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LOUANNE AND THE PACK OF KENTS

I was thirteen when I had my first butt. Robin, this milker, turned me on to Kents. I’d lime her barn for money and cigarettes, then walk five miles for a pack. Barefoot down the cracked-up road, pressing tar bubbles with my heels, I’d pass this old Coldspot freezer smoking fish out its sides, and this horse, Patches, who hung with the cows because he thought he was a cow. Taking the bend on HWY. J, then five steps up to Braumshreiber’s general store, with its wooden floor and fake front like a Hollywood movie, I stood in the doorway, looking down. The long aisle, to its meringue ceiling and lobby lights, lit a butcher’s face, his waxy mustache dulled by yellow haze, and white apron bloody with guts from Patsie Sheffen’s old bull. My front tooth missing, shorts to my knees, and hair combed flat against my face, I’d ask for a pack of Kents. Louanne ran the register. “Are you old enough?” she’d say. Louanne was big. Breasts to her waist, blond hair shorter than a fly’s, and a sunburn
around her raveled elastic swimsuit.  
She'd throw me a pack  
and buy me a cone just so  
it would look good. I'd sit where  
the old-timers in clean  
pressed bibs watched trains, eat  
my cone, smoke a butt, and listen  
for the old Chessie  
to squeal through town, drowning out  
the smell of cows.  

A WOMAN BY THE MISSISSIPPI

Her expression is nothing  
to look at. You would think  
her occasional pats of the water,  
the rippled buildings  
reflecting, boats and people  
thinning out with each wave  
was a romantic thing,  
but it isn't.  

The Mississippi is like a fat slug.  
Its surface images of thin,  
rheumatic couples holding hands  
edge the river, and break  
the sand—slurry crabs hide  
their faces, distorted,  
tinged in the dirty light.  

The river isn't beautiful today.  
Its brown mouth spits up  
stones along the shore, the pitted ones  
layered on layers  
of smooth snail and crab shells.  
And only the weepy tree at the river's back  
waves over the water soft and green.