

Barbara Drake

Milky Coffee

I am thirteen, riding in the back seat
of an old Plymouth driven by Art,
my friend Bonnie's alcoholic father.
It's late at night and she is too tired
to drive back from Portland to Coos Bay,
and I am too young to drive at all.
Art, coming off a binge week in Portland,
pulled himself together after we found him
at his favorite tavern in Portland.
I waited on the sidewalk
under a streetlight with moths circling
and Bonnie, twenty-one, went in.
Tonight, shaky but clean,
Art sits at the wheel.

Day before yesterday Bonnie and I counted out
ten thousand night crawlers on a farm
up on Prune Hill, near Camas.
Now, with a trailer on the back of the Plymouth
we're taking them home.
Bonnie wants to start her own business
raising night crawlers in a dirt box
out back of the auto court where we both live.
She says we will sell them to fishermen
and make easy money.

There's dense fog from Otis Junction south,
not just fog but midnight fog
where you can't see the curve of the road

until you're in it. On our left,
leaning from the rocky bank, I see faintly
salal, monkeyflowers, stunted coastal pines,
but in this fog I can't see the ocean
far below on the right.

Now as we drive south I fall asleep.
And we go through the dark and the fog until
we stop somewhere, maybe Depoe Bay,
at an all-night café
on the east side of the highway.
I don't drink coffee
but I order a cup as Bonnie and Art do.
I fill my bitter cup with cream and sugar,
a lot of it, so it's sweet and milky, then sip.
I'd never known coffee was so good.

I hold it, hot, with both hands, and as I drink,
something is etched on my mind,
something sweet and milky, something
along with the feeling of being poor
and lost in the fog of life, but exciting too.
Taste of sweet coffee and the thought,
someday I will be someone,
come all at once. Later the fog clears.
Deep as the ocean that wafts and purls offshore,
as we drive south, sweet coffee,
sweet milky memory, like all the rest,
settles down in me.