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 grandmother 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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