Office Lady and the Ice Cream Lady are soon fast asleep. You are still driving in the opposite direction of the town, of the apple butter factory, but none of it matters. You keep driving, yellow lines, yellow lines, until they stop suddenly, and a white wooden fence post jumps into the middle of the road, and then rows and rows of corn stalks slapping, slapping against the side of the volkswagon, and you skip to a halt in the middle of the corn field. You yank on the stick shift until you figure out how to put the car into reverse, and back out of the hole in the fence, and drive slowly back to town. You park in the middle of the town square and climb out quietly, leaving the Office Lady sleeping straight-up with her mouth open in the passenger seat, and The Ice Cream Lady curled up like a cat in the little back seat. The beetle is covered in mud and corn stalks tangled in the twisted front fender. You go home and you go to bed.

Machine Guy

This is the Winter when you have a couple of little spot jobs that tide you over and cover rent and provide a little beer money and a seven-eleven burrito every now and then, which is all you need until you find another steady job. Once or twice a week you clean carpets, and you pick up a shift or two washing dishes at a tourist restaurant on the other side of town. Then there's this guy who calls you every once in a while. He has a garage behind his house, facing an alley, surrounded by a big brick wall, which he's turned into a machine-shop. Somebody told him you were really good with machines, even though you didn't know anything about machines. He has started a business ordering machine parts and saws and things, and assembling them, and delivering them—but he's dyslexic and he can't understand the instructions on how to assemble the equipment. He calls you and you are left alone in his garage with a huge box; by dinner time you assemble a large band-saw, or a tractor transmission, or 10 big industrial vacuum cleaners. You have no idea how you do it, but you follow the instructions, and you do it. You stick this thing over here; you screw that thing in over there, and then you plug it in, and it always works. While you're working the guy goes on and on about how it's morning in America, and he's started this business to help bring the American worker back again. His chevy truck has two bumper stickers: 'Made in the U.S.A.' and 'Hungry? Eat Your Rice Burner.' Each time he pays you $20 and his wife feeds you a big country dinner in her kitchen, while their two little kids stare at you, but they never say anything to you.

Ice Cream Lady

One cold blue, windy afternoon you are on your way to the guy's garage, because he has called you. He has something in a box, he's not sure what it is, and he wants you to assemble it. You are glad because you need the twenty bucks, but you are nervous; you have a bad case of the shakes from yesterday's bender. You are walking up Baltimore Street, into a stiff north wind, when you hear someone call out to you.

"Hey, you!"

It's the Ice Cream Lady, standing on the side walk in front of the ice-cream parlor. She walks across the street toward you. She's wearing the same little white apron hat, the same apron with 'Serendipity Ice Cream' written across it. She's wrapped up in an oversized baja shirt, like a shawl. In the afternoon sunlight, she looks frail; she has freckles and she's much smaller and thinner than you remember her.

"So," she says, brushing her hair from her face, which is stringing around from the wind. "Burn down any factories lately?"

"Me? No, nothing like that."

"You got a cigarette?"

"Oh, who, me? Yeah, sure," you say. You pull the pack out of your jacket pocket. You try to pull one out.

"What's with the shaking? Why are you shaking?"

"Sorry," you say.

"Don't be. I think it's interesting. You got a light?"

"Oh, sure." You hold out your lighter with two hands, cupping the flame, which holds. Now you are shaking so badly you almost hit her in the face. But you light the cigarette.

"Always with the shaking," she says. She takes a drag and the smoke comes out of her nose, her mouth, tangles in her hair, then runs away from her.

"So, I'm sorry about your friend's car."

"Oh, her? She's no friend. I'm just crashing on her couch. And eating her food. And smoking her cigarettes."

"You're only here for a few weeks, right?"

"Well, I don't know. I may stick around a while. I mean," she nods her head back toward the empty ice cream parlor. "I got a pretty steady job at the moment."

"Your hands," you say suddenly, "are very red."

