

# Nickel Night

*By Nora Wendt*

The air is humid and still, almost intoxicating to the two of us sitting at the bar. Heads down and damp, we are taking what we can get of the infrequent air conditioning and Wednesday night special, “Any silver coin gets you a beer.” The bar top is lined with wafer-thin coasters advertising alcoholic promotions. Their exclamatory words smear together into fat lines of gibberish under the damp rings impressed by our sweating bottles. This is how August dies in Iowa, vengeful.

In the six hours and twenty minutes that have passed since we claimed our barstools, you have dampened considerably. Your Oxford shirt has unbuttoned and wrinkled, softening into a second, saturated skin. One long wet line runs up your spine, and two moist patches have begun to spread under your arms.

It is one in the morning, an hour to closing time. Dead presidents collect moisture in the nickel and dime towers you have constructed on the bar, right between us. You clumsily fidget with the quarry of unspent coins on the bar in front of you, and one skitters away, toward my side of the fence. I knock it flat with the side of my hand. Somebody important glares up at me from a puddle of Bud Light.

“Which one is that? Which president?”

“Thomas Jefferson,” you sigh into your collar, shamed because I can’t identify the blank effigy stamped on a nickel. But this is my dumb question to move us to a new subject. Up until this sullen quiet, you’ve been all words, staring ahead into the bar mirror.

As you speak, you rarely look directly at me, watching instead the reflections of the people behind us. The bar is quiet for summer, and we are the only two at the counter. You pause whenever somebody approaches to order a drink, wait to resume speaking normally until they’ve walked away. You say, “Why should somebody I don’t know have insight to my personal life?”

Intermittent to bar traffic, you talk about your week as an intern at the Maytag plant in Newton, Iowa. About the job you hate and the secretary you love and the work you avoid. Your sentences begin to run in loops. The secretary, dishwasher parts, your boss, the secretary. I’m beginning to think that the temperature would be a lot more tolerable if you would just shut your mouth.

“I think I’m in love with her. Her name is Denise, and she has this hair. Oh, my god.”

You wax poetic about Denise because we are dating as un-seriously as any two people can date. Ours is a long-distance relationship from towns apart. You have a year left of school to receive your degree in engineering. I still have two full years before I am awarded a degree in the visual arts. You can’t wait around for me to graduate. That year, you tell me, could spell the rest of your professional life. You could climb the corporate ladder to breathless altitudes, “Hell,” you say, “I could become a junior executive at Maytag.” I’d say the cold logic of water valves, wash arms, and spline-shafted motors has begun to infect your life.

You raise your glass in a toast, “to you all, to your health,” you exclaim, extolling affections reflection-ward. I raise mine, act the part of a good sport, and take a long drink of something domestic.

“Check out the hat,” you mutter, teeth gritted against the bottle’s mouth, lips almost unmoving.

“Where?”

“Behind us.”

I turn to look, but you grab my elbow before I get a quarter of the way around in my seat.

“No! Not that way. Straight ahead.”

I follow the gesturing line of your longneck and lean forward to squint through the bottles packed on shelves against the mirror. The bartender, cleaning glasses down the bar, starts to walk our way. He thinks we’re going to order something.

“I don’t see...”

“Between the Jack and the Vermouth.”

“Which is...oh, I see. Nice.” Just some local types. I’m not sure why you’ve picked them out.

“You into cowboys at all?” You want to justify your clerical infatuations with my attraction to some guy in a ten-gallon.

“Not in particular. I’d take that hat, though.”

“Want me to grab him for you? I’ll say I’m your little brother. I can catch a ride home with the chick in the spurs over there.”

You would probably do all of this and not think twice about it.

“Uh-oh. Here they come!”

You lean in to nudge me, and my elbow knocks a bottle over. I kick at you, stubbing my toe on the corner of the bar. It hurts and my eyes start to water. There is beer everywhere. I leap out of its way as it pours off of the counter and soaks my chair.

