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Ray Holly

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Ray Holly

*But what disturbs me most
in the leafy wood
is the to and fro and to and fro
of an oak rod—*

*Seamus Heaney,
From Sweeney Astray*

On a morning in late August, with the summer fading and the leaves beginning to wither and with the metallic keening of locusts rising from the roadside weeds, Warren Schober drove the green Chevy dump across town to remove a dead oak tree.

In the seat beside him Ray Holly sat, smoking cigarets, tapping his boot on the dash and sipping from a can of spit-warm Pepsi while the greatest hits of James Brown thumped and bumped from a little Panasonic, dangling from the rearview mirror by a carabiner. “Cold Sweat,” “Sex Machine,” “I Can’t Stand It” — it was a heavy dose, Warren thought, for seven a.m., as now and then it moved Ray to stick his head into the rush of air and bawl out the words to the world at large. The voice was high and ragged, a surprising one, coming from executive sired, Poughkeepsie born Ray Holly. Warren glanced at the sunburned, nearly beardless face, the wire-rim glasses, the curly hair wind-whipped to a froth, and then to the scarred, nicotine-stained fingers that had hung from every vertical face in Yosemite. Inside of a month, Ray would take his summer’s earnings, his soul tapes and his honky locks and fly off to climb in the Chamonix. And he would take Gwyneth, too.

Warren thought of the summer evenings at Ray’s third floor sublet. The walls were yellowed and bare, except for the picture poster of the Eiger Ray had tacked up — massive, snow-covered, sun ricocheting from the top. He remembered the long twilights on the back porch, beneath the sooty canopy of the tree of heaven: Ray, in constant motion, trying his French and Gwyneth’s dark head bobbing with laughter at his insane patois, the way the jug wine went to their heads while the chicken lay charring on the coals and the smoke trailed high into the night.

Warren turned off the expressway and headed due East, and though he slouched in the seat and arranged the visor every which way, for the rest of the drive he was eyeball to eyeball with the sun, so that when they pulled up to the single story cape in east Revere, he was half-blind.

Ray clambored out of the truck and disappeared around the corner of the house so he’d be first to the tree, as he always was. From behind the hemlocks, his voice staggered towards the upper registers:

“I don’t care about your *past*,
I just want, uh!, our love to *last . . .*”

Warren checked under the truck to see what had leaked out on the way over. Brake fluid, engine oil, hydraulics, it was always something. As he squatted and peered under the chassis, the memory of two nights before rushed at him so fast it nearly took his breath: Gwyneth, her mouth sweet with gin, eyes half-closed, falling toward him, falling, both of them, towards each other, as if in a kind of seizure. He remembered the explosion of breath and the soft smack of their bellies, remembered the rattle of Ray's snores, drifting from the bedroom. Warren blinked and the memory evaporated.

From the backyard he heard Ray light into the chorus: "I break out . . . uh! . . . in a coooold sweat . . .," as there appeared on the opposite side of the truck a pair of thin, green-veined ankles, rising like stalks from a pair of slippers that seemed to Warren, a couple of sizes too large. Warren stood up and extended his hand to a boney man with a deeply lined face and a head of jet black hair.

"Miles Murphy, son," said the man. He wore a snowy white T-shirt, chino pants, and carried a coffee mug, decorated with the head of a dog. He gave Warren's hand a vigorous crank.

"A pleasure, Miles," said Warren. "We've come," he added, "to take your oak down."

"So this is it," said Miles and grinned. "So this is D-Day! Haha." There was a dazzling flash of dentures.

"Yeah," said Warren, "I guess it is."

"Boy," said Miles, and scuffed at the driveway with his toe.

"D-Day," said Warren, whose gaze fell to the ground also. A springer pup rounded the corner of the house flat out, bounced off Warren in a blur of slobber and hair, then raced between Miles Murphy's legs.

Ray Holly appeared, scowling.

"How's it look back there?" said Warren.

Ray gave an odd goat-like laugh from the back of his throat.

"Benny!" said Miles. "Get your furry butt over here."

