

Robert G. Sherrin / TWO PROSE PIECES

DREAM THREE HUNDRED

I see the soft edge of motion and the hard touch of its sudden stopping. I see the farm girl at her window flapping eiderdowns at my passing. I see the cobbles or the asphalt or the concrete roll by only a few feet from my face; the tree branches that come at me like whips from nowhere; the mileage posts that threaten my kneecaps on fast corners; the hidden rock that could clip my ankle and crush it in my boot. I still see the red bus on my side of the yellow line.

There was a bike behind me and one in front. It was a shady road, the pavement moist, the regular seams of tar thumping under the wheels like a watch ticking loudly. The trees formed a tunnel ahead of me, allowing sunlight to dimple the roadway, tossing the gear changes back at us, making the passage of time a useless thing. We were motion and though you were on the back of my bike, I was alone and leaning into the curve.

I remember your hands in my jacket pockets. Your fingers on my ribs like a pianist's on the keys. You played a delicate tune. You'd been playing it with me a long time. You talked softly to me on telephones, whispering from great distances, arranging meetings that turned always to quiet affairs in the woods, each of us on a separate stump, not talking, not staring, not at all comfortable. You had walked and I had ridden to meet you. The motorcycle tilted away from us in the afternoon humidity, the sun highlighting the exhausts, the fairing pulled tight like a mask over the front end, the little lip of the seat's rear edge. All so quiet. We practised saying nothing. We practised saying goodbye.

- Gotta go.
- Okay.
- Wanna ride?
- No. I'll walk.
- Got two helmets.
- I wanna think. You go ahead.

Always the same. Me kicking at the machine, wrists twisting, toe tapping, gears clicking to certainty. I couldn't explain to you what a waste of time our meetings were. So the bike spoke for me, a brief wail then dirt and dust and my disappearing down the back roads, standing on the pegs over potholes, yelling, drowning the bike's voice and your silence in my sudden, short words. I don't recall them but they were loud and angry and were intended to echo back to you as you walked home. They were intended to insinuate themselves into your thoughts, push them aside and let you know that I could be mad and vindictive and passionate and funny and worth the effort. My departures always ended on the autobahn.

I would pull the goggles down and ease into the traffic moving quickly into high gear, the wind only now sucking at my lips. Then I'd slip my ass into the curve of the seat, the part where you were supposed to sit, and I'd duck my head until only my eyes showed above the visor of the fairing. There was no noise, only the elements of it: the motor vibrating, the tank a large tingle of explosives under my chest, the front end like the leading edge of a bullet far beyond the weapon's propulsion, living dangerously, temporarily, on its own.

Soon I'd be in a pack of autos: fast ones, slow ones; German ones, small anonymous boxes of power; French ones, low and sleek and nearly silent in their hydraulics and evilly swivelling headlamps; Italian ones that were blood red and flowed quickly; American ones that barked with energy and dodged in and out like nervous animals. But I was something nearly unseen therefore worthy of notice. I cruised up, downshifted, pivotted to one side upshifting — a suggestion of sound in the road noise — a swivelling of hips, a dancer in the fast lane then a sidestep back into the traffic. Me, almost flat, wrists cocked or uncocked; me, flat on my stomach at 176 kilometres per hour.

At times my mouth was open. Whenever I changed gears I growled a little, up or down in my octave of mechanical sounds. When I passed cars I shook my leathered ass and waited for the honking horns. I wanted men to hate me because I was faster and sneakier and less predictable than they were in their leather upholstered sedans. But they loved me because I was alone where beside them sat thin women with accessible desires, women who listened to music on seats that reclined into a back seat that, even in its narrow dimensions, hinted at steamy sheets. I wanted women to hate me because I was there one moment and gone the next, because I was almost touchable but always out of reach. But they loved me because they knew my thighs still vibrated when the bike stopped. I was the subject of those caged voyeurs who looked up from paperback copies of Réage and adjusted their shades to watch me working my machine. And they loved me because they couldn't have me, because they wanted only the suggestion of motion, of something fast and uncontrolled. They were the kind who sat back and watched while I was the kind who jumped and danced for someone else's pleasure.

