

## MERRY SPEECE

## STONE DOG

**J**OHN CLAIR, YOU DO THIS THING you do this thing you do this thing. Turn over stones and find something alive, pink, and suddenly writhing.

Factory women on the line bighearted on Friday night and out of breath from running downhill a long time fling open the door at the bar at the edge of that stringtown, Pomeroy (Excelsior Salt, its picture of a hog). Round flesh pounds and pounds over slag and suddenly the bar door bangs. Girlfriends, the breed. The one you can cut off in a corner, up for auction, yours.

Why not?

A furnace smelts iron.

Buckeye Furnace--shit. Them places is all state parks.

Find me someone if I could. I would say, I would tell her. I would give her my life, but then.

Her eyes leave your face, John Clair. Saturday morning, alone, just chimibly. House gone, fire.

SOMEONE SAYS, A NEW GIRL on the line. Any new woman, a man lifts his head, but that day I burned myself on that blue machine near the mold. Cliff Silk says, "You're losin it, John-boy, old man" and swings a case by my head and the flash of his reptile tattoo. A new woman, I lift my head, any proud animal just alert at the fence. I wade through factory girls, all them unwed mothers, "Hi, John. Hi, John!" the Avon door-to-door perfume (an old woman visiting my grandma said, "toilet water," and I thought she said something terrible), all the untouched private places.

New, and I stare all day. Old Bob Silk somehow surfaces, twists his blubber face, laughs, and hits me. "Forget it, Clair. Summer help, college girl." "Tell bossman" —I play along, light—"to put me on special temporary assignment" and wish the son of a bitch Silk would get laid off.

Then this, at break. Cousin Deb corners me behind the machines. She laughs in my face. Three years ago she would've put her skinny hands to her face and giggled, but then she got herself married and fat and divorced so now she just lights up and laughs smoke in my face. "I saw you, John!" "What?" "That new girl you couldn't take your eyes off. What would you give me to drag her down to Fanny's Friday night?" Debbie always on my back being nice. "I'm just trying to be nice!" and she'd tell her mom and my mom, too, those very words and every detail of my life — yeah, thanks. I wish she'd turn and take her tail away. Pummeled, I can't even look at her. Anger is a cool emotion. This has been going on and going on for the last six months Deb being goddamned nice. Six months since I lost me a good job at Excelsior Salt going down, John Clair, into the brine.

JUST GET MYSELF ALONE in a back booth at the Fan Club when Deb slides in across from me. Been in wait.

"Come on," she calls behind her.

The new girl holds back at the corner of the booth.

"This is my cousin John!"

(Specimen.) "John, this is the new girl Willa we're going to call Willy."

Hi, hi. Silence. Deb will get herself killed one day.

"Oh, I forgot! I have to give a message to Treen. *Private.*" Penciled eyebrows go up and down on her pink round face. She motions for the

girl to take her place across from me. "John, take care of her for a sec." A girl named Willa. Now that don't seem right a girl named like that like for an old lady great aunt. People get money and they think they can name their kids anything.

I think how to be polite. I ask her about school, what she's going to be. She hasn't made up her mind. She likes art. Art she likes. She likes working with clay, pots and things, but her folks think maybe civil engineering. Hell. She asks how long I've worked at the plastic place, if I've lived my whole life here. Whole life, strange words. I mention a war.

She listens to me carefully. She's looking at me now. I realize she's open to me, innocent, not one of those hardassed girls on the line.

I pull back. Our heads have been bowed over the table. I take a drink. Think of something I found once and went tearing up to the house to show my mama. *I found a stone dog turned up in bottom.* It's old, it's very old, and I can't breathe I am a lucky man. College girl, one with eyes, she studies, she turns me over stone dog, stone dog, I want to show her. What do you like to do. I ask. I can't breathe.

And she says and she says.

Her eyes are hazel, the bush that blooms early and its cats and the hazelnut light and light brown. Her face, her small brown face I could take in my hands.

And she says and all she will say and she puts her head down and she says all she will say is she likes to read.

Up against the wall at Ash Cave, then, new names carved.

