

2014

Seventh Annual

# Bread Loaf Fiction Prize

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*Winner:* Sally Yazwinski

Sounds of a Snow Storm

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The streetlights were glowing through the falling snow, upside down flashlights that burned bright through the darkness. The snow would continue to fall for days, and no one local weatherman could predict for how long. Sitting in his diesel truck, the small lights on the dashboard illuminating his cracked windshield, Milty peered down the street. He was parked with his plow up; it no longer touched the road. He wasn't doing anything that would help move the snow. The flakes that were falling sparkled like glitter in the little light that was available to his eye, and it fell like sand. If it weren't for the streetlights he'd be blind. Milty felt he and his unreliable truck were stuck at the bottom of an hourglass, the pouring snow filling the street, the sidewalk, trying to bury the valley itself.

This street held memories of Indian massacres from 1704, shadows of settlers walking along with pewter pitchers of beer, farmers towing rickety wagons with hay or empty, and old women in thick, wool dresses walking to visit each other in the cold afternoons. The street was unlined, uneven, and narrow, with a slope that led down to the South Meadows. Large, box-like farmhouses built next to each other created a historic aisle, through which, if one had the power, they would move directly back in time. Wooden shutters on perfectly, rectangle windows, short dentils lining the underside of stone shingled roofs, painted fences that were never moved and only repaired, these details had remained the same from the years of the Pocumtucs.

It was the Elm trees that Milty loved the most, black against the sky no matter what the weather might be. Littering each side of the street, these trees mixed and melded to form a canopy, a thick grove that a child would believe fairies to live in. These trees were allowed to grow old, nothing disturbing where their roots decided to spread. In the winter their bare branches would fan and stretch upwards to the sky and it reminded him of a chest x-ray of his father's heart, veins and vessels growing thinner and finer as they moved away from the source.

The houses had been built hundreds of years ago with the Elms in mind, and it continued this way today. Their roots would emerge out of the pavement of the road, they would push the slabs of sidewalk up out of their way, and it would stay unfixed because those who lived here now found it to be beautiful.

Milty couldn't remember the last time it had snowed in this way, in his middle age he thought back as far as he could, and he couldn't draw up anything in his mind that looked like what this street did now. The snow wasn't high, it was how it was falling, a closing curtain that he imagined ran the length of the small state. Lit windows shone on the duvet that was the snowfall, a thick blanketing on this road that once allowed the French and Mohawk to enter, trade, and leave.

Milty reached for the small black lever that controlled the plow underneath his broken radio. Like a video game, he pushed the lever down and the plow responded, hitting snow. He revved the engine, and the fine snow seeped underneath and around his truck as if he hadn't been there in the first place. It was then he decided to go home, to his brick house that held a fireplace, a sofa cushion that had formed around him over the years, and a dog that had no shame when his wife decided to make roast chicken.

He shifted the truck into reverse; backing into what he thought was a driveway. The snow was thick enough that he couldn't recognize landmarks he'd memorized since childhood. Short, stone walls that separated properties, mailboxes, tree stumps, fire hydrants; all of these were lost in the white.

Looking left and right before he turned right, Milty swore he saw a short, rounded, black figure ambling along. He waited; making sure it wasn't just the way the snow was whirling, tricking him.

“What the hell?” Milty said quietly, leaning his arm on the wheel and searching. “Everyone should be home, now.” Before making his turn, Milty waited and the figure came ever so slowly to his side of the truck, slipping every once and a while. Milty rolled his window down, flakes showering in and landing on his left arm, and a man was staring up at him between hood and neck warmer.

Milty didn’t recognize who it was until they shouted to him over the engine. “Milty, we have to meet up tonight, I just got a call.” Mark Bell the police chief had tracked him somehow, and in his own down snowsuit had walked who knew how far down this road, because no police cruiser would be able to get to this spot right now.

Milty cut his engine, and there was no other sound. He hadn’t heard a quiet like this. He opened the door, and clumsily stepped out of the truck, his boot crunching into the ground. He stood in front of Mark, and didn’t want to break the silence. It was as though they were underwater; the sounds of his boots, of his sleeves rubbing his sides as he turned came so quick to his ears. When he was younger and swam in the river, he and the other boys would dive and pick up worn, smooth rocks and crash them like symbols, seeing if the sound would reach their friend a ways away, swimming among old tree trunks that had fallen in.

They could speak quietly right now in the dark, so the two men who knew each other since childhood did. “I just got a phone call from Mary Crane, she isn’t sure where David is,” Mark said, adjusting his hood so that he could see Milty fully. “What, in their house?” Milty asked, pushing his red wool hat up on his forehead. “No, no, she can’t find him,” Mark said slowly, looking to Milty’s face to see if anything was registering. “Apparently he stepped outside to smoke a cigarette and never came back in. He drinks at night.”

