

WHAT WE LEARN ABOUT LOVE, WE LEARN FROM QUARRIES

Characters:

The boy = a twenty year old boy from Bangor, Pennsylvania

The girl = a nineteen year old girl from Bangor, Pennsylvania

The girlfriend = the boy's nineteen year old girlfriend from Bangor, Pennsylvania

This narrator = a thirty-six year old writer

The quarry = a flooded and abandoned slate quarry outside Bangor, Pennsylvania

I.

The boy and the girl, recent graduates from Bangor High School, stumble drunkenly down a midnight road that is so old that it has faded into a two-track that leads from downtown Bangor, Pennsylvania, with its 6,000 people, to a slate quarry that has been abandoned for so many decades—decades and decades and decades—that the boy and the girl know the quarry only as a reservoir (with such dark water). The boy and the girl can't imagine this pit as a working quarry, dry with rock cliffs exposed for hundreds of feet. The boy and the girl cannot image hundreds of workers hauling up block after block of slate to Earth's surface.

On this night, the girlfriend is at her apartment less than a mile from the quarry. The girlfriend wanted to stay home tonight—rest for work tomorrow. But the boy, scarecrow thin, wants (like all boys from Bangor) the quarry over sleep (or anything else really). The girl at the boy's side has swaying hips, a farmer's daughter's soft face, a stomach pushing gently against a white tee shirt. These are also things the boy wants over sleep.

II.

The moon—low in the east and waning an orange like Bangor's autumn leaves or a broken down '76 International Scout pickup—is an eighth full, two days till new. Without looking at watches, the boy and the girl know that it is the time of night where they should say an awkward goodbye, a goodbye that means tonight was nothing. The girl should break free from the dark woods, find her car—a Chrysler K Car, drive Ridge Road home—drunkenly swerving the yellow line, park in her parent's driveway—tires on the grass. The boy should walk to his girlfriend's \$250 a month apartment, see if she is still awake. If so, the boy should drag the girlfriend to bed, hold her tighter than any other night, leaving the fewest eddies of space.

But this is Bangor, a trembling town of cornfields, cow pastures, dark hollows, abandoned quarries and—spread across this landscape—so many factories that have been closed for so many years that them ever producing anything seems like a myth in this town with a single grocery store, Bangor Market, one meat market, Pyskers, and more bars than the boy or this narrator can count (but they try)—Ziggy's Hidden Valley, the Oak and Maple, Five Points, the Richmond, the Republican Club, O'Neil's, the Rod and Gun Club, the Red Geranium, TJ's, Market Street, the Colonial, the Scorecard, Jax, Frank's, Jewell's, the Overlook, Augie's, and others, so many others.

III.

After fifteen minutes of walking, the boy and the girl reach the quarry's edge. The boy gazes at the water (smooth and unbroken), at trees leaning over the quarry, casting shadows, breaking apart the glow of Bangor's lights—a dim, evaporating burn.

IV.

Ringling the quarry are narrow trails—newer than the two-track the boy and the girl walked in on—overrun by hungry weeds. Alongside these trails lay rain-soaked, empty cases of beer—Pabst and Busch,

Bud and Miller, Schlitz and their local beer Yuengling. Some beer boxes new and shiny from the last few nights. Others with the colors bled. Crumpled cans. Broken bottles. Torn grocery bags. Empty GPC cigarette packs.

High school boys (like our boy) use these trails to reach the higher places from which to dive into the quarry. As these boys dive the ten or thirty or sixty feet to the hard water, they look more beautiful than at any other moment in their lives. Controlled and muscular and perfect in their fall.

V.

Standing with his feet at the edge of the quarry, the boy is trying to make decisions. There is the girlfriend at her apartment, the girl beside the boy, the quarry's cold water. If the boy were to ask this narrator for advice, this narrator has no idea what advice he would give. Not one idea. What to tell him? What best to do?

But that's not true. This narrator is just afraid to give advice since he knows and understands the lessons of the past and the lessons from the stretching future; this narrator knows what tonight can become.

VI.

The girl (without thought—or maybe she's contemplated this moment forever) pulls her tee shirt over her head, reaches behind her back and unclasps her bra. The boy stares at the girl's breasts as if they are stars (except these—tonight—never seem to fade). Wiggling her hips, the girl slides her legs out of jeans and white panties. Her clothes become autumn leaves scattered across the ground.

VII.

Before the boy realizes what is happening—while still clothed and standing on the edge of the quarry—the girl runs toward the quarry. She is running and running and at the quarry's edge, she jumps and as she jumps, she transforms into an ash-white angel (an honest

to god angel). The angel-girl is flying—taking to the air—flying. Becoming air itself.

VIII.