She puts the cigarette in her mouth, holds them out in front of her, and turns them, like a glove model. Her fingers are long and thin and there are no veins, but they are bright red in the sunlight, down to her thin wrists.

"Yeah, well. I used to work in the paper plant up in Harrisburg, making Christmas wrapping paper. That was a good job! Until they closed it. So my hands got dyed red, sort of permanently. So what." she wraps her hands in the sleeves of the baja sweater and wraps it tighter around her. "Where are you off to in such a hurry?"

"Me? I got to go to work."

"Oh, yeah? You got work? Where?"

"You know, over there," you say, nodding your head across the square. "I work for this guy up there, I put together machines and stuff for him. I got to put together a machine, or something."

She looks you over. You put your hands in your pockets and shrug.

"You really look like you could use a hot meal."

“You’re probably right,” you say. “I guess I better get to work though.”

“Yeah, well, me too, I guess.”

Table Saw

When you arrive at the garage, Machine man is in a panic. "Look at the instructions! They are in Japanese! How are we going to put this together if the instructions are in Japanese!" Then he goes inside the house. You open the 80 page instruction manual, in which someone far away has tried to translate the words into English. "The equipped have many lubricant parts for your easiness," one sentence says. But the pictures, the mechanical drawings, all make sense to you. You spread the pieces, the screws, the bolts, the plates and blades out onto the cold cement floor. You start screwing something that looks like a little electrical motor into something that looks like a base plate. An electric space heater in the corner fills the room with warmth. Your shakes travel away some place; as each mechanical piece falls into place, your hands seem to grow a little stronger. When Machine man returns, you are wiping the oil from your hands on your blue jeans, testing a cranking mechanism on a gleaming, industrial-level, Japanese table saw. You help him chain-load the saw into the back of the truck, then tie it down with a tarp. On the back fender, the 'U.S.A.' bumper sticker is still there, but the 'Rice Burner' one has been removed. You follow him into the house, wash your hands, and sit at the dinner table. They say a long prayer, and then you eat dinner in silence, the two children sitting across from you staring. When you get up to go, Machine man follows you to the porch.

"So, ah, this may be it for a while," he whispers, pulling a twenty out of his pocket. "I'm not getting any orders. Nobody makes anything around here anymore." He scratches the back of his head and looks out at the night sky, where a few freckles of snow have started spinning down under the floodlight next to his truck. "You know, I started this business because they promised us we were going to start making things again. Doesn't anybody want to make things any more?"

Deer Tracks

Today, you wake up at noon. A steady snowfall is dressing up the grey little town. You have no calls, no work to do, so you start walking—first, up to seminary ridge, then past the cannons lined up on the battlefield road. You find a dirt road and follow it into the woods. Then you find a little deer path, cut through the brush, patted down by a dozen little hooves. You start following the path. The snow is still falling—light wet butterfly snowflakes that sting when they hit your face. It is a dark day, but your eyes still hurt from squinting against the glare. Even with six inches on the ground, you can still smell the wet trampled mud from the deer prints on the skinny path. The sky is dark brown; a funny color, even in a snowstorm.

The path ends for you at a barbed wire fence with a KEEP OUT PRIVATE PROPERTY sign nailed to a high post. Beyond it there's a clearing where a dozen cold, wet deer stand looking at you. They were not expecting you. They stop rutting their noses through the snow, searching for the last edible stalks, the last kernels. They are as startled as you are. They are so close you can smell their steamed breath. One by one they fall out, choreographed, and run across the clearing for the far fence, fading behind a gray scrim of snow. You want to climb the fence and follow them, but people get shot out here for following. So you turn around, following your footprints back out to the battlefield road. But the snow has covered your tracks. You have been out here for hours; darkness begins creeping in through the woods and the snow-heavy branches reach out for you. Eventually, you break out to another clearing. Headlights from a distant truck paint a streak of light out on the main road, orienting you. You pass a reconstructed picket fence, then a snow-heavy monument, a giant barefoot Alabaman swinging his rifle above the body of a fallen brother. The road appears, the outline of the way back to town.