Milty leaned back against his truck, looking up into the storm. He closed his eyes and felt flakes in his eyelashes; he didn't want any part in what was coming next. An old man was lost in this.

At any point driving down Memorial Street, you could find David's parked police car. He rode with his window down, his tan forearm and elbow hanging out; even sitting down he was tall. His favorite time of day was when school was over, he would drive slowly, stopping in front of lawns to chat with mothers waiting for their children to walk home. He would smile up at them from his car seat, relaxed, amiable but serious. There were other cops in town, and they would drive through when it was their turn, but people here had an allegiance.

David would show up to little league games in the summer. The local diamond nestled in between cornfields, bleachers wooden and hand made. He would stand with fathers in baseball caps, legs apart in a wide stance, arms folded, talking about their sons' throwing style. He would cheer quietly and shake his head looking at the ground when he disagreed about something that took place. Oftentimes after the game, David would pick the player who had done the best job, and offer him a "victory ride" in his police cruiser. All of them would want to go, but David gently insisted, "Just one boys, you'll all get your turn."

Every Thursday Milty's father would stop at "the club," in town on his way home from work. Stopping to sit at a sticky brass bar, stare up at a muted television, and nurse beers. Milty had learned to stay in his room when he came home, his father's tie loosened, his sweaty forehead and red nose signals. The smell scared Milty; it wafted off his father when he would hug him for longer than usual on these particular nights.

The winter months were worse, when his father would sit at the bar longer because “the roads were shitty.” His mother would wipe down the kitchen counter, walk to the window, and come back to wipe it down again. One night in January, Milty heard the phone ring; it cut the hushed calm of a house closed up for the night. It interrupted the dark living room with one lamp on, making Milty roll over in his twin bed down the hall. He couldn’t hear his mother, but a little while later, David Crane was in his living room.

Milty’s father had driven home and hit someone’s dog. He had been drunkenly walking around and knocking on the doors of houses close by, crying and slobbering apologies to anyone answering their door. David had been called specifically after Milty’s father had scared a young girl that had been babysitting. She had called the police, and the officer who responded saw that it was Milty’s sad father, and that someone who knew him better should take him home to his wife. David came to take Milty, and he had to be the one to inform the owners what had happened to the cocker spaniel the next morning. Milty’s father had been too embarrassed.

From that day on, Milty’s mother would not settle for just small talk on the edge of her front yard with David. She would invite him in, pour him coffee, and ask him about his two-year-old while placing a cinnamon bun on his plate. Offering him hand-me-downs of Milty’s old things, and sending him off when he was finished with a tender touch to his bicep.

Milty’s father had been driving him to school one morning, and in the early glow they saw David ride by raising his arm to them. His father responded in kind, and then he gave his son’s knee one light pat and told him, “David helps his neighbors, and he gives everyone ten minutes. Every neighbor deserves ten minutes.”

The men had decided to wait until the next day to start looking. Mary Crane had to be sedated. She had lunged at Mark when he told her it wasn't safe for anyone, including themselves, to be out in this storm. Milty had to hold her small, crooked hands to his chest to keep her from trying to claw at them. Gritting her teeth determined, she managed to get a hold of a television remote that she flung into the fireplace. "Sons of bitches!" she had called them, her bird-like torso heaving. "Sons of bitches just care about yourselves!" Mark stayed with her through the night; she wouldn't come out of the bedroom.

Milty knew the South Meadows, so he offered to look there this morning. Mark would take the East Meadows and a few other men would split up the remaining farm properties that encircled the town. Snowmobiles, cross country skis, Milty would walk through it all to search.

He had parked his truck at the slope of Memorial Street. And in his snow pants with ski poles, he was marching down into the true river valley. This morning was bright, the air cold but dry, and the darkness he had just worked in seemed unreal. The road was covered in snow, but the large, elderly trees marked the way, creating a clear path by how they were spaced. Facing each other, with open snow in the middle, as if they were on opposite ends of a battlefield. Step by step, lifting one booted foot high up out of the snow, and stomping it down, breaking the crust that had formed between last night and now, Milty moved. He had reached the point on this road where the large farmhouses stopped, pavement abruptly became dirt underneath this snow, a clear signal that he was entering a world where nothing civilized or convenient needed to be.