The dog barked, danced away then disappeared back behind the house, Miles shuffling after him, coffee cup held high. Warren followed, ducked through an opening in the hemlock hedge and emerged in Miles' chinch riddled back yard. To the east stood a bank of young willows, to the west, a small elm, and in the corner of the chain link fence, bordered with bridal wreath and andromeda, stood a massive white oak, stone dead.

"What do you think?" said Ray.

Warren looked at the bark sloughing away, limbs splayed lifeless against the hazy sky and felt a loosening in his bowels.

Ray lit a cigaret, inhaled and said, "I'll bet its Ant City up there."

Ants, for openers, Warren thought. Ants and earwigs, grubs and rot.

And not a limb you'd trust your weight too.

"If they got their own city up there," said Miles, "I wonder what the hell they're doing under my sink?"

The three of them stood pondering this. Miles moved on to the next question: "Well gents," he said, "which way is she going? I'd cut the bastard down myself," he continued, "except I got a bad heart." He pronounced the word "hot" and thumped himself on the breastbone.

Warren waved to the yard in front of them, the only open space there was, and frowned. "Can I ask you something?"

"Shoot," said Miles, grinning. Benny sat at this feet, wriggling, panting.

Warren toed the dog and it gave him a cloying, over-the-shoulder glance. He felt a curious urge to kick it in the ass. "It's kind of personal," he said.

Miles shrugged. "Fire away."

The dog barked, sniffed, then bent with relish to his genitals.

Warren's eyes traveled up the huge lightning scarred tree and then he said, "Why'd you wait so *long*, Miles?"

Miles looked sheepish. He scratched Benny's head. At his touch, the mouth dropped open, the eyes rolled up and it appeared for a second as if the dog would pass out. "The wife always thought it would come back," said Miles.

"So she changed her mind?" said Ray.

"No," said Miles. "She died."

"I'm sorry," said Warren.

"So is she," said Miles, "haha."

Ray lugged the felling saw from the truck. He found a clean spot and sat on the grass cross-legged, clamping the big Stihl in a kind of leg lock, the lethal, gleaming teeth resting on a knee, the other leg slung over the body of the saw. Warren liked to watch Ray sharpen the saw — it reminded him of a guy wrestling an alligator. Ray filed, advanced the chain a tooth, stopped to perform a French inhale.

"Boy," said Miles. "Look at that kid smoke! Man, I gave that up a long time ago." He patted his chest.

Ray finished sharpening and stood up. "I'll climb this old bone."

"Uhuh," said Warren, and before Ray could argue, he picked up his gear and walked to the oak. He knew if younger men started doing the creepy trees for him, he would soon stop climbing them altogether. At the age of thirty-six, he thought, it might not be a bad thing. If he could only think of something else to do.

"Did you see how rotten it is?" said Ray.

"Yes I did."

"But I'm lighter than you," Ray grinned.
"Ray," said Warren, "how vain you are."

Warren followed the lightning scar into the morning haze. He moved slowly, setting each spur deliberately as the trunk tapered off within the circle of his arms. He stopped for a breather and thought: how quiet it gets in a mere forty feet. And how *flat* it is down there; as if the earth's features blurred into the only significant one, that a fall could kill you. Warren allowed that thought free rein. He believed it made him a careful climber.

Below him, he could see Ray balance on one foot, grinding it into the turf and swinging his arms to a bass line only he could hear. Warren looked straight down at the inky verdure of Miles' head, and in an instant, he thought of Gwyneth, beneath him, her face luminous in the night, the dark pool of hair, the feel of her fingers at the small of his back and Ray's snore, oddly comic, so they had laughed, both of them, and then frozen at the sound of their laughter. She had clasped his face in her hands, and her eyes swam with fear and she said, "Warren stop — I'm scared. I'm too scared now . . ."

Warren focused on the trunk before him. What the hell do you call that? he wondered. A fantasy? A nightmare? An honest mistake? He rapped the trunk with the saw handle and heard the hollow sound. And what did she mean "now?"