“What’s wrong? Drowning your sorrows over here?” The Lone Ranger smiles, bearing big horse teeth and rawhide breath. He has my wrist locked in his hand, a hand that says he’s never lifted anything heavier than a ream of paper. I laugh and excuse myself to the bathroom. I’d bet a nickel that the line is so long, by the time I’m back he should have moved along to some other wagon camp.

I’m almost to the restroom when I turn around to see if he’s still there. He is, and he’s punching you on the arm in a way that suggests you know each other. This is your regular bar, after all. He stands taller than you, speaking to the top of your head as you begin to mop up my mess. In your loose trousers and wrinkly shirt, you look like some rumpled yuppie. A junior alcoholic, absent-mindedly using the bartender’s gray rag to push beer off the bar and onto the floor. The cowboy carefully rolls up his right sleeve and takes the towel from your wayward hand. From across the room, everything seems fine. I let it go, and follow the neon image of Annie Oakley, pointing her six-shooter in the direction of the powder room.

The three women in line before me have the same haircut in varied shades of blonde, highlights glaring under the flickering neon of beer advertisements. There is an up-front honesty here that belies the darkness of the rest of the bar.

A tall woman comes out of the restroom, shaking her hands dry and laughing. Two women from the line enter the bathroom together. I let my mind, my eyes wander in and out of the dark corner. This is a sticky little bar, domestic beer on tap, domestic music blaring overhead, deafening the live voices trying to converse. Tom Petty sings about the “Great Wide Open.” All of that is just beyond these doors, but it isn’t air-conditioned so I don’t want to go. Tom must realize the song’s futility, because he stops halfway through and starts to sing about a dance with Mary Jane.

The door swings open, and the woman in front of me pivots around, tottering. Her damp forehead reflects the glowing neon streaks of a liquor advertisement that covers the wall behind me. A bead of sweat, shimmering blue, works its way from under her hairline to the corner of her eye.

“Hold...my drink?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Her drink is a glass of melting ice with some amber-colored liquid poured in between the cracks where the ice couldn't be jammed together any tighter. The glass is covered in condensation. I have to hold it balanced on one sweaty palm so that I won't drop it. She staggers into the bathroom, closes the door, re-opens it, closes it. Then I hear her scratching, trying to lock it, which ends up with her opening the door again. I walk over, pull the door shut, and stand back. She shouts a thank you, voice muffled through the door.

I can taste my breath, thick on the back of my tongue. It is rancid from 'dinner.' "My treat," you said, baskets of pretzels turning soft on the bar, mountainous bowls of stale peanuts. The salt is rising up in my throat, pushed out of my stomach by the beer. I am about to put down the watery drink and find the gum in my purse when the door opens. Out stumbles a new woman, one whose lips are fleshed out into shapely maroon arcs, whose lovely hair is teased away from her head. She will melt momentarily.

She takes a step forward to reclaim her highball, and trips.

"You...going...later?" Her speech is as blurred as the words on the soaked bar coasters. "Where?"

"Swim. Ming! After. The bar. Clo...shes."

She has these bright, insistent eyes that say I should understand her. I have no idea what the hell she's talking about.

"Yeah, I'll think about it." Nod, nod.

She smiles in the middle of taking a drink, condensation and alcohol dribbling down her chin. Her freshly applied lipstick now adorns the lip of the glass. She holds it loosely as she lurches away, walking as though her feet were in tin buckets. The woman behind me shakes her head. I just smile and close the door.

I turn on the cold water and hold my sticky hands under it, scanning the bathroom for the courage to look at myself in the mirror. The toilet is lidless, cracked, and the toilet paper dispenser is apparently ornamental, holding a brilliant minimalist sculpture, an empty brown cardboard tube. In the corner is a little plastic trash can, overflowing with tissues used beyond use.

My reflection emerges between messages scrawled on the mirror in eyeliner (mainly terse rhymes regarding somebody named Richard). What's left of my hair is becoming full in the damp air, sponge-like. Cutting it short has forced it to condense all of its usual rebellion into two-inch strands, so that I seem to wear a straw wig. My lips gave up imitating 'Ripe

Berries' a six-pack ago, and my gleaming face has made a mockery of "shine control" powder. In a strapless top, the pale skin of my upper chest and arms is stretched thin over my bones. I look like a scarecrow dressed in some poor girl's bar clothes.