**T**HE SIGN ABOVE THE DOOR of the Fan Club is a peacock someone I knew in high school cut out in shop and painted. That guy gone now. "Got his goddamnedself killed," his dad cried to me on the steps that night. Coal truck come around the corner, and him just one little guy on a cycle. Half out the door I was still in uniform and it was so strange to be alive, life something to be ashamed of.

You see, this is the third Friday night with the girl, and this time she slides across from me without Deb herding her in. "Come bye! Come bye!" old sheepdog. We are a thing. People try to catch my eye and wink. "Oo, John," someone says, going by, the shit.

First thing, she says she doesn't know my name.

Everybody in town knows my name. Is she pulling my leg?

"Ah, come on."

"I mean I don't even know your last name for sure."

My name is Clair. Used to be St. Clair, but my great-grandfather, that wild man, that lifelong bachelor, dropped the saint.

Her face is blank – she's pretty like that. I see she doesn't know that name and probably doesn't know a goddamned thing about the history of the Northwest Territory. I'd like to sit myself down someday and write out the whole story just for her eyes.

My grandfather – the one way back – was Arthur St. Clair, first governor of the Northwest Territory.

"Oh," she says. She looks into my face for something grand like history so I have to look away.

Arthur St. Clair. Military Man. His the ass Indians kicked so Mad Anthony got sent out to take over the campaign. He went on to be governor and to fight statehood. He lost and left Ohio sick and broken and poor and died trying to run a tavern.

I remember then the stone dog I brought.

"Here. I have something. I want to show you something," I say and arch back in the booth and reach into a tight pocket. She smiles at my struggle, and I bring out for her the stone dog.

I found this in a field, the spring I turned eleven."

"Oh," she says. "Some animal. May I hold it?"

She turns and turns it.

"Bear?"

"Dog. I mean I've always called it a dog. I never showed it to anybody to find out." I meant an archaeologist or something, who might know.

"Are you very interested in things like this?" she asks.

"Yeah," I say just like that because suddenly the moment is too much, showing her the dog I ran so fast up from the field to show.

"Well," she says, studying me, turning me over and over, stone dog, stone dog. "The place where I'm staying this summer, across the road is a mound."

"Indian?"

She smiles. "Yes, John." Then, she looks down at the stone and carefully says, "You could come over and see it. I'll show you. And I think I have a book somewhere."

Oh, shit. Oh, shit. Women who like to read, on their hands and knees trying to make out the Leo Petroglyph.

**T**HEN THIS IS THE DAY, and this is quitting time, and I head out to the lot. Out there by my car under the trees near the back two girls are tearing at each other and half a dozen other girls watch. I walk slower, think how am I going to get out of here.

Cliff Silk comes up, slaps his hand on my shoulder, and laughs. "John-boy, they're fightin over you."

Bastard. They're probably fighting over the new machine operator with the slick black hair. I know that guy from somewhere. I know that guy.

Yeah, Gallopolis. Him with that old French name. He used to be married to that freckled woman with big ones, freckled, too. Cliff Silk said we'd have a contest to see who could guess how many freckles, and he'd be the judge. I remember all right. He left her, then called up after a month to say he needed her, would she meet him at the park at such and such. I remember her that Friday at work happy. They'd get back together and have a baby. The girls even picked out baby names, damn it. Monday she came in her face swole up and blue. Her old man had met her, and when she kissed him, he'd clamped his hands on her and forced her around and held her out so his new girlfriend could beat her up. "I still love him," she cried, her lips big, and some of her girlfriends tried to help her think of ways to fix that other girl and get him back.

When I get up to my car, they've about fought it out, and anyway they don't like us guys watching them.

"Hey, John needs his car," one calls out. Then a chorus: "Got a heavy date down at Fanny's" and "Willy!" "Will-he?" "Will she?"

No Fanny's for me tonight, ladies.

**W**HEN I DRIVE DOWN THE PAVED county road around every curve, taking every curve smooth, I think of that hot shower, the water covering me, warming me. Warmed my goddamn balls. Me cold and shaky all day from thinking too much. For a moment in the water I felt good, but now I am afraid. I could drive past her place and never come back. How still everything is in the old cemetery and the abandoned filling station where I stopped at sixteen to buy a colored rubber and didn't even have a woman.

This must be it, I think. I turn onto the grassy gravel lane and drive back behind some big maples and lilacs and that mock orange. I know this place, remember, been here before. Is this it? This house is abandoned, a lovers' lane or a place to come to break windows.

