

Billy Neal

My white-haired, even-keeled
grandmother, God rest her soul,
taught first grade, and if that
wasn't trying enough,
married an Irish drinker
who ran with a professional

drunk named Billy Neal. My
grandmother hated no one. She
disliked Billy monumentally,
frowned upon the week-long
benders my grandfather and he
called fishing trips after

World War II. When my grand
mother was widowed Billy took it
upon himself to teach my father
life's essential lessons, classes
held at an Exchange Street bar,
attended with a fifth

and beer chasers. Later my father
would say he sensed the man's
loneliness, his restlessness, and tried
to hear what was said in the
echoes of his words. No one else had given
Billy that much. And on his death

bed in 1966, as his liver turned against
him and his throat took the role of a rusted gate,
Billy said: "If they draft you, never make
friends." My father retraced those words
to a blood-red field, to a
boy named Billy Neal who

held a best friend and watched pink strands of skin
and intestine dance—where legs once had been—
moving crazily like snakes hanging from a tailgate.
And my father told this all as we drove from Texarkana
to Memphis and covered territory found on no atlas
and spoke of a man known by no one.

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