

Chasing the Night

Paul Milo Miller

Paul Milo Miller was born in Vermont in 1967 and moved to Ohio when he was eleven years old. After graduating from high school, he took a year off to “try to make some sense and find some direction in life.” When he graduated from college in 1991, he had no immediate plans but thought he would attend graduate school sometime in the future. Miller wrote the following essay in a freshman composition class at the University of Akron. “Chasing the Night” takes place during an evening’s outing in which Miller and his friends go “cruising.” More importantly, Miller reflects on a situation in which many students his age find themselves: graduating from high school and considering what they want to do with their lives. Before you read his essay, think back to the times when your life was in transition. What were your thoughts and feelings? How did the situation resolve itself? As you read Miller’s essay, notice the careful attention he pays to reflection and introspection.

1 We were out on the dark back roads, penetrating the quiet summer night with a nearly unholy roar as Bob pushed his GTO up towards the 100 mph mark, sometimes slowing down to a more manageable 65 or 70 for a particularly threatening turn. I was sunk low in the back seat, the wind from the open windows nearly pinning me back. I considered suggesting we slow it down a bit, but thought better of it. It would have been a futile effort and merely opened the door for derision. Anyway, I figured at this speed if we hit anything we’d practically disintegrate on impact; if we slowed down it would just be a more painful and lingering death.

2 I realized that Bowden was turned around in the front passenger seat, yelling something at me. The wind-tunnel effect of the back seat was too great to make out much of anything. I forced myself forward and yelled, “What!?”

3 “You want to get something to eat?” Bowden hollered. Bowden had a first name but we never used it. Before I even answered Bob had pulled the car onto the shoulder and was ripping the beast around. In a shower of gravel we were off back towards town, the car screeching like a banshee in the hot darkness.

4 I sipped a beer that I had been holding between my legs. Bob didn’t drink—that’s why he always ended up driving. My mind wandered as it always did when I found myself on one of these late night rides across the Ohio countryside. You couldn’t very well talk with all the wind, so the three of us would just sit back and take in the night, content with our own thoughts. I always thought of the same thing.

5 I knew this stage of my life would be coming to an end soon. I’d be

back at college. All this pointless roaming through the boonies would be replaced by a sense of direction. These late night toasts to freedom would disappear in a sobering sense of responsibility. The commitment to nothing and no one I felt roaring through the open farm country would become a victim to the constricted, limited charm of settling down. I could feel it all stirring within me already: That desire to make good for my parents, that sense of starting to lay roots, thinking about a career, a purpose—not so much a purpose, I reminded myself, as a function—for my life.

6 I thought about my girlfriend. I knew she had already been thinking about marriage. It scared me because I could picture it. For the first time I felt the middle class world that I had grown up in, and which had been so good to me, start to drag me in. Maybe it scared me because part of me knew that I would end up there—there on Main Street U.S.A. with a wife, two kids, and a dog. I would be sucked into that existence, forgetting the dreams that I had once entertained on summer nights just like this one, blasting through the night like werewolves on acid.

7 I think that’s why my girlfriend hated it so much when I went out with these guys. She wasn’t worried about me seeing other girls—she could’ve competed with that if she had wanted to. But she knew she couldn’t compete with the exhilaration, the freedom I felt hurtling through the dark with no destination, no purpose other than the experience itself. She knew that was when I got closest to discovering myself, closest to saying, “Screw the real world, the world of rules, expectations, and commitments.” Closest to forgetting that world I realized was really the adult world.

8 I just didn’t want to grow up. Really, I thought, none of us did. It was the Peter Pan syndrome; we’d rather be out howling at the moon and occasionally running down stray cats or a sluggish ground hog in the GTO than worrying about supporting a family and getting a job. There was something about the hours we’d spend in that car driving recklessly around that somehow seemed to put things in a perspective that we could all deal with. Maybe it was the recklessness, the wildness of youth, knowing that we could all buy it on a tricky curve and that the instrument of our epiphany could just as easily be our coffin. A fuel-injected thanatopsis that somehow affirmed living was enough; that the trappings of growing up we had been enticed with for so long in our journey to adulthood and “our place in society” really didn’t count for much after the dust had cleared and all we’d have left would be a tombstone.

9 Maybe in rocketing out into the countryside we were trying to get away from what everybody was telling us: what we should do, who we should be, and how we would be happy if we played by the rules. In a sense, it was the dying gasp of final rebellion before we closed the chapter on our youth and moved into a new stage, a stage that would not be so free and blissfully ignorant of the views of others. When we were young (and especially when we were out driving) we could, in a sense, create our own reality, ignoring what “everybody else,” what society, had to say; but in this new stage we would

have to begin listening more to what those other people were saying just to survive. Of course we would have to, we couldn't help but grow up. Time was a trap that Bob's gas guzzling dinosaur of a car could never outrun.