I turn off the faucet, wiping my wet hands on my pants, and open the door. There are a dozen women waiting to get in, including the chick in spurs. Twelve perspiring upper lips and foreheads, twelve heads of matted hair, eight dripping drinks, and four eyes damming with tears. The phrase 'hot and bothered' drifts through my mind.

"Hey! Hey, Jill!"

Your voice carries all the way to the restroom. I wonder how many nickels you've spent since I left you in the company of the Lone Ranger.

"Rick's buying!"

"Hey...Rick."

It's almost two, and it isn't just us that he's treating. The Lone Ranger is buying rounds for everybody in the bar. Crowding around us, they lean in for last call. The bartender slams the last draw on the counter decisively. He is a short man who just wants to get everybody out, sweep up the peanut shells, wash the dishes, and go home to his television. He begins to clear off the bar, picking up glasses and running them to the back room almost faster than people can put them down. He shouts to somebody working the tables, a man who only shrugs and shuffles through a swinging door into where the kitchen is. The bartender follows furiously, and even Rick jumps at the sound of glass shattering.

He pushes his hat back on his head, holds a napkin to the dampness collecting on his forehead. He's not a bad looking guy. From what I can see of the hair at his temple, it's a light color, blonde or red, and he's got the longest eyelashes.

A second hat appears near Rick's right shoulder. In seconds, the rest of his sidekick materializes from out of the humidity and extends a hand.

"Pinto."

"Pardon?"

"I am Pinto."

"Like the bean?"

Rick cuts in, translating. "It's a nickname. You got a nickname, Jill?"

I am waiting for you to defend me from your friends. Any minute now.

"Let's go!" The bottles lined up in front of you amplify your voice. The audience in the

mirror is becoming irritated with you. Pinto withdraws his hand.

“Go where?”

“Swim. Ming!”

You’re speaking fluent drunk-ese. I’m several beers behind, and sewing your words into coherence.

Pinto explains while you space out. “Yeah. Rick and I know this pond. We go all the time, it’s great.” He’s a short guy, in height and speech.

Your eyes float in your head, unfocused. You nod, either agreeing or losing consciousness. I follow the line of your sight to something shiny. Pinto’s brown belt has a big, big silver buckle. I can’t read exactly what is engraved on it in the dark, but I imagine it’s got to be either his name, or the name of his horse.

Hi-ho, Silver.

You’re quieter in the back seat of Rick’s Ford than you are at the bar. A smooth silence passes between us as we roll alongside fields of slender cornstalks. They are unaware that in a month their leaves will become brittle and dry. That a farmer will decide one cool morning, all crisp air and muddy overalls, that the corn is ready for harvest. Combines will enter the field. Parchment leaves stripped from brittle stalks, ears of plump kernels separated from their rasping husks. Maybe late September.

The one stop made along the way is for Rick’s sidekick to relieve himself. Rick slows down and pulls away from the road into a low, bare ditch. Pinto runs off into a field for decency’s sake, making some crack about flooding the crops.

The Ford repeatedly clears its throat while we roll down the windows and listen to the field, corn sheaves flapping in the shallow breeze. Our sediment-encrusted shoes line the carpet under us, the rich smell of our summer feet filling the car. Pinto returns and Rick peels out of the ditch, fishtailing on the groundless gravel. Our seatbelts swing vacant over our heads, and we make fast grabs for each other. If we are thrown from the vehicle, we want to land together.

Rick straightens out the Ford, and the four of us are again propelled along the dark highway. You nonchalantly scratch a handful of fingers over the loose overhead upholstery, unconcerned with death. You are not frightened by anything as banal as cars spinning out of control in rural Iowa, the nocturnal grating of chrome and earth, or skull-crushing centrip-

etal forces. But I am.

“Tell your friend to drive in a way that doesn’t scream ‘intoxicated.’”

You pause a little, and I watch your bare toes curl up into little white slugs. You are stammering right next to me, but I don’t turn to face you. Your voice sounds a very long way off in my ear. “My friend? I thought you knew him...”