He rapped harder and got a muffled boom. He pictured himself standing on a forty foot column of rot held together, more or less, by bark.

"Hey Warren!" Ray hollered. "What drum say?"

Warren laughed. "Drum say: Get outta my yard!"

"Ha," said Miles. "Get outta my yard." That's great."

Warren cut the lowest branch as it sagged, snapped free and sailed downwards, shattering when it hit the ground. He watched Miles Murphy's mouth form an 'O', watched the ants stream from the stub in front of him and crawl confusedly over his boots. They sense, thought Warren, that something is amiss.

By eleven, Warren had worked his way nearly to the top. The haze burned off and to the east he could see coastline. He had not realized that they were so close. He squinted his eyes at the glittering plane of light. Flat, he thought. Even the ocean. He knew that if you just got high enough, things began to curve. He scowled. But how high was that? Something Ray would know.

"Hey Ray," he hollered.

Ray and Miles both looked up, waiting.

"Send up a smoke, huh?"

Ray nodded and lit one up. He untwisted strands of Warren's climbing rope and clamped the filter tip between the plies so the burning cigaret stood perpendicular to the rope.

Warren pulled it gently towards him, hand over hand.

"Aaa," said Miles Murphy with a huge grin. He made a swatting motion with his hand and said, "You guys — you guys know what you're doing."

Warren pivoted on his spurs and puffed at the cigaret. He did not inhale. He looked up at the top splayed over Miles Murphy's yard like a hand. Below, Miles bumped the screen door with his knee and emerged from the house with mugs of coffee as Benny squirted out from between his legs, almost tripping him. That dog, Warren thought, what an idiot.

"Coffee time, gents," said Miles.

Warren felt a sadness wash over him, though he was not certain what it was about. He tipped his head back and watched a large, slow cloud move in behind the oak top. It appeared for a second that the tree was moving, not the cloud. He knew this was an illusion, but suddenly he felt that nothing would hold — the rope, the top, the tree itself, nothing, and he kicked out and descended so fast he burned his hands on the rope.

"Boy," said Miles, startled. "When the coffee comes out, you don't mess around."

"I guess I don't," said Warren. Mess around, he thought. He unbuckled his harness and spurs. There was sawdust in his hair and down his shirt. He lifted the hem of it to let it dribble out.

Miles laughed. "Yeh," he pointed a finger into Warren's belly, "Your stuffing's leaking out."

It was dark in Miles' house. The blinds were drawn and the kitchen and halls were linoleum tile so there was an echo. Everything was waxed, dustless. The furniture looked somehow unsat upon. Through the doorway in the kitchen was a 21" Zenith switched on low volume. In the stillness, Miles put eggs on the stove to boil. Though they had agreed to lunch, Warren had never felt less hungry.

"Your place," Warren began, and Miles turned his head, "is really *clean*,"

"I try to keep on top of it," said Miles.

Ray drifted towards the living room, his boots squeaking on the floors. "Wow," he said from beyond the wall. "Who's the shutterbug?"

Miles followed him in. "Uncle Sam!"; he said eagerly.

The walls of the living room were covered with Navy photos—submarines, flattops, destroyers and a large aerial shot of the fleet as it swung into the sun, wakes arcing across a marbled sea.

“I’m a carrier man,” said Miles. “That’s my ship there.”

He pointed to an aircraft carrier, Korean War vintage, on the wall behind the couch.

“What’s this plane here?” said Ray.

“The F-1F.” said Miles. “They call it the Voodoo. And this one here’s the Banshee.” He pointed to a flight of swept wing jets, banking towards the camera. “And these babies, these are Furies.”

“Wow,” Ray said, his voice husky.

God, Ray, Warren thought. You sound like such a *jerk*. “Wow—lookit the jets!” Warren watched the two of them. There was a strange similarity there, a restlessness, a lightness, as if their bones were filled with air. And if their bones were filled with air, his were filled with something heavy. Dirt, perhaps.