As the naked angel-girl flaps her arm-wings, this narrator understands (even if the boy and the girl cannot) why she is trying to fly. Desperate to escape Bangor, its gone-wrong prayers (the hundreds of jobs that have fled the region, the drunks leaning over long oak bars, the sputtering American-made cars driving potholed roads). The angel-girl is trying to fly away from the once-tan-now-cement-gray duplexes filled with soft-cushioned sofas and smoke-stained ceilings. The angel-girl is trying to carry herself from the arms of the earthbound boy who will grab at her in mere moments because the earthbound boy has needs just as the girl has needs. But these needs have nothing to do with each other.

And this narrator also knows (even if the boy and girl do not, or cannot) that no matter how hard the angel-girl swings her arms, they can never be wings. She can never be an angel. She can only be—forever—a girl from Bangor, Pennsylvania.

IX.

The girl, now treading quarry water, acts as if not everything has fallen apart, not everything has fallen.

X.

Because the girl is so beautiful (and waiting), the boy, he too tears off his clothes. Throws his tee shirt onto a right angle rock. Army shorts onto a bush. American flag boxers tossed next to shoes. Maybe he'll find them later. Maybe he won't.

XI.

Once the boy breaks the surface of the quarry, he is lucky because the girl needs nothing (not one single thing) to convince her that the boy (this very boy) is the boy to take her places she has never

been—places she may never go. Maybe not out of Bangor, but somehow (if only on this dark-mooned night) so much further. Without a single pickup line from the boy, the girl kisses the boy (tonguing her desperation). The boy kisses back his own needs (and they are extensive).

This kiss threatens to flame from the lips of the boy and the girl to the surrounding trees—catching those elms and maples and oaks on fire. The fire spreading from the canopies to downtown Bangor. Threatening to burn this town to the very ground.

XII.

But if the boy could see even three hours into the future (like this narrator can), the boy would see the kiss flaming out, the thinnest strand of smoke wisping toward our stars.

XIII.

And this narrator, he wonders, during this quarry night—and the decade and a half of nights to follow, if, say, somehow tonight's sky shifts back to being just any night sky and the moon, if it continues to arc across the blackness, could the boy not see that tomorrow will still be just like tonight, but without the girl, without the quarry? Is this what it means to be from Bangor? Everything the same (groping from inside a darkened closet for the door knob), day after day after day—the same angry mothers at home. —The same fathers driving home drunk from bar. —The same boys searching for any girl. —The same girls searching for a boy to take them from Bangor.

XIV.

Because the water is cold (barely fifty degrees), the girl and the boy climb from the quarry. Once on hard ground, the girl wastes no time (because in Bangor there are so few moments of magic). She lies on her back—she will have the scrapes to prove it—on a massive block of slate.

At one point, this block (this very one) would have become roof shingles for a farm house on Upper Mud Run Road or a blackboard that their high school teachers would still use to show the Pythagorean theorem. But tonight this rock serves as a bed. The girl on her back (staring at the cresting moon) with her wet hair spread across the rock like rays of a dawn sun. The girl raises her arms upward—reaching for the very moon itself (trying to catch and hold it).

XV.

This narrator remembers (so clearly, though fifteen years ago) that the girl, her hair was the (exact) color of this moon.

XVI.

The boy (naked and dripping wet) sees this all as if from a great distance—as if he is still in the quarry, or standing high on the cliffs above, or on the rooftop of a Bangor building, or, somehow, he is flying where only ravens and angel-girls fly. (With eyes closed) the boy tries to memorize everything (everything, and again, everything) about this moment (the contrast of the girl's skin against the slate, the way her breasts arc off her chest, the way the bony moonlight filters through the trees) because come morning the boy will need something to push him toward sleep.

This narrator too (for so many reasons) also tries to remember (also from a great distance) everything from this quarry night. But for this narrator, the memories seem more like shattered glass—fragmented and hard to piece back together and too often cutting.

XVII.

The boy on his knees (getting nicked and cut like the girl's back). The boy wishing (almost praying) that scars lasted forever (*Like sin*, the boy thinks) (*Like memory*, this narrator thinks).

XVIII.

The boy and the girl kiss so passionately that it feels as if come tomorrow morning (a Sunday, the beginning of a new week), the boy and the girl will toss a single duffel holding everything they will ever need (and almost everything they own) into the rear of the boy's '78 Chevy Monza. They will leave behind everything (her job serving ice cream, his job washing cars, his girlfriend, even this quarry). They will hit the dew-dark asphalt with dreams of not a single breakdown until the boy and the girl drive past the cement plants of Northampton, the garment factories of Palmer, the steel mills of Bethlehem thirty miles (so far) away.

But there are no roads that leave this town, and if there were, there'd be no cars that could make it far enough—our roads are littered with late model Fords and Chevys and Dodges (with blown trannies and thrown rods and melted engine blocks).

XIX.

High above the boy and the girl (who just an hour ago was an angel, a near-perfect angel), stars shimmer and flicker over this region of deep deciduous trees. On the earth, small never-named creeks gurgle (like a grandmother gasping for a final breath of good air) while fields of corn sway in a mid-summer's night breeze.