Words blowing out of the open windows, into the fields. “...I just met...while you...in the restroom.”

I chew my lower lip in the exact spot where the silence collects, becoming heavy.

Rick takes his eyes off of the road to meet mine in the rearview mirror. The way he’s angled it, I can see my reflection. I look like a basket case with my hacked hair and lip-biting.

“Hey, honey, relax. Once you’re in the water, you can turn around and watch the show.”

“For now, why don’t you watch the road?” Pinto is the only one of us wearing his seat belt. He doesn’t have anyone to hold on to up there, just his hat. Pinto turns around to face us, lifting his voice above the undercarriage *ting* of moon-blued gravel.

“We go out here all the time. We’ve never been caught. Closest ever happened to me, is I had to stand there buck-naked while the Sheriff lectured me, and his buddy wrote me out a ticket.”

No response, what with you stammering breathlessly, and me busy chewing my lips off.

“Ah, don’t worry. It ain’t much more to pay than a speeding ticket, anyhow. Besides, that ain’t the point.”

I put my hand down on the seat and you close your fingers over it.

“Wh-what-t-t...is the point?” You stutter, almost breaking my fingers in your grip.

“Shit, man. I only get naked so I can see *other naked people*.”

Beyond his jagged smile, trees rush the road, blotting out the cornfields. We pass the park entrance, and the clumsy sign that states its operating hours, but we do not slow down enough to read it. As we speed around roads sculpted into pedestrian scenic routes, there isn’t a soul to be seen. We tear past picnicking vistas and fenced preserves of long-stemmed prairie grasses. We know that the park is well past closed.

Rick has begun to hoot and yell, bucking the Ford with the gas and brake pedals as though it were some wild horse, not a powder blue pick-up truck with one burned-out headlight. He turns around and shouts, “Almost there!”

Pinto pulls his hat over his face, and we swerve hard again. We seem to skid sideways for

a mile through the gravel lot, four doors flying open on rusted hinges and sucking us out into the night. In my racing, chicken-exiting brain, everything is becoming extreme.

We two tumble out of the car before it comes to a complete stop, shoes in hand. By the time Rick and Pinto grind their boot heels into the gravel, we're far ahead. As we run, pine needles lance our toes, rocks are caught between them.

I drag my feet as you blindly pull me along through the darkness, "How do you know we're not about to step off into a ravine?"

You have an intuition about direction, you say, about finding water.

Slurred voices drift through the trees. We follow them into a clearing where there are a dozen or so people standing in a tight circle, finding their sea legs in forty ounce bottles of malt liquor. We move past them unnoticed. Matching long strides through the woods, we will be first in the water.

You stop me at the threshold of the sand. It's quiet here except for the sound of water pushing itself onto the shore.

"Just keep moving," you say, monotonously, as though reading an instruction manual on nude swimming, "Don't look back. We'll get in, swim around. Be good sports. Then get a ride home from what's-his-name. It's fine, okay?"

Walking the path between groves of trees and drinkers has cleared your mind. But the moonlight, the beer, the excitement, has all had a deteriorating effect on mine.

"What's-his-name?" A black-and-white image of the real Lone Ranger flashes into my mind. I briefly wonder what his horse's name is, whether that horse can even swim, because I know I can't. I taste blood where my lip has split.

Suddenly, you are naked, pale, a giddy marionette flailing toward the water.

I stand ankle-deep in pond scum, your khaki pants and generally buttoned-up wardrobe heaped next to me. I watch the back of your head grow smaller and smaller until there is nothing on the surface of the pond but the thrashing of water that trails behind you. It gets longer with each breath that I remain on the beach.

The faster they're off, the sooner I'm in, I tell myself. I fumble with my jeans' zipper as though it were a loaded gun, clumsy hands loosen my pants in erratic jerks. I remove my shirt in one swipe and leave my clothes on the sand near yours. The sooner I'm in...

I make a dash at the water, then realize I'm not done. I'm standing here in my underwear, within earshot of Pinto's clipped phrases and Rick's whooping laugh somewhere in the



woods. I need to get in before they catch up.

