

Ralph's Bar, Mansonville

Lori Weber

The moon rises, reflects off Owl's Head Mountain, and spills a path of white light along the highway to Ralph's Bar. We follow it, two city women, stumbling dumbly into a country dive. Ralph steers us to a table and within minutes we are fenced in by farmers, their faces dark as dung under peaked caps, their features shadowed as fields at dusk. They go straight for our hands, pulling them out of angora cuffs and holding them inside their own rough palms. They discuss our hearts, judge them by the size of our hands, their sincerity by the firmness of our fingers. We utter a few words but they are too light and sober, can't catch where drunken chatter churns beer and smoke into atmosphere. They hold an idiot farmhand puppet-like above us and make him do his auctioneer routine. High-pitched nasal non-stop squeal, then bang - we are sold to two teens pulling slot machine handles like tractor gear behind us. They smile across the dark, two shy grooms, and we fake good humour and smile back. Under wheat coloured skin their tight muscles offer new life: the chance to live in cow country, where the air is dairy scented and men rise at five to oblige the land with skillful hands. They promise squares of land, white-framed houses and barns whose silver silos stretch to heaven. But the fodder of our lives is the stuff that concrete is made of. Our hands have pulled silk nylons over legs, scrunched the bags of a million office lunches and handled keys to countless apartments, whose balconies give onto smog. Our hands know little of land. The grooms start across the room, jeans low on their hips, knees apart like cowboys who have forgotten the horse is no longer between their legs. We rise to leave. Several arms tug our sleeves, but we persist, weaving in and out of catcalls to the door. Moonlight slips in behind us, lighting up the table, where the teens have joined the men, to talk and throw back beer, as if we were never there.