Warren sat in Miles’ bathroom on the edge of the tub, the scent of air-wick heavy in his nostrils. Voodoo, Banshee, Fury, he thought. It was a mistake to come into Miles’ weird house. It was a mistake to break for lunch and it was a mistake to come down from the tree with one cut left. Mistake, mistake, mistake.

He sat and stared at the cluster of skin care products on the vanity and the bottle of Grecian formula, then the vinyl poodles dancing across the shower curtain. He listened to the harp-like plink of the leaky faucet and he watched the sweat trickle along his forearms. He thought: Ray knows.

Ray Holly sat at the table, rapping out a rhythm on the formica top. Miles stood at the sink in a cloud of steam, cooling the eggs with tap water. The windows were fogged, the hood of the stove was beaded with condensation. When Warren sat down, Ray curled his lip and raised an eyebrow.

Miles crossed his skinny legs and told them stories about whoring in Tokyo, whoring in Seoul. “You could get a Korean girl for five bucks a week. They smelled like Kimshee. ‘Moose’ we used to call them.”

“How come?” said Ray.

“I don’t know,” said Miles, puzzled. “I guess ’cause they were horny. Ha ha.”

There was a flicker and guffaw from the Zenith in the next room and Warren could hear the EmCee: “Let’s have a look behind that curtain!”

The haze had returned. The backyard was still. “Yank yer crank, Mate?” he said *that?*” Warren was incredulous.

Ray frowned. “I think so. He said it really fast.”

“What’d you say?” Warren asked.

Ray shrugged. “Nothing—I dummied up.”

Warren snickered. “Maybe it’s Navy talk for something—pass the sandwich or something.”

“Old Miles,” said Ray thoughtfully, “he’s a very lonely guy.”

A lonely guy, thought Warren. Ray. You’re so compassionate.

In the crown of the elm next door there was a rustling of wind.

“About the other night,” said Warren.

“What about it,” said Ray. He began to pivot on one foot.

“I sure was drunk,” Warren said.

Ray stopped dancing and polished his glasses on his T-shirt, then fixed his watery green eyes on Warren. “So what?” he said and gave an odd little laugh.

While Ray buckled on his gear, Warren revved up the felling saw. The 115 C.C.s roared so that the whole neighborhood seemed to vibrate. He pressed the kill switch and there was silence once again. He sniffed at the blue cloud of exhaust that hung in the back yard like a veil.

“I don’t care about your faults,” Ray sang, “I just want—*uh*—to satisfy your *thoughts*.”

“Ray,” said Warren. “I want you to stop singing that fucking song.”

Miles Murphy joined them, pointed to the mass of clouds to the east. “Getting dark up there,” he said. He pronounced the word “dock.”

Warren nodded. “Could be thundershowers.”

Miles said, “Well I figured I could feed you anyway—save you some time.”

Warren looked at his watch and it was nearly one. Somehow they had been in Miles’ house for two hours. “It was great Miles,” he said. “Thanks.”

Miles was watching the fluid, chimp-like ascent of Ray Holly. “The kid can *climb*,” he said.

“Yeah,” said Warren. “That’s what Ray does. He climbs things: buildings, mountains, trees. . .”

“I don’t *care*,” Ray sang, as he climbed higher. “I don’t *care*.”

Miles frowned. “Can’t sing worth a shit, though,” he said.

Ray perched on the stub of Warren’s last cut, looked up at the top. “Wow,” he said. He pivoted in his harness, looked to the east, “and the *ocean*,” he said. He reached into the cavity, dug out a handful of rot and flung it out over the yard. A breeze sprang up and scattered it. To the north, the sky turned a silvery purple. Ray stuck his head into the cavity,

right up to his ears.

"Hey Ray," Warren yelled. "Finish up and get out of there."

"There's *light* down there!"

"Jesus, Ray, finish it up!" Warren yelled, suddenly furious.

The clouds moved in and buried the sun. A gust of wind blew up little dust devils and set them careening around the yard, and Warren could smell the tannin from the oak and he could smell the rain coming. In the world of Ray Holly, he thought, this will pass for fun: the wind blowing sixty miles an hour, rain on the way and Ray hanging there in the middle of it, singing, laughing, having a ball.

