

Rick Hilles

Custodians

The girl I was now is almost gone.

—Katharine Whitcomb, *Saints of South Dakota*

The boy I was is now almost gone.
 Yet everything I've done, and will do,
 is because of him. But to find that boy
 again I must dredge up the bundle I was
 at fourteen, and my first job as a custodian
 at St Paul's Pre-K.

Mom's on disability.

It's just the three of us, and I'm oldest,
 so I work. And already my fourth summer there,
 I imagine every crush I've ever had in their bikinis
 lounging by swimming pools, rubbing coconut oil
 into their bare skin glistening in the hot sun
 as I scrub every hall, and wall, each locker down,
 any surface that still shines with their attention,
 every touch, fingerprint, scuff of penny loafer
 as they turn back to the beauty of their lives
 soon, in my hands, will amount to nothing
 but a thin film in lukewarm water, a grease
 that, nevertheless, rainbows each time I look
 into its surface. Even in the braid of water I see it
 as I empty the bucket in the broom closet sink.

By my sixth summer, I see my future in urinals.
 Each toilet I flush. Everything that will come
 to pass in the mini hurricanes of indigo I'll find
 years later in Vermeer's Delft Blue. I see my future
 in the bubble gum I pry from chairs and desks.
 And maybe only now do I see what Mom conceals
 from us in meals that keep us from wanting more.
 That what feels like a prison sentence commuted
 to community service is for the crime of posing

as middle class in the affluent suburbs when we're poor.

Dad lets Mom keep the house. And while he skews us to conspicuous wealth each time he pops the clutch of his Bimmer into park in Mom's driveway to pick us up for weekend custody visits, I know precisely where we stand when he drops us off and Mom sends me right back outside to ask him when this month's child support check will arrive. Dad worked as a kid, too, and though we never speak of it, I like to think he likes me more for working. But my being a janitor I think makes him scowl. Then look deep into his lap. The custodians I meet treat me like a grandson. One Friday lunch, an old timer working on his third pension (after the Army and Republic Steel) surprises me with a cold Olde Frothingslosh to go with my fish and chips. I have more lunches with him than with my own father.

The summer I turn 21, my ninth one there. I grow my hair long. Pulled back. Copper-brown. Straight. I fill out my t-shirt and faded blue jeans. My supers this summer in the Canton Art Museum are lifers, maybe twice my age, and bigger around the arms and chest. The loading dock's garage door is open; bright light and traffic noise seep in. We sit around an old teacher's desk eating lunch. The one with the dark wilderness beard says he's just gone off coffee. "It makes me want to hit somebody—*anybody*" he says. His sidekick laughs—his hair a gray wreath of smoke—and he stands. As I choke down another forgettable sandwich, he leans in and says: "You know where they like *you longhairs*—don't you?" His eyes go flat black.

And something like a silver dollar spins between them. Shadows dart across the walls. A thermos hits the floor. Are they really chasing me? Is this a joke? Are they trying to rape me? when the man with the wilderness beard grabs me by the forearm. He holds it like a cold one he's ready to crack open. I wrest free. I run.

 Somehow, the bearded one
—dark but for a few veins of lightning—finds me.
He can't look at me, but leaves a peace offering:
a soapy bucket of warm water and a new sponge.
He wants the narrow hallway to be cleaned.
I climb as high as I can—on my knees, sloshing
walls up to the skylight, until they rainbow
to the cleanest regions inside myself—and I see
a life that I might live, beyond the world of men.