But there is a light on, a barebulb in a window without a curtain. And there she is on the step. On the step. This woman is either overeager or doesn't give a shit.

But she smiles and comes to the car. "Hi, John."

"Hi." I get out and don't know what else to say. I breathe. "This is some place."

"Uh huh."

"Yeah, this is some place."

"Come on. Come on in. You can see it. Probably it was nice a long time ago."

She goes up the step. The screen is coming off the door. Inside is a square of linoleum littler than the room, torn. Plaster's fallen off in places. In a window a pane is broken.

I want to say something to her right then. Just look at the floor. This is all wrong. I feel a little mad, think this woman doesn't have any sense, too weird for me, must think poor's an adventure.

I think she's studying me. "Come on outside. It's a pretty night. We can walk to the mound. It's not far." She goes out without waiting for me, without looking back.

She stops finally at some roses and lets me come up beside her. She

smells a flower. Tries to break one off but can't. Bends down, uses her teeth. Face in the thorns. "Want a rose?" she asks.

"Naw." I still don't look at her. This doesn't feel right.

"The mound's across the road." She leads the way, not far.

"This is it," she says. When I don't say anything, she says she guesses it isn't much, maybe not what I thought, not an effigy, not much of an adventure, sorry, a wasted trip. She speaks fast, her voice tight, and she cuts it off and starts to walk away.

"You shouldn't live in a place like this!" My voice growls, and I surprise myself. I clear my throat.

"What?" We are stopped and looking at each other.

"You shouldn't live in a place like this."

"By an Indian mound?"

"No! This house! An abandoned house for godsake!"

"Abandoned? I'm renting it --"

"-- You're paying money?"

"Not much. That's the point. It's not that bad anyway. I grew up in a house like this, my very aristocratic Mr. St. Clair."

"In Columbus?" Didn't she say she came from the city God cursed flat?

"No," she laughs. "I live with my sister in Columbus when I go to school. I grew up in Kinnikinnick. In a house like this."

"Kinnikinnick? That's over by Chillicothe."

"Yeah."

"Some good mounds there." I smile at her. Look around. "This is a good mound. Let's walk on up, maybe we'll find something the groundhogs kicked up."

**I**N LIFE, COULDN'T I HOPE for something fine? Sixty gallons of freshwater pearls dug up?

"John, you're nice. You're smart."

We've just come out from looking at her book. It's getting late, and the next day she has overtime.

She comes up to me in the growing dark and kisses my cheek and leaves her body there for me, an arm around, book still in hand pressed hard against my back. She rests her head on my chest, and I put my head down, my throat hurting and swept up say her name for the first time "Willa!" and take her face for a hard kiss.

And she laughs, so the kiss is gone. "My name's not Willa, it's Willow."

Willow, a name given to girls in the hills. *Willow Rae*, she says a moment later standing by the car, as I sit there ready to leave. She says her name and pulls her soft hair back and up on top her head – hair the rich color of buckeyes, lucky buckeyes – so her arms are raised, and here at the car window her breasts abandoned for me.

**W**ILLOW RAE. The last time I heard that name I was in a field of strawberries.

One time a bunch of us was picking just for fun more than for the ten cents a basket. Some of us kids went thinking we'd stay all day and have money for a show. We ate the best berries and threw the rotten ones at each other, and when Gerald whose field it was came out with his arms crossed and stared we decided to get to work. But in a half hour our knees were sore, and us migrant workers migrated over to someone's big yard to play ball.

But one morning I went out alone to the strawberry field early. I must've wanted something bad, must've been determined to get the money. Seemed like the sun was coming up and it was shining through a little bit of fog, maybe, the rays separated and shining all around a tiny thin woman in a dress in the strawberry field and a thin little girl like a stick figure running in the strawberries, and the woman called out, "Willow Rae! Willow Rae!" till the girl came, and they knelt and set to picking berries.