Hershey Bears

Some hours later you are back at the Billy Yank, watching a Hershey Bears game on the grainy TV, working through a dollar pitcher at a table by yourself, when somebody asks the bartender if he's seen you. It's moustache guy, who led you to the Heritage Room just a week before. You look at him, and you remember him a little better now, from a year or so ago. You used to think moustache guy was a messenger, one of those people who could strike up a conversation with you or anybody else in a bar and have really meaningful, thoughtful things to say. About the third or fourth time he caught you there, you realized he was completely full of it. This is when he worked at the Gettysburg Bank, before he lost his job, and ended up at the apple butter factory. Now, tonight, he comes in looking bedraggled, unshaven, with an inch of snow on his shoulders.

"Hey, man, where have you been? I've been looking all over town for you. Listen man. Some guy is looking for you."

"Guy? What guy."

"What guy," moustache guy repeats, in that way he does that makes everybody else feel like an idiot. "The girl from the ice cream store, remember her? Her boyfriend got released, he's down here looking for her."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"He showed up at Office Lady's apartment. She told him Ice Cream Lady has been hanging out with you."

"She's not hanging out with me. Why would she tell him that?"

"Why would she tell him that? Because Office Lady's still pretty pissed. Because you sort of trashed her car. Where were you all day?"

"I was out looking for the eclipse. Then I followed a pack of deer in the woods."

"You followed a pack of deer in the woods," he repeats. He picks up the last third of your pitcher of beer, drinks it straight from the spout, and wipes his moustache with his ski-coat sleeve. "It's snowing out, did you know that?"

"Yeah, I know that."

"Listen, man. I'm just giving you a warning, that's all. I just know the guy's looking for you. You can do whatever you want."

"Thanks for the heads up," you say. "You want to split another pitcher?"

Eclipse

The next day, you lay low until it's time to go clean carpets. You take the alley between Chambersburg and the next street. Snow clumps still hang from telephone wires and cables hanging from steel posts to the back doors of the little string of stores, half of them boarded up. The snow is still piled on garbage cans and window sills, but black water seeps out beneath it, into the alley. You step out to cross Baltimore Street.

To your surprise, Ice Cream Lady is standing on the street corner across from you. She's smoking a cigarette with one arm, the elbow held in the hand of the other arm, watching the smoke wind high up into the hazy sky above the little brick row houses facing the street. She's standing there all alone, next to the payphone. You can slip past her, you think. She doesn't even see you…..

"You."

"Oh, hey!" You say. "I didn't see you."

"You saw me," she says. "How could you not see me."

She doesn't look well. She is still dressed in her Serendipity Ice Cream Parlor striped apron and matching baseball cap, but the hat is turned backwards. The whisps of brown hair are sticking out in all the wrong places. She looks like she slept in her uniform. She continues looking up at the sky.

"What are you looking at?" you ask her, still standing there, across the intersection.

A van suddenly speeds between you, swerves around the square, and races up Baltimore Street. The passenger yells something out the window—not at her, but at you—but you can't make out what he says.

"I'm looking for the eclipse," she says.

"What eclipse?"

"There's supposed to be an eclipse right now," she says. "You want to come over here and help me look for it?"

"There's no eclipse," you say. "And it's cloudy. And besides, you're not supposed to stare at an eclipse."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Because it destroys your retinas or something."

"You're full of shit," she says.

"No, I'm not."

"Are you going to come over here and help me look for it, or not?"

"I'm pretty sure there's no eclipse today," you say.

"Yeah, well," she says, flicking the cigarette butt between you and her, in the middle of the street. The sparks fan out around you, then quickly smolder in the slushy snow. "I got to go back to work anyhow."