The lines of trees ended, and Milty's eyes and bare cheeks were met with wind. A strong, constant, flow of air that brought a taste of what was in the land; river silt, the ancient lakes that carved mountains, old, useless cows that were shot and buried in the fields that fed them, and

worn arrowheads that would be discovered only after it's rained for a few days. All were in his mind as he left tree and shadow behind him, and the fields opened up.

Since he had started walking the sky had slowly morphed from glacier blue to grey, but it wasn't colder. "You're looking for someone, you're looking for someone," Milty repeated to himself, not sure how to actually do it. The snow was up to his knees; he was winded, and stopped. He had never seen so much white, and as the clouds shifted and blew around the sun would peek out, the white would become blue, pink, or peach. A canvas that changed depending on where Milty was looking.

There was a pond to his left, he knew, Brogan's Pond. An oval ring of brown briar branches indicating something other than dirt was below the snow. Years ago he would come here to go ice-skating with his cousins. He remembered one year when he came down here, skates slung over his shoulder, flask in his pocket, and he saw crows on the ice. Three of them, their black faces intently looking down, pecking at something below the surface. A group of boys had skated over, and eventually through word of mouth Milty found out that a lamb had fallen in and drowned before the water had frozen. While the boys were there, skating around avoiding tree branches that stuck out of the black ice, the crows would eventually break through and pull out strings of meat, ignoring the crowd.

If someone were to come down to this spot and look out towards the west, they would never know a river was out there. Masked by a line of trees, it looked like the end of the fields and the beginning of woods, but Milty knew that a river lay behind. That would orient him, and lifting his ski pole he placed it firmly and set out in the direction of the oaks.

One brown barn far off to his right, long with double doors at either end, seemed to not belong. It was as if someone had placed it there, lying on top of the snow, impermanent. In the

summer cows would walk in and out of the barn, now the pasture empty. He could see occasional fencing, where sheep would be kept to one place. The barbed wire invisible from this far away, but Milty did see wooden stakes spaced incrementally.

In October men with metal detectors would comb these fields after the corn had been chopped. Never asking permission they would come and walk, finding quarters, or pieces of metal that had been broken off dump trucks that drove through these fields in the fall, carrying silage away. Milty thought of all the things found here, shiny, metal buttons that had fallen off of gentleman farmers' vests, black forged hinges, horse bits, and old keys. Walking right now it seemed that nothing belonged except the small, hidden bodies of water and the flocks of birds that would swarm and dive like schools of fish, their shadows small but distinct in the snow. Milty knew this landscape, but he wouldn't find David in here. That he knew, the fields went too far, and the snow had covered up the night before.

It was August, almost the end of the baseball season, when it was Milty's turn for a "victory ride." After a game in the sun, his father had waited for him to walk over off the field. Milty had grass stains on his knees, and he wanted to go home and watch television on the couch. His father and David had talked throughout, and the thought hadn't even entered Milty's mind that he'd get to ride with David. He had been in the outfield, mostly watching grasshoppers, and his teammates were angry when they found out that it was him that got to go tonight.

"You ready to go?" asked David after he had shook Milty's father's hand. With a clap on the back, David sauntered away and Milty looked up to his father's face.

“He’s going to take you for a ride tonight. You’ll be home in a bit, I’ll let mom know.” Milty’s father squeezed his thirteen-year old shoulder, and pretended to punch him in the stomach. Grabbing his glove, he walked to his car in the red of evening.

Milty looked for David in his uniform, and in this late light he looked even taller than usual. Milty ran to catch up with him, his cleats clacking, David looked back and lifted his arm waiting for him to run past, when he did he placed his large hand on the small of Milty’s back guiding him to the police cruiser.

“Come on and hop in the back,” David had instructed him smiling. He opened the car door and waited for Milty in his pine green baseball uniform to climb in.

They had driven away from the ball field, Milty turning around and looking out the back window, trying to see if his father had left in his own car. David drove Milty to the police station down the road, it was small and didn’t seem to Milty an important place.

Parking the police cruiser next to a large, brown station wagon, David stared at Milty through the cage that separated them. “Let’s go for a ride in my car, shift change is coming up so I need to leave this for the next officer,” he explained, turning back around and opening his car door.

Milty left the car, disappointed and again he felt a hand on his back. He was pushed to the front of the pedestrian car; the passenger seat was where he was allowed to sit now. Crickets could be heard and the warmth of the day was gone.

David looked weird sitting in a normal car. Milty felt small sitting next to him, and he wondered where David was going to drive him. Some kids had said that David had just taken them to the gas station to get an ice cream, and others had said that they had been sworn to secrecy. David went to buckle in his seat belt, and he leaned over to help Milty buckle his.