I drove the autobahn and weaved in and out of traffic, cursed everyone. Cursed you particularly, called you bitch and other things. I cut drivers off, slalomed the white line, closed my eyes at 193 K's and counted to five then opened them and let the wind eat away at me until the speed dropped and my face stopped fluttering and my knees grew sore from pinching the tank and my ass loosened up on the fear that saw me plucked by the wind from my machine. Eventually I pulled off the autobahn and stopped and sat quiet listening to the motor cool, waiting to see if I could curse you anymore before I headed home on a back road where I knew of a pay phone by a bridge.

You had to say yes. You did. We had to meet and talk. We did. You were forbidden to ride because it was not only dangerous and unladylike but also promiscuous. We rode anyway. At night with the lamps off, the white line was Morse Code in the moonlight. From behind your thighs closed in on me like insistent pincers. There was air to breathe and air to cut through. There was air to rustle with our passing. There was air to record our sounds and there was air to shield our motion after the ride was over.

There were others who joined us. There were rides into the meadow land where our sounds were swallowed whole and only small things like frogs produced an echo. There were moments of flying when we crested a rise and floated over the pavement until the forks dipped and we fell forward. There were times when the sunlight turned the distant road to water.

That day there was a bike behind and one in front and the six of us were weaving and turning down the forest highway, left side on the yellow line, a fast insect of noise heading south in the spring. The air was moist and remained with the skin, almost palpable in the mouth, tasting of cedar, smelling of privacy. There was nothing on the road but us.

The bus was red. It carried school children. It crossed the yellow line. Of that there is no doubt. He honked, I admit to that. He sideswiped the first bike and it collapsed. But the road curved right and the bike's motion continued left, directly into the rear wheels of the big Mercedes. There were sparks and fire. And yells. Yours, mine, the school children, those dying, those about to.

The bus missed you and me. I'd braked for an instant and swung right, heading for the shoulder while panic slowed everything: the bus red with cries and wide open faces, its honking a wild northern sound, the driver's eyes huge, his hands in the air; the first bike torn up in the rear wheels, the rider and passenger fluttering and flopping like rags in the roadway. A helmet bounced like a soccer ball.

And the impact of the head-on as the third bike failed to swerve fast enough: perhaps the rider caught in a blind spot of sun, perhaps a sideways glance that took part of a second from his reflexes, perhaps he was frozen into death like a deer who steps onto the tracks and is stunned by the train's lamp. Who knows? It was metal on metal. It was very very loud then very very quiet.

We had skidded and swerved and slowed and finally slid into the dirt. Your hands still in my pockets. You looked calm, you lay quietly on the gravel.

—What happened?

I shrugged. Slip away, I thought, don't force me to show you. And you did. Shock pulled you under. You went unconscious.

I walked alone to the highway. School children were running toward me, hair flying, tears falling, screams uncoiling in the tunnel of trees. I thought I heard birds starting to sing. I opened my arms to the little ones who grabbed at them, yelling and wailing and pointing at the bus; some pissing, some weak and sitting on the pavement; others strong, running madly from side to side. I saw oil flowing from the bus' front end. I saw the bus driver staring ahead, upright and stiff in his seat. I saw the three bikes on their bellies in the road. I smelled dust.

The children huddled around me on the centre line. They hugged me and pleaded with me and cried to me in German. I smiled and looked down. I spoke to them in English. I said

— It's only a dream, my dears. Only a dream.

I said it again and again, again and again.

FORCED OUT

He stood in the outfield, one hand padded with leather, the other tucked in jeans. On his head a white cap with blue stripes, on his chest a shirt with the word EAGLES in scroll. His eyes were tired from staring at the infield, seeming further away than the twenty yards of stubble indicated. To play the infield you had to be able to catch and run and yell snappy phrases, little poems of exhortation to the pitcher. The infielders also wore full uniforms.

He looked into his glove and saw the name of a baseball pro in gold lettering, the black leather like a darkened theatre, the words Golden Diamond seeming to promise perfection, smelling not only of saddle soap but also of the cloudburst slide into third on a risky triple, of the lightning steal, of the pleasant pain of a snagged line drive. But where he stood was pasture land and he and the other two were like heifers cut loose to do as little damage as possible.

