

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

F. John Sharp
Billy and Us

We chased him into the darkness, Billy Avalon the second, and deep into the woods, like townsmen with torches pursuing the beast. We chased him like hounds, relentless and fast. Merciless. Cruel.

We lost him for a while. He ran track. He knew the woods. We stopped and listened, until the distant snap of a branch set us off again. There were three of us, Justin, Eddy and me.

Billy used to be a friend of ours. Each of us might have said he was our best friend but truth is he liked us all the same. He was always gathering us, always had us over, always made sure everyone was included in everything. He was the first to swear, the first to steal a beer and share it, the first to swipe a Playboy and take it behind my garage so we could all see.

He showed us the cave, the one through Murphy's woods and beneath the big hill. He set up a clubhouse there, with chairs, a table, a cooler, a radio and a propane lantern he bought with money he earned washing cars. We spent hours there, talking about everything, arguing over nothing. If you'd have asked us, we'd have said it would be like that forever.

But he also showed the cave to Steve Wellesley. Steve ran track too. Billy had yet to return from a track meet on a cool March evening. After we'd eaten our supper Justin, Eddy and I went to the cave, when we found Billy and Steve already there. They were not talking.

"It's not what you think," Billy cried, but he was pulling his yellow sweat pants up from around his ankles.

Yes it was, and we just stood there, processing. By the time we could move again, Billy and Steve had left.

"What the fuck?"

"Billy's a fag?"

"He is not a fag."

"He was being a fag just now."

"Maybe it's not what we think."

"Fuck yeah, it's what we think."

"He's lied to us all this time."

"Fucking liar."

"God damn lying fag fucker."

"We've been to his house."

"On sleepovers...shit."

"Maybe he's trying to change us."

"That's why he has the cave, to make a fag club."

"Fuck."

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

"People are going to think we're fags too."

"We have to get him."

"We have to get that Steve fag fucker. He made Billy a fag."

"No, we have to get them both."

And we took off.

They'd been walking, but when they heard the chasing, the intensity of our breathing, the malice in our footfalls, they ran. They split up immediately. Eddy and Justin went after Steve. I went after Billy.

As I ran I heard shouts from where they were chasing Steve "You turned Billy into a fag," I heard Justin yell, and I thought they'd caught him. Then Eddy screamed, "Over there," and the running continued.

I'd chased Billy deeper into the woods when Justin and Eddy finally found me.

"You get him?" I asked between gasping breaths.

Eddy shook his head.

"That's okay," Justin said, "we can still get Billy."

We spread out, figuring he was mainly cornered between us and the big hill. It was getting dark and the woods got thick there. We ran in what we thought were sweeping patterns but were probably more like random circles. The sun began to set and the crickets came out, and from the sound of the underbrush, it seemed like nobody was moving fast anymore, like nobody could remember why they were supposed to.

Billy was hiding behind an old oak. I started walking toward home and he tried to keep the broad trunk between him and me, but I caught a glimpse of the yellow sweats. I turned quickly and grabbed his shirt. I pushed him against the tree, pressing him against the bark, my face in his face, driving my 119 pounds into him like I could force him into the very heart of the wood. Like forcing him into the heart of the wood would somehow make him what he used to be. What I thought he used to be.

I could see tears in his eyes in the moonlight streaming between the leaves. I could see in his eyes the question: 'What do we do now?' I didn't know. We heard Justin and Eddy getting closer. We both knew what that meant.

"Steve got away," I said.

His eyes still asked. 'What do we do now?' Branches snapped just out of sight and I gripped him tighter, eager to show off my catch. His eyes got bigger and the question changed.

I imagined what six fists could do to a face, what six feet could do to a set of ribs. I imagined seeing him in school like that, or maybe not ever seeing him in our school again. I imagined seeing him in the hospital, with his mother at his side, trying to understand.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice breaking.

"For what?" I said, angrily. "What are you sorry for?"

His eyes welled up more and he shrugged.

Maybe I was tired and all the adrenaline had been spent, but I didn't know either. For a minute I forgot about the past hour and remembered the previous ten years. All I wanted was for it to be like that again, and I knew that could never happen if they caught him. I had no idea what we would all do tomorrow, but right now...

I let my fingers relax. He slid from my grip, and bolted into the darkness.

Justin and Eddy found me.

"He's gone," I said.

We caught our breath, hands on our knees, wordless. An owl hooted, and the crickets droned, and the night fell heavy over our shoulders.

"I gotta get back," I said.

"Yeah."

We walked, dropping off Eddy first. At Justin's, I stopped.

"Damn," I said, shaking my head.

"Yeah."

"What do we do now?" I asked, for Billy.

Justin shrugged, and went inside. I looked long toward the woods, wondering if he could ever come out.

F. John Sharp lives and works in the Cleveland, Ohio area. This is his second appearance in Wilderness House Literary Review and he couldn't be more pleased. His poetry and fiction has been widely published in both print and electronic form, and he is the fiction editor for RightHandPointing.com. The website he procrastinates building will one day be at FJohnSharp.com. Check it out from time to time and one day...voila! He does have a blog at <http://auroraboardealis.blogspot.com/>.