“There we go, this side’s a little tricky,” David said cheerfully, and before grabbing the wheel, Milty felt a hand through his polyester pants grabbing his skinny knee and slowly sliding up. David ran his hand along to where leg met hip, squeezing Milty’s upper thigh and not letting go. With the other hand, David shifted the car, and using his rearview mirror, slowly backed out of the parking lot.

The sun had come out to stay at this point in the afternoon; Milty had taken off his hat and his jacket, sweating as he continued to follow the snowy banks of the small river. Over the radio, he had heard from Mark and a few others, no one had found anything all day.

Milty had tried to imagine where he might’ve gone. He couldn’t have gone far, a drunken old man. “Did someone take him?” he wondered. “Did someone see him and pick him up?”

When Milty had driven in these fields, he would see David faraway in his yard, up on a hill smoking on a small patio, his legs crossed thoughtfully. David wouldn’t leave his house anymore; he’d lost his license a few years ago. He would drive with his wife to go to the dentist, to the doctor, but that was it. People would stop in to check on Mary, and make sure that she all right.

The holly bushes were thick at this part of the river, the berries looking even redder against the open air. The trees had been pushed out; peeking through the brown branches Milty could look beyond and see the water moving swiftly. The edges were frozen but the river itself moved fast over large, smooth stones. The rocks looked like the backs of dolphins, invisible water falling gracefully over and around the pearly whites, tans and grays of the riverbed. The

sound of the rushing water was easy to listen to as Milty walked slowly along, it smelled like rain.

He kept looking through the bushes, and if he hadn't he would've walked right by it. Milty saw a green slippered foot peeking out from the white, from heel to toe. As the wind blew, the fine snow continued to fall away, and a grey ankle appeared. Milty suddenly felt hot, he could hear a buzzing in his ears, and blood pulse high into his scalp.

Tossing his ski poles to the left, Milty fell to his knees in the snow, and looked closer. Milty didn't want to crawl into the brush and look by himself, and he looked around quickly. A Chickadee had perched in the upper branches of the holly bush he was kneeling in front of. It's soft feathers blowing gently out of place, it's black head cocked to the right, its beak opened like it was calling but Milty couldn't hear it.

Falling onto all fours, Milty parted the branches and crawled into the bramble. His face close to the snow, the cold rose like heat off pavement. He crawled slowly ahead and with a gloved hand, scooped the snow away from the ankle, the frayed edge of an old, red flannel pant leg was revealed. Milty looked around for something else to move the snow, because he didn't want to touch the body, but there was nothing he could use.

With both hands now, he pushed snow to the left and to the right. David was lying in front of him, and he was wrapped in a blue bathrobe, briars caught around his thick middle. Leaving him there in the snow, with his head still buried, Milty crawled out. He stood and brought his gloves up to his face; he had to pull him out.

He wasn't surprised that he was angry, or that he wanted to leave him here telling people he saw nothing, but what did surprise him was how quickly the anger came up out him. A rage that was nuclear, so deep seated that Milty's lungs felt tight. He crawled back in, and standing as

best as he could, he kicked at the leg, over and over. As he kicked more of the leg would become exposed, and he worked his way up to the thigh, kicking. Milty kicked until his thigh wouldn't lift his boot anymore.

It would take a while, but Milty would use his jacket as a sled, unearthing the man, rolling him onto the makeshift hearse. He wasn't frozen, his limbs could still be moved, which led Milty to believe that he hadn't died too long ago. Milty was livid about never being able to use his jacket again. "Son of a bitch," Milty said to the river, to the woods.

Sitting in the packed snow, next to a man facedown on his coat, Milty waited for someone to come. It would be a while before he realized he never actually made the call on his radio. Mark would eventually come on a snowmobile with a trailer attached, the noise echoing off the sides of the valley so that Milty felt he had arrived when he still had a ways to travel. When Mark did come, the two men would grab wrists and ankles and place David on the trailer. They would leave the jacket in the snow. "Fucking pervert," Mark sputtered. "No more rides."

Milty thought of the first time that David had spoken to him. He had been seven and at the playground in September. Kicking a soccer ball in the grass, Milty had noticed something in the net of the goal. Trotting closer, it seemed as though a section of the nylon string had come to life, hopping and twisting. Kneeling inside, Milty saw a young squirrel wrapped in the string of the net. Its fur the color of a baby fawn. Lying perfectly still on the green field, as soon as Milty went to touch it, it lurched violently, suffocating itself. Milty started crying when a shadow fell upon his small frame.

"No good," David had said shaking his head slowly. And gently pushing Milty out of his way, he pulled the sleeve of his sweater up over his hand as he knelt down, and covering the twitching squirrel, pressed down on its young face.