We pulled into the Big Boy parking lot; the breakfast bar was waiting for us, open all night. "Hey Mil, what you thinking?"

"Nothing," I said, but went on anyway. "Do you think if we started robbing 7-11's and gas stations we could make it to Mexico before the cops'd catch up to us?"

We all laughed. After eating, we headed back towards the outskirts of town, chasing the night and hoping to stay oblivious to the fact that our young dreams of freedom were on a collision course with reality. Sooner or later it would happen, we'd crash and burn in that American dream and find ourselves thrown clear of the wreckage into homes with white-picket fences and jobs that would get us up at six. But for now we'd just hear that engine rev and try to achieve escape velocity from what was pulling us all in.

Discussion Questions

1. How accurately do you think Miller portrays young men; that is, are his reactions representative or atypical of the thinking of people his own age? Explain your response.
2. To what extent does Miller's essay apply only to young men, or do you think the same can be said of young women's thoughts and feelings as well?
3. In paragraph 7, Miller muses on his girlfriend's reactions to his behavior. Do you agree with his thinking? Why or why not?
4. Explain your understanding of the following lines that appear in paragraph 8: "A fuel-injected thanatopsis that somehow affirmed living was enough; that the trappings of growing up we had been enticed with for so long in our journey to adulthood and 'our place in society' really didn't count for much after the dust had cleared and all we'd have left would be a tombstone."
5. Given what you know of Miller in his essay, what do you suppose will happen to him in say, one year, five years, twenty years? Explain your reasons for thinking the way you do.

Under the Lights

Andre Dubus

Andre Dubus was born in 1936; he earned his B.A. degree from McNeese State University and his M.F.A. degree from the University of Iowa. His short stories have appeared in such publications as

story collections include *Separate Flight* (1975), *Adultery and Other Choices* (1977), *Finding a Girl in America* (1980), *The Times Are Never So Bad* (1983), *We Don't Live Here Anymore* (1984), *Land Where My Fathers Died* (1984), and *The Last Worthless Evening* (1986). *Appearing in his collection of essays, Broken Vessels* (1991), "Under the Lights" recalls Dubus's boyhood love of baseball.

The first professional baseball players I watched and loved were in the Class C Evangeline League, which came to our town in the form of the Lafayette Brahman Bulls. The club's owner raised these hump-backed animals. The league comprised teams from other small towns in Louisiana, and Baton Rouge, the capital. The Baton Rouge team was called the Red Sticks. This was in 1948, and I was eleven years old. At the Lafayette municipal golf course, my father sometimes played golf with Harry Strohm, the player-manager of the Bulls. Strohm was a shortstop. He seemed very old to me and, for a ballplayer, he was: a wiry deeply tanned greying man with lovely blue eyes that were gentle and merry, as his lined face was.

Mrs. Strohm worked in the team's business office; she was a golfer too, and her face was tan and lined and she had warm grey-blue eyes with crinkles at their corners. In the Bulls' second season, she hired me and my cousin Jimmy Burke and our friend Carroll Ritchie as ball boys. The club could not afford to lose baseballs, and the business manager took them from fans who caught fouls in the seats. No one on the club could afford much; the players got around six hundred dollars for a season, and when one of them hit a home run the fans passed a hat for him. During batting practice we boys stood on the outside of the fence and returned balls hit over it, or fouled behind the stands. At game time a black boy we never met appeared and worked on the right field fence; one of us perched on the left, another of us stood in the parking lot behind the grandstands, and the third had the night off and a free seat in the park. Our pay was a dollar a night. It remains the best job I ever had, but I would have to be twelve and thirteen and fourteen to continue loving it.

One late afternoon I sat in the stands with the players who were relaxing in their street clothes before pre-game practice. A young outfielder was joking with his teammates, showing them a condom from his wallet. The condom in his hand chilled me with disgust at the filth of screwing, or doing it, which was a shameful act performed by dogs, bad girls, and thrice by my parents to make my sisters and me; and chilled me too with the awful solemnity of mortal sin: that season, the outfielder was dating a young Catholic woman, who later would go to Lourdes for an incurable illness; she lived in my neighborhood. Now, recalling what a foolish boy the outfielder was, I do not believe the woman graced him with her loins any more than baseball did, but that afternoon I was only a scared and frightened, a boy who had opened the wrong door, the wrong sewer.

Then I looked at Harry Strohm. He was watching the outfielder, and