Be alert. Be alert out there. The coach's voice in falsetto, a million light years away.

Beyond the confines of the playing field people were gathered. They made him sick. The men sat on the hoods of their dusty cars, their fat thighs spread, a bottle of Stampede Ale clinched in their crotches, fingers in their mouths, whistling or yelling or belching. It was important to them to be noticed. And the women in their canvas chaise longues perusing the *Digest*, the *Home Journal* or *Confessions*, not trusting their hubbies to talk only of baseball or their sons to speak properly on and off the field while keeping their young hands away from their groins in public. The girls off to one side, talking and squealing of Tampax and virgin pins, of so and so's wienie displayed furtively and momentarily in a tent under a hot sun with mothers whistling from stoops for lunch, suspicious of the silence and heat buzz around the teepee in one neighbour's back yard. Then there were boys who did not play, who slouched across the stubble, along the foul lines and beyond the outfield, trailing nooses of rope, boxes, sprung wires, traps to snare gophers. The animals were killed and their tails removed for the 5¢ bounty offered at the station store.

There were, of course, the gophers; scores of thousands of them squeaking in the night, scurrying past, underfoot anytime you strayed from paved road to prairie. Holes were prevalent beyond the last line of officers' houses, holes that could snap a horse's leg, that could tear up ligament and twist cartilage in a man. At an NCO's softball game one outfielder had run backward, hands up, to grab a long fly ball only to step awkwardly in a gopher hole and break ankle and arm in the fall. The fire crews arrived the next day, pumped water and aviation fuel into the burrows, ignited the mixture, watched, waited and listened as the gophers boiled underground.

Traps had been set under houses. Fires were lighted, armies of men and boys with sticks beat the grass and herded the rodents toward a drainage ditch filled with oil. Bulldozers buried the writhing, greasy squeakers. High thistle would grow there. A sweetness, a scent of near vomit would hang like old perfume over that ditch all summer.

Be alert out there. Backem up, backem up.

There was a dull crack in the distance, a .22 or a ground ball to short. The outfielder took his eyes off the troop of boys parading past to see the short stop make a play to first. The cheers swelled for a moment, a sound almost of pain or a wind tearing quickly at high wires then mooing away as the distance between him and the game grew. The boys, the gopher hunters, had moved toward the dugouts, one swinging a weighted plastic bag.

One down, two to go. Gotem swingin like barn doors. The backcatcher, oddly gopher-like in his gear squatted down and raised one finger.

The outfielder pulled his cap lower and crossed his legs. His back was tired from standing in one place too long. He watched a gopher pop its head up not ten feet away, sniff the air, then scuttle to another hole. They were not beautiful creatures. Their teeth were often yellow but their eyes were large and soft, dark brown, like hot chocolate being stirred. The pupils showed the fire of misunderstanding. The creatures did not understand that they were unwanted things, dangerous so the rumours had it: had attacked in a group of forty a small child and killed it with their slashing teeth and rabies; had

shit in people's food; had eaten away tires on aircraft; had undermined the runway when they gathered by the thousands in spring at the end of the airstrip, a wavering of brown on the pale grass. The great Lancasters would drop in to land, engines whispering almost feathered as back pressure built to stall speed. The gophers were undeterred. They mated in a frenzy until it was time to depart. The rumours were only rumours, tiny packets of air that circulated around the base. It gave everyone a reason to kill in the spring when the juices ran a little wild after the cold winter.

The sound of a Harvard trainer, bee yellow overhead, pulled the outfielder's eyes from the burrows around him and he watched the noisy plane dip then founder as the student pilot lost power and pressure in the bank. But the engine wailed back to life and the plane moved over the pale sky. Loud voices rose to draw the boy's attention to a ball rolling into right centre. The fielder stumbled to it, tossed it awkwardly to second. The runner was already on his way to third but was trapped. He hesitated, pitched himself back and forth in the narrowing gap, the ball drawing closer like a slow white bullet, the runner in agony trying to avoid it, twisting like a gopher at the final moment when the third baseman ran him down, forced him to the dirt out of breath and instinct, dispatched him with a tag to the shoulder. The infield was a tightly knit group and now they romped around each other as the parents clapped and whistled and stopped reading and drinking for a moment. Fathers were shaking upraised beers and bouncing their soft asses on the dusty hoods of their cars; the mothers were cracking thin smiles at the antics, their features hardened by the need to grimace at boys imitating men who wanted to be boys again; the knot of girls had swivelled to watch their lovers-to-be rolling in the dust, noting judiciously the taut buttocks and tough chests; and the boys, hunters, moving further from noise and notice of the elders, lugging their sacks of animal, bringing out the knives, relishing that ritual as much as the thought of nickels sliding over the oiled counter at the store. The game went on.