Intermixed among these farms, factories spread: Ingersoll Rand, Crayola, Mars and Mars, Display Workshop, TechoBloc, Pennsylvania Power and Light, BASF, Hoffman LaRouche, Cappozzollo Slate Company, Bethlehem Steel, Met Ed, Dixie, Alpha Cement, Kavler Plastics, Martin Guitars, Merry Maid, Majestic Garments. This list is the beginning of a stanza of factories that could run seven pages long (or eight, or nine, or more, more).

XX.

This narrator thinks (from years in the future) that if Bangor were the night sky and our factories and bars were stars, then our nights would be filled with so many (sad and stumbling) constellations. And every myth would be one of sadness.

XXI.

On their temporary slate bed (or in any bed, no matter how soft), neither the boy nor the girl knows how to make love. No one teaches boys and girls from Bangor, Pennsylvania how to love. It's as unneeded as a sixth finger chopped off at birth.

What boys and girls learn about love, they learn from the backseats of silver Honda hatchbacks (where to fold their knees), in the back corners of red barns (how to find room beside bales of hay), from grassy yards (how to keep their jeans knees clean). What we learn about love, we learn from abandoned quarries during dark summer nights.

XXII.

This narrator thinks that he could read books and books about love for the rest of his life (and he has), but still, he too, would never understand love (what it is, or how to make it).

The boy and the girl think it has something to do with bucking and grinding and then kissing softer (much softer) afterward. (This narrator thinks that they might be onto something.)

XXIII.

If the boy could look into the future—past this one night (as this narrator can)—the boy would see the girl married—three years later cheating on her husband—then divorced. The boy would see his girlfriend a year from now (well after the boy and the girlfriend have broken up, and after she learns of tonight) sleeping with the girl's future-husband, then marrying a man with many DUIs.

The boy, if he could see into his future, he would see himself running through women like June rain until, well, until he decides that maybe he knows nothing (nothing at all) about love, and so he decides to just stop trying. He just stops.

XXIV.

And the girlfriend, she is in her apartment waiting in her big bed for the boy—whom she knows (or soon enough will) is off fucking the girl. While waiting, the girlfriend turns and turns under sticky summer sheets (like a clock—rolling like the seconds, feeling like the hours).

If the girlfriend were to get up from bed (which she does and does and does) and look out her window (she stares into the swallowing night), she would see the very trees that the two-track road snakes through—where the boy and the girl walked many hours ago. But at this moment the trees are a wall of black—trunks and branches and broad leaves. The girlfriend would think, *There is not a single findable path into that forest at this hour.* She would think, *Wait till dawn.* She would think, *Why does nothing ever change in Bangor.*

Come earliest morning—after the boy staggers from the woods and finds a home in the girlfriend's bed, after he kisses her a latest goodnight or an earliest good morning, the boy'll be surprised to find that his girlfriend isn't angry. Just sad. As if she expected this all along. Something just like this. Her sadness will hurt worse than the boy expected. And the girlfriend will say one thing, and that one thing will be the worst thing the boy can imagine. She'll say it again.

XXV.

The ethereal glow of Bangor—a quarter mile from the quarry—is as pale as the girl's hips and breasts, or the moon, though the moon has now fallen against the western horizon—against our craggy Kittatinny hills.

XXVI.

At the quarry, the boy and the girl finish with whatever they had been doing. With everything done, the world has changed (though Bangor's streetlights still burn out one at a time and the moon casts off its bony light and the girlfriend still rolls in her bed). The boy climbs off of the girl and searches for something to cover all he is exposing.

The girl, she awkwardly slides into jeans, pushing panties in a pocket. Once dressed, the girl gazes toward Bangor, a town crumbling almost noticeably before her very eyes. If the girl knew what a metaphor was, she'd wonder if the crumbling town equaled love and the quarry equaled her future. But boys and girls from Bangor never learn of metaphors. It would be just one more thing to break a heart.

Without any thought to his future (except maybe tomorrow morning and finding a way to get back into the good graces of his girlfriend), our boy stares glassy eyed and tired (hung over or still drunk) at this quarry diving so deeply into this eastern Pennsylvania earth that its water is as blue-black as midnight (or a raven) (or a fresh bruise).

XXVII.

And this narrator, what of him? What of him?

He is in his mid-thirties and is standing (still after all these years) on the edge of the quarry (see him—There!—that thin shadow in those dark trees). This narrator has stood beside the quarry for the past fifteen years (since the night of the boy and the girl). During the intervening years (and years and years), this narrator has seen near a thousand (or maybe a million) boys and girls (all from Bangor, Pennsylvania) come to the midnight quarry (this very quarry). Each and every boy and each and every girl searching for the same thing. The exact same thing.

And during every night of his waiting, this narrator prays for the cold waters to whisper to him secrets and secrets and secrets about any of the secrets of love because so far he has not learned nearly enough (or really even a single goddamned thing).

XXVIII.

And the quarry? What of it?

It is (always—forever and ever) deep and dark and silent and oh so cold. f

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