Warren watched Ray set himself to make the cut, lifting his knees high to drive the spurs tight, the top shuddering from the impact.

Miles grinned and made a swatting motion with his hand. "You guys," he said. "You guys are *crazy*."

"Do you really think so?" said Ray.

"Aww," said Miles "Sure I do."

"That's good," said Warren. "Sometimes I think we're just stupid."

From the top of the oak, Ray said something but the wind snatched his words away, and the clouds swarmed overhead. Warren heard the saw sputter, catch, and rev, Ray notched the top towards the open yard. As he began his back cut, the elm next door tossed violently. The wind shifted and rushed out of the west, rolling over them like a wave, catching the oak top as it settled towards the yard, pushing it backwards till it hung poised over Ray Holly. Warren watched, helpless as Ray yanked the saw free, dipped his head and pushed, pushed till his arms shook and his face went dark with blood but the top was too heavy and the wind was too strong.

"Let it *go*, Ray—get out of the way! Let it go!" Warren yelled, but there was no time. The top snapped off and seemed to hang a second. As Ray tried to duck it struck him like a hammer between the shoulders, driving him chest-first into the tree.

Before the top hit the ground, Warren grabbed his gear and ran stumbling to the oak. He threw himself up it, slipping, ripping his arms and knees on the bark. He came up beneath Ray, who hung in his harness, jack-knifed at the waist like a broken puppet. He tried to check Ray's neck for a pulse but his own heart beat so hard he couldn't tell. He fumbled with his rope.

"Ray," he said and laughed. "Look at this, Ray. Jesus," and he held out a hand that shook like the palsey. The wind roared, rushed over them again and he held Ray tight against the trunk until it died down. He tied himself in, then reached down to pull Ray's head up. There was a gurgling from deep in his chest, but Ray's face was unscratched, the glasses intact. The idea that Ray was fooling him possessed Warren, and he started

to giggle.

"Ray, you ding dong, cut it out."

Ray gasped. A bright bubble of blood formed on his lips. His head sagged.

Warren jerked him by the hair and said, "Listen Ray, you're not going to die Ray, you're not going to die, man."

He took Ray's glasses off and jammed them in a pocket.

"Hear me Ray?" And he tightened his grip.

Ray's mouth formed a word.

"What is it, Ray?" And he stuck his ear to Ray's mouth and there was a hiss of air.

"Ow," said Ray. "Let go."

"No, you bastard, you sonofabitch, I'll hurt you again, I'm not letting go, you skinny fuck so don't even *think* I will. Listen to me: you're not gonna die, Ray. You're not gonna die. Hear me?"

And Warren slid his arms under Ray's, bringing them around front so he could work Ray's knot and holding him to his chest, they descended. Warren stopped once because he thought he heard an ambulance, but there was nothing, just wind. All the way down, Warren kept his mouth close to Ray's ear. He said, "I'm not going to let you do it, Ray. I'm not going to let you die."

When they reached the ground, Warren could find no pulse. He clasped Ray's chin and blew into his mouth. He waited, blew again. On his lips he could taste Ray's blood.

Miles ran from the house with a blanket.

"Jesus, God," said Warren. "Didn't you *call*?"

Miles covered Ray and said. "They're on the way. Don't worry, buddy. Don't worry."

"Jesus, Miles, where are they?"

"They're coming buddy," Miles said gently.

Warren tried again to start Ray's heart. He blew into his lungs, waited, blew again. Again. Again. Finally he stopped and looked to Miles. His face was wet and he could feel the numbness creeping over him. "I lost him, Miles."

"Oh Jeez," said Miles and his old eyes filled with tears. "I shoulda took it down a long time ago."

Warren tried to speak but his voice abandoned him. He tried to stand but his legs refused. He could not, for a minute, bring his eyes to focus. Finally he touched Miles shoulder.

From the drive they could hear the ebb of a siren, the hiss of a radio as the rescue van arrived. From the house, the spaniel barked furiously.

To the east, Warren could see the willows heel over, bend double by the wind.