She walks away, briskly, and disappears around the corner. You stand there for a minute, thinking. She doesn't look well. I should go after her. I should protect her. I should help her. But I am late for work, and I have to work. Maybe I'll track her down after work, though. Maybe I'll try to find her and see what's going on. You tell yourself a lot of things, walking farther up the alley because you're scared to run into some drug guy from Harrisburg who's looking for you, and you're afraid of the Office Lady who thinks you trashed her car. But I didn't even do anything, you tell yourself. I didn't do a thing. I never do anything.

Motorhead

You work a six-hour shift, and Billy the One Armed Carpet Cleaner asks you to work another six hour shift at midnight. He drops you off at Lincoln Square at eight. All the snow has melted; water is dripping from leaking gutters, dripping down the brick-and-stone facades, to the sidewalks, to the street. You have four hours to kill, and you don't want to go home, and you don't want to go to the Billy Yank. You set out for another bar you've seen, a little farther out of town, where nobody will come looking for you.

Across the square, you notice a couple standing closely together by a black, motorhead car. In the shadows you can see that the woman, small and thin and wearing some kind of hooded shirt, is yelling at the man, a chubby little guy in a ski jacket, his hands in his pockets. The woman has her arms folded and a cigarette ember glows in one hand. Is that her, you think? And is that the guy who's looking for you? That's the big-time Harrisburg coke dealer? Well, that just beats all, you think. What are you really scared of? You walk to your new bar and wait there, by yourself, until midnight. When you return to work, clearly lit, Billy looks at you funny. 'You alright, man?" He asks you. "Yeah, I'm great," you say, but your work is sloppy—at the Chinese restaurant you knock over a bucket on a carpet he just cleaned and he has to re-clean it; then he has to remind you to sweep out the booths at the diner. When he drops you off in Lincoln Square at 6, he hands you two $20 bills.

"Thanks," you say.

"See you around," Billy says, but he's still looking at you funny.

Then you go home.

The Note

When you get to the Dead Pheasant Lounge, there is a hand-scribbled note taped to the door. It is written with surprisingly neat penmanship, and awful spelling.

Hello, I found out were you live from your frend. I jest wanted come to say goodbye, but you arnt here. Going back to Harisberg. Sorry I was so craby yesterday. Sorry I niver got to buy you a hot meal, becose you shure do look like you need it. Sory we dint get to burn down that factery.

Sincery,

Carolina (the Serdipity Girl).

You turn the key and enter the apartment. You lie down on the mattress and look out through the window at a tree branch, now free of snow, leaning up against the side of the old abandoned mill building. You turn on the alarm-clock radio that's buried under a pile of laundry next to the mattress. It can only pick up one station, the horrible pop commercial station in Harrisburg, playing the same whiny song. You lay there on top of your crumpled sheets on the mattress on the floor, and night falls and morning comes. The sun rises above the chimneys and the telephone wires out past the mill. Eventually you get up. You check the refrigerator; you are out of beer. You pull on your boots, walk down the stairs and cross Chambersburg Street. You enter the Seven Eleven and you put a dollar burrito in the microwave, and you pull a six pack of Schaefers from the refrigerator. The song comes on the radio again, that same whiny song. At the counter you pay for the beer and a pack of smokes and the burrito. The microwave bell rings and you put the steaming dollar burrito on top of the beer cans and you carry the bag out.

At the corner again, you stop. You look up at the windows of your little two-room apartment; you've left a light on and the light bulb stares back down at you. And then you turn and look down the street, at the Heritage Room, where all this started; at the corner where the Ice Cream Lady bummed that cigarette from you; and at the Billy Yank,

where you've been hiding from everything and everybody for all this time. Big streaks of phosphorous clouds shine in the sky, all pointing down Chambersburg Street. I got to pull it together, you think to yourself. I really got to pull myself out of this nose dive. When you get upstairs, you eat the burrito and drink a can of beer. Funny breakfast, you think to yourself. Then you get up and you have another beer.