Shoot to me big fella. The catcher's thin chant barely reached the outfield.

The left fielder stood patiently. The urine was growing in his bladder. He tightened his thighs and felt the pressure in his groin, the little thing a little bigger, the sac tight and dimpled like the casing of almonds. He narrowed his gaze on the group of girls and

wondered if their gaze ever narrowed on him, considered him in their calculations, ever wondered about his wiener as they squealed their analyses behind the bleachers. Did they watch him as he walked alone to that spit beyond the hump of the drainage ditch where the Harvard had crashed last year? Where he forced himself to look at the torn metal, rust in the yellow, the pilot's seat ripped and bent, a stilled gesture in the aged canvas, rubber knobs and control lines pocked with snow? Did they watch as he kept a look out for a severed finger or forgotten limb, then pulled it out and pissed over the empty seat? It seemed appropriate. A salute of comprehension, a tattoo of disdain over things crumpled, once almost human in their airborne and mysterious grace, now only too human in poverty and awkward silence. At odds with their surroundings. Did they ever wonder about him?

Another crack. The boy turns and hears the voices, louder than ever, the syntax directed at him, the high tension striking an electric chord in his chest. The ball at its apex now arcs toward him. He stares up, making all the minute calculations, gauging, the wind, the need to dilate pupils, the drift of the ball due to overspin, the expected impact of a hard object moving fast, the inevitable cushioning of one thing against another, turf, leather, or flesh and bone. One hand forgotten, still in pocket, the other raised, the boy questioning the movement as he makes it. And the ball drops suddenly, even after the noise and nervous reaction, to the centre of the black glove, into the heart of that baseball player's name. There is cheering from a distance, a gurgle and bubble and tinselling of sound. He doesn't think twice about it, just starts the long trot to the dugout where he will be told he is first up.

Hit it Robbie, hit it.

The noise is overpowering after the outfield, like moving from the back pew during the sermon to the altar rail for communion. He has a moment to himself after the others slap his shoulders and yell at him: Otta go, Wayda be, Howda hangin there. The coach smiles, thumbs up, claps his hands, calls for homeruns and alertness, promises a trip to the DQ for a win. The boy makes for the on-deck circle, selects a bat, turns to walk past and behind the dugout where he can warm up.

A mother is berating her son, shaking her index finger, her frame thin and angry under the flowered dress. Her hair is red and bobbed.

Why do you have to kill for a nickle? Why do you have to torture them like this?

The son has no explanation. He shrugs. The outfielder stands quiet, bat to his side as he stares at the boy's right hand: A plastic bag with two gophers sucking for air. Their yellow teeth grab at the plastic, their eyes wide, legs in motion, the bag drawn to their features, the thrashing slow and dim as if projected by a distant lens.

You stop this right now. And the mother turns away, yanking the hair from her face, cursing at the flaccid hubby who squats on the Buick's hood. Her face moist with futility.

The umpire calls for a batter.

The boy with the plastic bag walks over to the boy with the bat and takes it from him. He lays the bag on the stubble and goes to work. Six solid hits stills the slow-mad thrashing, the last blow breaking the plastic, tossing fur and blood in a short burst. He returns the bat and walks away.

Let's have a hitter. The ump lowers his mask, calls a last time.

The outfielder takes the bat automatically. Wide eyed he finds himself at the plate, the wood a little red on the fat, the ground in the distance wobbly with movement. The crowd is a blur of sound, the beating now a building pressure in his upper groin, hands very cold on the sanded wood, throat closed, lips dry, mind not focused. The catcher, in crouch, balanced on his hind legs, chants

Shoot to me big fella, shoot to me.