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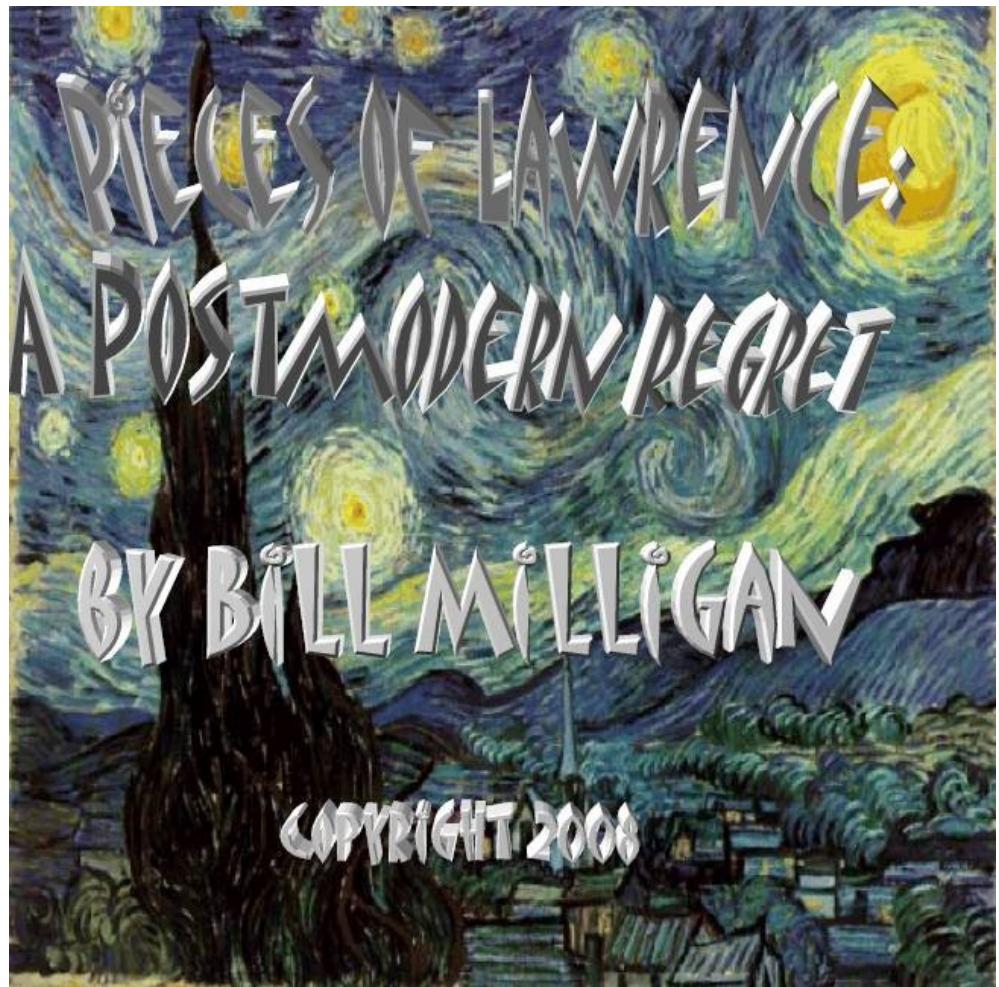
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[He was happy. Okay, let me show you]:

It's a summer day, sunny, say 80 degrees, and I hear the clank of the red wagon as he pulls it through potholes and the road's loose gravel. The song he sings jells in my ears the closer he gets to my house, a half-shout of disjointed prefixes and suffices that never translate to discernible English but something more akin to a Native American chant: "Ha-hee-a...La...day...dah" and so on, spiked shouts dropping to garbled whispers and back up again every few syllables. He isn't drunk. No, his issue is something else, something undefined but clear enough to my small child's mind that I know I can exploit it.

But he isn't Native American. Armenian? Could be. Jet black hair falls slick out of a wool cap and his mud-stained grey overcoat flails about his legs. But he's too pasty for Armenian, unless he's a sickly one. Dark stubble dots his face like ashes on a napkin. Oh, the Rubber boots. Rain. Sunshine. Didn't matter: he wears rubber boots, always, the black ones with metal buckles jangling.

[The buckles jangled, must have jangled as unclasped metal does when forced against each other. But how could I hear them above the din of his singing and the noisy wagon? I do hear it. Yes. Yes.]

The wagon: a rusty Red Flyer. No mistaking that. Or its contents: sticks, stones, dirty bottles, cans. He lives in an adult foster care home down the road. ***[No scratch that: he lived with his crazy mother in a home that used to be an adult foster home. No, no: the woman was his wife. Lots of rumors. Those were a few.]***

"Lawrence, don't forget to throw money in the wishing well!"

His name is Lawrence. Knowing his name seems natural like knowing that a bee buzzes but not knowing why or how it buzzes, only that it does. The understanding doesn't translate

past the basic fact: His name is Lawrence.

[He must be dead. I'm sure of it because a part of me has atrophied, died, decayed, and he must be wholly gone now because he was never fully there even then. My words on page are a séance calling him.]

The wishing well is a weed-choked ditch that separates our yard from the road, a putrid pool forming near the mouth of a plugged culvert. I convinced Lawrence a couple of weeks prior the ditch is a magical wishing well and now each time I hear him coming down the road I intercept him like some child-troll waiting under a bridge.

“Hey, Lawrence! Hey! Don't forget to throw money in the wishing well!”

He stops mid-syllable, cocks his head at me, grinning. Hands black from dirt he digs through the pockets of his overcoat and produces several coins—pennies, mostly, but occasionally a stray nickel. He flings them into the muddy water and watches the ripples for a few seconds, a slit-thin smile and a gaze that sees something no one else does momentarily transporting him somewhere far, far away. Then he snaps to attention, starts walking again, resuming his song, the clanging of the wheels on pot holes a rhythmic percussive beat and his boots [***dammit, I know I can hear those buckles jangling!***] mixing with it all as he walks down the road.

“Lawrence, come back! Hey, what did you wish for? Lawrence! Is that woman you live with your mother? How old are you—35, 40, older? Where did you come from? Where are you going with that stuff in your wagon? What's that song you sing? Aren't you hot in that coat? Why are you so happy?”]

After his form and his song and his wagon blur together far down the road, I plunge my right arm into the dirty water, groping and feeling, my clutched fist punching the sky after snatching a coin from the murky darkness.

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