I sheaf off my underwear, leaving it where the water and sand mingle, and run into the pond at full speed. I thrash around until I am waist deep, watching through my watery veil as your head glides further and further away. One hard trip on the uneven sand and rough debris of the pond floor, and I am falling forward into the water. I let it creep up over my shoulders, and move out to where you are.

Instead of swimming, I move in an exaggerated underwater walk, something like bounding across the moon, splayed toes scattering loose piles of sand. I find you staring purposefully at the cornfield of nimble stalks furthest from our shore. I give you a gentle tap on the crown and we can acknowledge each other again, made decent by the murky water.

We turn together toward shore, in time to see a clump of stragglers exit the woods, and run right over your careful pile of clothing. They move in clumps, gobs of exposed, pink flesh. I'd rather not watch.

"Race you out to the bobbing things."

"The buoys," you correct me.

"No, just us."

You're in the lead. I swim like driftwood. Before I've moved more than two meters, the water has become a landscape of floating heads and beer cans. Your face is lost among them. I dog paddle past the two men whose hats I have memorized. They didn't waste any time swimming right to the center of the action. I lower myself so that only my eyes and nose glide above the level of the pond, wary of Pinto's wandering gaze.

Their shoulders brimming up over the water don't speak much of farm labor. Both men have soft backs, softly stooped into the typically rounded posture of an office worker. Rick's hat nods over Pinto's in a gesture toward the same rows of corn that you were just examining. He creates a lilting rhyme of odd words, using as verses the brand names of herbicides that run from the fields into this pond.

"Roundup, Broadstrike..." He reminds us that we are naked in a pond in farm-town Iowa. Mad Cow, Mad Sheep, mad us. Pinto laughs, high and hypnotic. We are olives in an extra-dry herbicide martini. "Marksman, Guardsman..."

The water in my ears dampers the Lone Ranger's voice to an echoing whisper. By now I've drifted too far from the shore to stand, and have to rely on my body's natural buoyancy. This is short-lived. You wave to me from out at the rope fence, deceptively close. "Come on,

you can make it,” siren-calling from the buoys. I kick and choke to the nearest dock, arms wrapping around its fat timber leg. You shrug your shoulders and turn to swim along the rope fence.

From the other side of this dock, I can hear angry noises, grumbles and water-slapping from a handful of bathers. Their voices rise over the sounds of people entering the water, the sounds of people throwing beer cans and each other.

“That whore! She walks in here, in her bra and panties. I asked her why she still had *those* on.”

There seems to be a class struggle, a rift between those committed to nudity, and those who wear their underwear right into the pond. We, the naked, are represented by the loudest, most vulgar woman in the water. Too intoxicated to swim, she supports herself with a leg of the wooden pier and tosses her wet hair. It’s strung limp across her face, which is screwed up in disgust as she drags harder on the drowning cigarette, “So she goes, ‘Well, I’m not a whore.’ That whore!”

She spits. The cigarette officially dies, its tobacco entrails falling out in a damp lump. It is given a burial in her beer can, crushed and submerged. The can sinks, submarined into an underwater mission to seek-and-destroy all contraband underwear.

I want to warn you about chemical cocktails and the underwear people. I float and kick out to the buoys, where you aren’t anymore. A swaying marker discourages me from swimming any further from the sandbar, or any closer to the poison corn. I throw my arms around it, drowsy and content. From back here, I can scan the entire crowd. I see other heads scanning, eyes groping the way hands do on a crowded bus.

Nobody knows I am here, floating at the back of nowhere. I am indistinguishable, almost even to myself, just a piece of jetsam on the water. I let go to float on my back, ears submerged. Throwing small tides with my arms, I can loosen the gravitational pull of reality and the shore. I hear, alternately, the mute chords of the waves and the vocal fragments of anonymous swimmers. Voices travel like lightening over the water’s surface, but are dampened into silence directly under it.