Later when I took my baskets to the stand, Gerald looked beyond me out into the field at Willow Rae and her mother. "You know," he said, still not looking at me but beyond, and he began to tell me about a



shame, real shame, the husband and father sick, couldn't get beyond the edge of his bed, didn't have the strength to stand. He was probably going to die. "They never had nothin'," and she was out in the fields trying to earn a few dollars, and Gerald gave her some berries the birds got to or ones just starting to go bad, a little soft is all, Gerald said, berries for jam. Gerald talked, revealed this all to me, Gerald with his beard peppered and his long white hair pulled back into a ponytail and one earring, Gerald, his name with the hard g, "Like Good God," his wife said.

They were so thin - mighty - and picked them berries so fast and intense I thought they must be starved for berries like birds. They were desperate to pick enough berries to see them through the winter. They were ladies that lived upon strawberries and the paper food stamps is printed on.

They lived in a narrow little house, lived narrow, and couldn't think how to get out of living like that.

And my whole life - and when tiny thin women and tiny thin children scatter and then I am lying in a field in the mud and suddenly I notice as I begin to die how tender the little shoots of rice are, and my whole life a voice comes across a strawberry field that is with the morning wet and drenched with new sunlight, a voice like a bell and calling and full of love, "Willow Rae! Willow Rae!" and I know I'll live, and I will go home. And then the pain begins.

**I**T'S ME WILLOW RAE!" Suddenly I am awake and out of bed and swing open the door, and for a moment I am confused. It's a woman. It's her. Her eyes drop from my face and down and then down to the floor.

"I came into town early to get my car worked on. I thought I'd drop by. I woke you I'm sorry." She come into town early. Come, come, same thing.

Then about naked I'm embarrassed standing there in my sweat shorts. We both stand there.

"Should I come back later?" Her hair is damp and curly. I smell her soap.

"No, no. Come on in."

I point her toward my one chair and start for the shower and remember

my papers on the coffee table and retrieve them and stuff them in a dresser drawer and pull out a t-shirt.

“Writing a novel?” What’s in her voice, making fun? “Huh,” I say, a half laugh meant to be no answer and close the door between us.

She doesn’t ask again when I come out in a few minutes, just studies me. I ask if she wants anything to eat, and she says she already had breakfast. She tells me to go ahead, but I don’t feel right eating in front of her. She laughs and pushes me out of her way – her hands light on my waist – opens my refrigerator, studies it inside. She finds juice and pours me a glass and watches me drink it.

“Now what?” I ask. What more.

She asks to see some of my books. I get one with good pictures of artifacts, and we settle down on the edge of the sofa bed. She asks what’s this, and I tell her, hornstone blanks, don’t have to read the description. I don’t know I’m talking too much until she stops me with, “You’re really smart. You should go to school.” I don’t say anything, just hunch over the book, and don’t let my arm touch hers. “Well, why not? You can’t spend your whole life in a factory in Pomeroy!” And why not, it’s my life. She says I could – teach history, why not?

I ask if she wants to look at these goddamned pictures or not. Certainly, she says, every syllable, and flips ahead, and the pages open to a woman, pottery, with breasts like twin worlds round and her swollen between her legs and on the next page a man with his cock to his chin. The woman next to me breathes a little laugh and leans to read. She leans against me to see the words, and I am cold to her for a moment, but even when I’m cold, my arm goes around her, and we push the book away and lie back on the bed. She presses against me before I have time to think, can’t believe it, she has her hand in my shorts and has me and pulls the foreskin back and lets it slide and pulls it back. I can’t stand it, think I’ve got to be inside this woman – if I could just get inside her everything would be all right – and I roll to her. My tongue goes up her neck and behind her ear. I taste salt, and I’m a fallen man.

She moans and pulls herself away from me, rough. “What time is it?” Now, I say and press to her. “What am I doing?” She sits up. “I’m late. The car.” She sits on the edge of the bed letting her breathing slow a little.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” she says. “I shouldn’t have done that. Now you’ll think it means something.”

I sit up. "Naw," I say, my head in my hands. "It don't mean nothin."

Doesn't mean anything, she echoes softly, faraway, then jumps up brisk, "John, I'm sorry."

I won't say anything.

Sorry, she says, sorry, sorry. Then, "I'd better leave."

I let her walk across the room to the door and don't say anything.

"Why the fuck don't you stay?" I say loud.

"But, John, I told you I made an appointment to get my car worked on this morning."

"I mean, why don't you stay." Stay. What does stay mean, woman? Never leave.

