

Craig Wright

Leaving the Building

Trying to listen to Mom's records with her one night, she said, with her hand on this guy James Taylor's face, "Used to be something to look at."

She held up her other hand like swearing on a bible. And like always she was talking about my dad.

He never talked about her. Even when she wasn't around he'd talk at her, like, "Mary Catherine, what you doing to this boy?" when he'd see she'd bought me something.

Sometimes I'd answer for her but she'd have to listen about something she already knew.

I said her music sounded like Jesus singing in the church basement on Tuesday night.

She looked at me like I ought to know what she was thinking.

Ronnie-Ann thinks it's fucked-up I think about porn people when they're not naked.

She says it's like wrestlers without their masks or names or whatever.

"Fucks everything up," she says.

She says the same thing about my mom, how I can't think about what she'll be doing. I need to remember how she was. It's what she'd want.

Ronnie-Ann says things don't mean the same once you get old.

She works full time at Wal-Mart in White City so we got it made.

Or I do she says when she leaves in the mornings.

I draw though so fuck her.

And when I start tattoos she'll feel cool when we go out and this will all be something that happened.

"You don't know what I want," she says.

I was working on different ideas that'd be cool on her side one day--peacock feathers, Aztec-looking shit and reptiles.

Ronnie-Ann was texting with the same friend she's had a million years and who's hated me longer than that. Which makes them better friends.

"Dara likes you," she says, "But she's my friend."

That means Dara's blowing up Ronnie-Ann's phone the one time she saw me talking to some girl from her piece-of-shit Orange Julius job but if Ronnie-Ann goes and fucks Kai Meese Dara takes her out for margaritas to make her feel better and I'm the dick to say anything.

Ronnie-Ann says, "My whole life I want a man with a job, some benefits, and I got a man says it ain't what I want." She nods, sending that to Dara.

"We're going to make it," I say holding up my art.

"We will but you might need somebody else to stick that shit on."

One night my dad and mom sat at the kitchen table going over papers piled between them.

I laid on the couch like on the edge of a cliff at the top of a canyon a thousand miles away but felt in there with them too.

Out of nowhere he said, "I'm leaving the building."

I could tell how she looked.

“I mean it,” he said like he didn’t all the way.

I pictured her not letting him out of her look.

I rubbed my finger across the man-made material of the cushion and left a line in the fibers that meant something.

My dad said that then the whole thing came true.

Once Dara told me I met Ronnie-Ann the way she met all her boyfriends. “You were there.”

The day I came home and Dad’d gone for good we went to Pizza Hut Buffet and the waitress brought Mom a second beer on the house.

“We both got cut from cheer,” Mom said, watching her walk away. “Still makes us friends, I guess.”

I asked her where people got Elvis left the building from and she told me nobody’d stop cheering after his shows until this voice came on, “Ladies and gentlemen, Elvis has left the building.”

He’d be gone for good then.

She said, “They wanted him to come back.”

Ronnie-Ann got home from work one night and said we might as well cancel cable since I’m the only one uses it and it’s not helping.

I pulled my sketchpad from under the couch and she tossed the remote in my lap.

I asked her, “You’d like it if we both worked at Wal-Mart?”

She dropped the new Victoria’s Secret on the coffee table and said like everything was coming to her, “What would you do, draw?”

I knew better and nothing would come anyway.

“Exactly,” she said, and went in the bedroom.

I picked up the Victoria's Secret and had to toss it back when she came out.

That morning three weeks earlier, about to drive Mom out to St. Mary's for good, I didn't want to say anything like "Take your last look around" but I wanted her to have that chance. She'd lived there 24 years.

Best I could do was ask about anything she wanted before we got in the car.

She said "Your ball's in the yard," and nodded toward the back.

I looked at Ronnie-Ann.

"You need to bring it in. Been out there a long time."

"Mom I don't need an old ball," I told her.

"That's yours," she said.

I felt like I needed to see what she was talking about and needed to do something for her so went out back and at first didn't see anything but her backyard but then that dirty blue ball by the corner of the steps, grass grown up around it, and this was once my backyard too and pictures wrapped around my face and pressed in on me.

I brought in the ball trying to be ready for more remembering but she acted somewhere between not knowing and going to Safeway.