Here I am disembodied, disowned, disenfranchised. I imagine myself not born yet, not near being pushed into the world. Under the same low sky and dust of starry matter, we have all become siblings, our bodies synchronized to a median age, the differences in our genders melted away in the warm current. Small waves smooth themselves in sheets over my body,

sky-bared.

One great push of the tide sends a rush of water over my face, into my mouth, but it is the sudden light that chokes me. I right myself, gagging on water and colored flares. Cherry throbs of red, bomb pulses of blue, send backup. The pond is newly engendered in the flashing lights, bodies emerging onto the sand. Slick-wet, bare-white, and luminous, broadcast over the glistening waves of what was our murky cover.

The stars above are aligned for chaos, parodied in the white points of flashlights that dodge between trees. Dogs bark behind a thicket of weeds just high enough to slow the progress of a uniform. A man in brown-and-badges stumbles his way down to the beach, searchlight trained on bare legs shuff-scuffling into their khakis. I see you struggle up onto the shore. You dress and jog barefoot toward the trees, shaking sand from your pant's leg. You move disoriented, as though the bobbing tufts of light are scattering your vision.

The surface of the water is passed over a few times with flashlights before they disband, turning toward the woods and the promise of land-logged nudity. I float alone in the dark, one hand on the buoy line. Forgotten at the edge of the pond.

The tide carries me up and down on the water, like a cork. There are a few things that I know for certain. I know that you are going back to Newton, Iowa, after tonight, with two weeks left of your internship. That at summer's end, you will return to finish your education. The rest of it, I can predict. That directly following graduation ceremonies, you will speed back to the Maytag plant, find Denise in the lobby, and fall on one knee, proposing marriage. That she will accept, maybe even without dropping her nail file, and you will marry her, father two-point-five children, rise to 'legendary' in corporate status, showered in pay-raises and extra holidays, retire with a pension and golf yourself into the grave, all while I bob in some chemical sewer.

I need out. I need to swim out before I dissolve. But, remember, I can't swim. All I can do is float on my back. Pieces of plant material drift by, catching between my toes in greasy strands. The tide laps around me, the sandy floor settles until the pond is miles deep and I am isolated, impaled on its surface. I watch with regret as the bright sky smears into one dense, obsidian expanse.

Slowly, and then like gunfire, rain takes the pond. The smooth surface becomes a thousand concentric distortions, warping and confusing distance. Light and metallic, the simple sound echoes and multiplies as empty cans spin on the water, pockmarked in the rain. Clothes

scattered on the beach take the shape of the sand beneath them. Cold drops pelt my upper body and face. Soon there is no sky, no land, no pond. Only blurred boundaries, one continuous element.

The rainfall is fast and furtive. After five rounds of feeble thunder, it is over. The clouds drift away, consumed by clear black night, and the only interruption in the length of emptiness that stretches before me is the reflection of the moon. It looms overhead, docile and obedient as the water.

You who brought me here, you whose damp neck I followed, you are not around to guide me out. Instead, there is the moon. Its perfect, ironed-down blankness pulls me along on strands of uncertain light. Facing the sky, my head leads my body to shore as I float with arms outstretched. When I reach land, I tell myself, when I feel the teeth of sand grains between my fingers, I will have made it. But I want to be ignorant to how far or how close I am. To know is to panic, and to panic, drown.

I kick and scissor, returning the sky's empty stare until I feel the sand brush against my back, in my hair. I close my eyes, legs still churning, untangling me from the water. I sit up, and water pools in my lap, lacking the strength to pull me back in. Standing upright on the shore, I am released, goose-bumped and chattering. My skin alarmingly white, hair waterlogged and stiff. I am on land, anchored by gravity. I exist.

I roll forward onto my feet, standing slowly, pushing with my arms and legs. Drained and loose at every joint. Relearning my weight, I walk with legs too wide apart, vainly searching for evidence of my earlier tracks. They have sunk, leaden, under layers of water and chaos. As I walk further, I see the bare steps of other bathers pounded under the sharp-toed impressions of officer's boots. Where the footsteps end, deeply tire-treaded gouges collect water.

