

Philip Stephens

Paradise, Missouri

I paced. I looked at thumbtacked prints of Christ
Down in the nursery of the Baptist Church:
Christ raising Lazarus, scolding disciples,
Or suffering children to come unto him.
My groomsmen sat, drank beer, and talked too much.
"When you got fitted for that tux," Josh said,
"Did you get fitted for a ball and chain?"
"Hey man, once you get married," David said,
"You won't believe how many chicks'll want you."
"We should have gone back out to Paradise,"
Ralph Yale said. "Like we did before my wedding."
"Don't tell this now," I said.

"Why not?" he said.

"We drove out to that shotgun shack Mike Hall had –
Liquor in troughs and bags of dope like snacks,
And God, there were these girls up from the lake.
Man of the hour here gets messed up so bad
He mashes with this one. Turns out she's married.
Hell, you'd been dating Julia, what? A year?"
"You're one to talk," I said. "You got married
Just one week later. What'd you do that night?"
"Yeah, yeah. So they're right by her husband's truck.
Course, hubby kicks the hell out of our boy,
Until Mike pulls him off, right?"

"I don't know."

Late amber light blazed through one window well,
The stink of perfume and soured milk grew strong,
And while they kept on about Paradise,
Its recent dam, its shotgun shacks, its store
Where we, as boys, bought stinkbait and tobacco,

Then went down to the river, I ignored them,
But when I tried to crack a window, saw
This print of Jesus in Gethsemane,
Down on his knees before the soldiers came
And Judas kissed his cheek and Peter lopped
The ear of Malchus off. And I recalled
She wasn't pretty. "He gets drunk," she'd said.
"He even hit me just for eating french fries
In his new truck. I bet you're not like that."
We'd leaned against an old outhouse in back,
Her lips against my neck, my hands inside
Her shirt, until she had me follow her.
Again, her lips, and then a shot of light
Ripped through my skull, and I dropped to the road
Taking kick after kick. All I could see
Was the lit billboard glaring near the store:
*Last stop before the lake- liquor, bait,
And ammo.*

"What was that girl's name?" Ralph said.
"I don't know," I said.

Then someone upstairs
Called, and my groomsmen stood, and we filed out
Into the sanctuary of cut flowers
And organ swells and fading, glass-stained light.