

Stars & Fireflies

by billy robinson

"Those are some big-ass tits," Stu said. Me and him were standing along the chain-link fence at Ventnor Middle, our fingers intertwined into the cold metal latticework. Maureen was off playing tag with a bunch of squealing girls. She had dark ropery hair and a freckled face like one big connect the dots puzzle, but it was her tits that were something else. Amazing gyrating water-balloon-filled Jupiters.

Just about everyday Stu would say something crazy like, *I 'm gonna get a look under that hood of hers if it kills me*. I never doubted him. He said he was going to slash Mr. Jenkins tires if he picked on him again in class, and wouldn't you know it, that afternoon I saw Mr. Jenkins leaning against his Mustang, the last car in the lot.

Stu had a way of making his eyes look scary. Squinty little slits that let me know he was someplace else. The way he looked at Maureen made me think he was on the African plains, skulking between bullrushes. I marveled at his primal simplicity. I too wanted to get a peek at their wild magnificence.

Stu lived far on the other side of town, but one day he called and said, Get over here.

I pedaled to Dorset Avenue, crossed the Ventnor bridge, cut over strangers' lawns. Half hour later when I got to his house, he was waiting outside. "What is it?" I asked, but he just got on his bike and gave me a wave. Behind him, we rode all the way up the beach block until we reached Wisahickon Avenue. All the homes were huge down there, three-story mansions, but wedged up against each other, only a narrow driveway separating one window from the neighbors. By the time we got there the sun was already cooling over the roofs of houses.

Stu hopped off his bike, and I trailed him as he sneaked down an alleyway. We heard a dog bark but paid no attention. We climbed a

fence and ended up at some driveway of a large stucco house. He then pointed to a shed.

I laced my fingers together and heaved him up. Then he leaned down and offered me his hand.

"What are we doing?" I asked again.

"Just shut up and watch," he said. I stayed silent, flat on the black pebbly shingles, my eyes fixed on a second floor room. Darkness was soon all around. The screen I was looking at was blank.

And we waited. Waited as if waiting for a movie to start. Stars began to dance by the millions overhead. And fireflies, their pulsing signals, flashed in the cool darkness. It made me think of the night my parents took the family camping in Bolton. Dad and Joseph and I pitched the tents while Mom baked the beans and burgers over an open pit. We gathered broken twigs and mushed burnt marshmallows between graham crackers. Before bed, I lay out outside, full and not ready for sleep. I listened until the last ember popped on the dying flames before my eyes shut on their own. Then the day after we got home, Dad called us from the Interstate. Said he couldn't do this anymore. There was another woman, a woman along the Blue Route where he'd been selling his windows.

"Holy shit," Stu suddenly said, and Maureen's fiery second floor window sparked awake.

I craned my neck to that sliver of light. A tight white tank top, the shorts, her hair pulled back. I watched her hair band release, hair uncoil. My pupils grew into camera lens. Peering into that window as my heart grew into a steady rhythmic drumbeat. I imagined close-ups, body part by part, lingering, following the curves. Her skin goose-bumped. Eyes piercing, deadly, capable of slaying me. I gazed back at them stealthily, flying low, the pebbly black shingles biting into my kneecaps, but I didn't care.

"Come on," Stu moaned. "Take it off. Take it off, damn it." Her hands moved behind her back, reaching for the clasp. I sat bug-eyed, nether a word. I held my breath as the straps began to slide down her shoulders. It all made me convulse, whisper incantations

to myself. My eyes swirled. For weeks I hadn't been able to think straight, waiting to lay vision on those majestic, swooning breasts.

Stu's hand grabbed my arm. Began to tug, pry.

And I closed my eyes.

Stu said, "Oh my god, my god," and I squeezed tighter. Then he was in my ear. "What are you doing? Look," he said in a raised whisper. "Look. Look, you idiot."

I could have seen their perfect shape, their splendid ripeness. What had been unreal and perfect in my dreams for so long, suddenly exist.

All I had to do was open my eyes.