Wandering between piles of scattered clothing, I find my jeans stamped into the ground. They are yards from where I thought I had slipped out of them. I peel them off the sand in one sheet, reanimating the stiff denim legs. Grains of sand rub in distressed tracks against my thighs. The shirt pressed into the ground nearby is not mine, but I pick it up and shake it out, particles flying. I pull the gritty top over my head and turn back. There is no trace of me in the water, and there won't be. The pond is blank, moon dissolving into it.

New sunlight slips among the dense silhouettes of trunks and boughs. I walk into it, narrowing my eyes against the glare. Soon a gravel lot shores up to the forest edge, and there

is the blue pick-up, one door wide open. I follow its incoherent tracks to the dampened road, toward the glowing horizon. My bare feet are divided, one choosing the dirt road, and the other the weedy shoulder. A breeze moves against me as I walk, carrying with it the musk of a matured summer.

Before me, the road stretches muddy and crooked as a dry river. Power lines measure my distance toward the discolored haze of 'home.' To my right, there is a steep incline thick with weeds. Above it, a false horizon, tempered blue sky over needly-green cornstalks. The sky and the corn are restrained by a thin, barbed-wire fence. The only sense of unsettlement is the rustling of waxy leaves. The sound is low, and above it light is caught, lost and reflected among the tassels.

My left foot drifts, joins the right foot in the weeds at the side of the road. Together, my bare feet slide down into the dewy grass of the shallow ditch. Their low shuffle displaces a collection of small, white moths. They flutter further along the embankment to nestle invisibly in the grass. Struggling up the incline, grasping the unseen, I manage to pull myself to where the fence starts. I bend at the waist and slip cautiously between the two strung lines of barbed wire. It is dark here, in the tall morning shadow of stalks. A canopy of threaded corn-silk rustles over my head. Closer, I see the shimmering tassels are muddy-ended and damp. Meticulously planted rows march away from the road, becoming dense and uneven, eventually massing to black.

I was once told that if I were lost in a cornfield, I should chose one row of corn, and walk with it until I found myself at the edge of a new field, at a road. Peering down the planted corridor, I see no escape, only two rows that converge to one black point.

I can see you, hours from now. You walk back to the bar to retrieve your vehicle. You move fast, an orange blur in the pullover that you promise to return. Honest, you tell the wise, disbelieving officer, orange just isn't my color. You find the car exactly where you remember parking it, maybe there's a ticket on the windshield that you tear in half, and half again, and leave on the asphalt. At any rate, you get into your car and drive straight back to Newton, Iowa, to Denise the secretary, and to designing dishwasher parts.

Long leaves scratch and grab as I step out of the row, rough edges scraping against my arms. After a few steps, I stop and untangle myself. Brushing a hand between two stalks, I feel something resist, then cling, to my forearm. In the light, I can see transparent strands fly, drifting on a breeze that I don't feel. I look toward the place that my arm brushed. Between

two stalks, like ice etched on air, the glistening strokes of a spider's web.

Along one of the spokes, a grey spider walks nimbly, artist of her own entrapment. Though they are identical, she knows which of these strands will hold her prey immobile, and which are hers to prowl, unencumbered. She can sense the changing seasons, accepts the scarcity of insects drawn to her web, accepts her hunger. She patiently waits for summer to end, for the death of the simplicity that she knows so completely.

You say that you know just enough about everything, enough for small talk. No need for patience if you can chat your way through wash-arms and drive shafts, Denise's hair and Thomas Jefferson's profile. You have some rural knowledge, too. You know, for example, that corn blooms in the full moon. Someday, you will admit that you've never seen it.

Picking my way carefully between two rows of overgrown stalks, I hold my breath until I've cleared the field. I stand just at the edge of it, facing the fence. Barbed wire and a cliff, my reward for following one row of corn. I fold into the fence, slide my legs between the two wires, and twist out of danger's way. Once through, I stand at the precipice of the incline and look for small cuts. I have none.

Staring down at the road, I know what I do have. I have the knowledge of direction, of which way is the way back. I know the signs of seasons turning, of paths deviating. And, walking home, I know I have my own footprints in the loose gravel road behind me.