I knew eventually I'd have to do something showed Ronnie-Ann I meant to do something. Then she came home and she'd given her smock to some lady asked for a smile. "Here," she told the woman.

"I closed out the register because who knows what they'd do about that," she said.

"You quit?"

"Wasn't no quitting, I just left."

"Now what?"

"Let's get fucked up," she said.

And for a few days we did and Ronnie-Ann watched porn and I drew crazy shit, some pretty cool, lots of eyes.

At some point she got bored and went and rented these old movies to match the porn. “Same thing,” she said, “Singing in the Rain” in one hand, “Swinging in the Rain” in the other.

“Which one you going to watch first?” I asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” she said and put on the un-porn one.

I wanted these eyes to look into their selves, their soul, somehow back in.

“I mean they ain’t naked in this one, obviously,” she said, jumped up and changed it out.

“Do these eyes look right?” I asked.

She reached for my pad, covered her face so the eyes covered hers and said, “They look fine.”

I faced her full-on, the TV caught between fucking and not, us between getting fucked up and not.

“The stories are the same,” she said.

When I was seven my dad caught me and nine-year-old Kirby Rogers in his tree house looking at naked magazines with our pants down and when I saw my dad’s face I pictured his legs reaching to the ground.

I told Ronnie-Ann once we got on our feet I’d open my shop but now I was going straight.

“Like in movies,” she laughed crying and asked if I’d still do her side with the eyes and all.

Next morning made breakfast in my dress shirt while I shaved.

We might as well have been on TV.

Life lets you know what to do if you let it and Harry and Davis calling about my application I figured they’d forgot felt next. I knew enough computers and software to fool them and they needed me yesterday they said.

I told the lady I wasn’t ready yesterday but could start in the morning and she said, “That’s funny,” but didn’t laugh,

said, “Nine o’clock, but I get there 8:50.”

Next day I learned their system in a cubicle until break when I texted Ronnie-Ann, “Boring,” and she wrote back, “Boring’s good,” with a smiley face.

I pictured her home putting up my drawings she had out on the table when I left.

I tweaked their website the rest of the day in what I realized was *my* cubicle so I’d need a little cactus from Wal-Mart, a picture of me and Ronnie-Ann at the beach or somewhere and my own cup.

When I got off I called but nothing so texted “on my way” and nothing and when I got there nothing.

I woke up once and Dad was sitting on my bed like he’d never left and it didn’t scare me but seemed like he’d been there a long time. I closed my eyes and tried to stay awake.

Next morning I convinced myself he’d been there so I wouldn’t have to ask Mom.

I knew where Ronnie-Ann was and didn’t have any idea at the same time.

I thought about going to find her.

I thought about going out to get fucked up myself.

Thought about that long enough it’s what I did.

When I got home Ronnie-Ann wasn’t back and starting on my own didn’t help and somehow I ended up at Mom’s.

They told me the Sunday before at Saint Mary’s how she watches TV with the sound down until *Jeopardy* which she turns up loud and nods along.

I said, “Maybe she’s figured out something.”

She never liked *Jeopardy* before because they gave you the answer.

This pretty nurse smiled like she liked me I thought right in the middle of all this shit.

Mom kept this folder of drawings I did for her when I was a kid and wrote on the backs, “Buster sees Superman everywhere,” or, “Buster loves color,” or “My Buster sees things different.”

Ronnie-Ann said once, “You can feel how many times she’d look at them.”

I couldn’t get her to look at them Sunday though and that folder was about all she took to St. Mary’s.

I was supposed to sell what she wouldn’t need.

Everything had to be out in a week.

I couldn’t do nothing but move things around.

When I got to her records I knew I should listen to one and get some of what she heard, look at the cover the way she said, and the last thing she listened to on the record player started spinning and I couldn’t bring myself to put down the needle.

I left it going around and called her room from her land-line I still couldn’t get rid of and listening to the ring I wondered if she heard the same ringing.

It was close as I could get.

I held the phone in front of me and wondered what it was like for her to hold me when I was little.

I hate things that mean that much.

The ringing helped and hurt at the same time until a voice answered I didn’t know and I didn’t know what to say.

I tried to picture the pretty nurse but could only see Ronnie-Ann somewhere I couldn’t quite and I didn’t want to hang up and I didn’t know what to say.

I listened for my mom in the background until the phone died.