

Bowling Alone

“That ain’t bad,” said the miniscule man,
voice muffled by his wispy beard
or heavy army jacket
that used to be the color of mashed peas.
Four bucks –
rental shoes and two games of bowling –
he seems to think it a reasonable percentage
of his welfare check for a half-hour’s fun.
I watched him as he bowled,
another little tramp waddling to the line,
pushing the angry ball towards the idols of his past
with the speed and power of a child.
He hits nothing more than stubborn pins
in the shape of all the women he has ever known
with their mocking, open-mouthed, ruby grins.
As he turns to leave, I see him hunch ever lower
with each shuffling step towards the door.

An Old Woman Taking a Smoke Break Behind the Mini-Mart, 12A.M.

She slumps against the dumpster;
the weight of a long night before her
and fifty years behind
bows her slender frame
into the shape of the nozzles
hanging from the pumps out front.

In the pitch of late summer,
the fiery tip of her cigarette expertly weaves
through the desperate traffic
of a few remaining lightening bugs
who signal to friends and lovers
in passionate bursts of finality.

Their greenish yellow light
almost reveals the short gray perm
clinging to her scalp.
It almost reveals the path back inside
where the fluorescents will not
edit what time has written on her face.

She flicks a petite wrist -

made steady from two generations
of counting change
and tearing lotto tickets
and sacking 10W-30
for almost stranded motorists -
sending the orange spark over the horizon.
She checks her watch,
sighs
and lights one more.

Between drags, she doesn't think
about her daughter standing at the register
on the other side of the cinder block wall,
middle aged and single with a girl of her own
who sits at a table near the windows
by the owner,
learning how to count to ten
in Urdu.

A Day at the Beach

I can imagine us lying in the sand
at the lake, your toes tracing memories
around discarded bait buckets and cigarette butts.
I close my eyes to see you loosen your top
as you turn your back to the sun
while I open my book and pretend not
to read, sneaking peaks at the edges
of your small breasts
over, under and around the empty pages.
You glance at me and smile,
reaching out to touch my hand,
but only for a moment
so that your tan will be even there too.
I imagine that I imagine
sliding next to you,
tossing your bikini
and the rest of the trash
aside as we screw our parts together
before the family finishing their chicken and watermelon
at the table by the swings notices
that we are so in love.

Another Snake
(with apologies to D.H. Lawrence)

I saw a snake on my way home from work
today – coiled, basking in the hot, hot sun
in the center of the breakdown lane.

His blackness made him a tableau of sorts
against the pallid grayness of the defeated blacktop
upon which he curled.

It is here, every morning, that I cross into the sun
to reach my office - an honest job to keep an honest family fed –
and back into the light each evening as I return to my country home.

A mighty, divided highway cleaves these two worlds,
on one side the city,
and across it, beginning where the restaurants and shopping centers end,
a hard stop – like a period at the end of a sentence –
miles and miles of forest stretch beyond the horizon.

And it is filled with creatures that never come to Starbucks to drink
fair trade coffee while tending to a client's needs.

Today, as I breached the barrier,
I saw the snake at the side of the road.
He had beaten me there,
and as I passed him he seemed to be looking at me
as if he wanted to retrace my steps,
to cross the highway
and find an office for himself
and come back to his hole at night with a rat
and provide his children a meal to eat.

He would not have hurt anyone; I know this for certain,
for in Indiana, too, the black snakes are innocent.
We fear those cast in copper or bejeweled on the head
and ornamented with beads at the tail.

And he was pure black
and looked as if he were getting tired
with the waning of the sun.

Knowing all that I have been taught about snakes
And about people,
I was surprised that some angry man in a truck

with wheels the size of his grandfather's combine
had not swerved to the side of the road to burst
the smooth, sable skin of this blameless prince.

And, knowing what I know, I thought that some woman
might have seen him
and lunged her Civic towards him
and crushed the life from this father of sons and daughters.

I did choose to swerve my SUV
and parked just beyond him
and got out carefully, mindful of those who, unaware of me,
might see the magnificent rodent catcher
– killer of his venomous cousins –
and through the heat of fear and anger
incinerate us all.

And standing at the side of the road,
staring down the serpent,
I felt the full weight of indecision
and helpless impotence.

Chocked with fear that I would despise myself,
knowing I must help him back into his world
and off the edge of mine,
I did all that I could do.

I removed my right shoe
and waved it in his face,
and he lifted his head,
and he hissed at me,
and he swirled in place as if to find comfort –
a better position for sunning
and chasing off strange creatures while sunning.
But he did not leave.

And later, after returning my shoe to my foot
and returning myself to my family,
I knew that I had missed my chance –
to lie next to him in the sun on the bleached asphalt
until the darkness fell over us both.

The Strangest Thing

As far as I know
there is no story to tell -
just a girl
sitting Indian-style,
like we all learn
in Kindergarten
(not knowing which Indians we are imitating –
as if there is any difference to us),
in an open dog kennel
placed carefully next to the house
in the side yard -
the pup waiting patiently
on an emerald patch
of the finest Kentucky bluegrass
looking in.