"What?" She's come around and sits on the bed beside me. My head's still in my hands. She puts her arm across my back, a pal, some pal.

"I'm sorry to leave you like this, this upset, but I can come back later if you want."

I don't say anything. "I'll be back" are words I hear, just words, and the door shuts.

I lie back on the bed, deadman, and after awhile get up and get dressed and put a loaf of bread and cold meat in a sack and fill a thermos and get my notebook. I'll drive out into the hills to Gramma's old place, stay all day, and she can come back and knock and get no fuckin reply.

**T**HE LANE UP TO THE PLACE is gone, grownover, so it's just easier to go up the hill, most of the way, on a logging road where the woods is rutted out.

My granddaddy told how in his day the oxen coming down the hills, the skids piled up with logs, were crushed.

My granddaddy kept an ox, an ox named Ball. "That's one of them old names," he said.

How the ox comes to me at the gate butts his forehead to me – all forehead – the boy all brains – wants to tell me something. Ball, Ball,

poor Ball. His curly red head, him one of a matched pair (the other gone – where? I didn't ask but it seemed in spirit always there). Nothin prettier than a matched pair. "Boy, I didn't know pretty till I seen it," he said. Boy, you won't know pretty till you see it.

At the old place, nothing but stonework, can't even see the pieces of charcoal I used to write on stone with, even the ash we used to poke sticks in is gone. Everywhere I want to go I have to fight my way through, all this teasel. I sit on a pile of stones. An old woman would say, would come out on the porch that isn't anymore, "Watch out for snakes, boy." Gramma, I looked. Go away, ghosts of my ancestors.

God, I can still taste her, the woman, Willow. I found a dead woodpecker once and touched its tongue, and its tongue was stiff, a thorn. Put my stiff tongue into a hole. A woodpecker's tongue wraps around its brain. My brains is all tongue. I put my tongue to a salt block in a dark barn. Leviticus said bring salt with the sacrifice. In Egypt the salt swamps are red as blood. Why is this water around me and the rice red as blood? A civil war rages at the salt licks of the Kanawha, and women and children eat the dirt of the smokehouses. The Vietnamese soldier put his mouth to the flesh of a dog don't think of it come back John, come on back, boy. But how do I come home from the war? I can't walk, the pain, my leg. I'm not hurt that bad, not too bad, but my wound won't heal, I have no salt. I am some dumb animal at the salt lick, and here comes Simon Kenton again with his gun.

But God I am alive. I hold my life in my hands, and I have a little place in the hills for my life to belong. So what if it's this hopeless rivertown? I know how to fit in.

If I went away, I would be someone else and no one would ever know my name. I would live among women who smell like money and the insides of filing cabinets. Every morning they would come by on the way down the hall dangling their coffee cups, empty, for me, stains.

What is my name? Some man named St. Clair or no man, a man without a name, a man like the fucking multitude of men who stand on the cliff of black sandstone and scream: "I am the very goddamned man who shot Tecumseh!"

Tecumseh said, no dogs! We slit the throats of the Shemanese dogs.

God if my name was Marmaduke Van Swearingen, I'd strip myself of that name and run the gauntlet, and if I lived I'd become Shawnee War

Chief, Blue Jacket. When I return from battle, I look at a beautiful brown woman through a sheet of mica. She raises her arms so her breasts...

Here's a history lesson for you, here's religious truth. In the Shawnee Law, handed down by word of mouth, a young man with his woman on the wedding night won't know quite what to do, and an old woman is supposed to help him get it up and show him where to put it. I read that and laughed.

I ought to tell Willow that and make her laugh. Willow. So much time has passed, I've hardly written a damned thing, all my shade is gone, and this is shit sitting at the top of this hill in the sun. The valleys of corn asshigh look cool. I should go. I'll catch her or we could meet later. You, woman, my little brown girl, tanned, pretty little engineer, "won't know pretty till," maker of beautiful clay pots. Woman, bring me your bowl so the steam rises in your naked breasts. Give me the three cornered bread, my blue bread, the one made of ash. John Clair, man, you've worked your brains into your hide long enough. The leather is ready. You are alive and strong. That woman, my woman, she is brown, nutmeat, she will open herself to me, the lips of her sex, the secret of native walnut hard-won, split, the perfect halves.