

He Lay by the River

a childhood
in flash cards

by Nick Hauser

It was the year of the oil crisis
and the winter of the ice - the
electricity lines swayed low in
anomalous splendour and families
huddled around their fireplaces
like cavemen when his birth cry
echoed through the lightless
sterility of a rural clinic.

His first memories - the blissful
sensation of his right thumb
between his wet gums and his left
hand smoothing the worn linen, the
spring sun filtering through the
bars of the crib, brightening the
waving yellow carpet, the strange,
ever varied landscapes of that
yellow carpet.

He was almost old enough to know better when his brother introduced him to sin. They could lie on top of each other and rub their penises together until they got hard - his brother showed him how it worked. After four or five times he didn't want to do it anymore. He didn't like how his brother's eczema-crusted member felt on his own soft skin and it made him feel stupid and guilty.



Early on he made his first attempt at escape, slipping out the sliding glass door, racing through the neighbour's yard to Surrey Lane. His plan was to cut through the park and climb the fence to the supermarket parking lot. After that he had no idea - that parking lot was for him where the world ended. For a whole half hour he stared up at the wooden planks, before turning back in rage and terror. He hated himself for being so faint of heart, trembled at the thought that he had just about gone too far.

Then came school, about which there was almost nothing to say (ask as his parents might) and nothing to remember. And then came always (scornfully slowly) summer, itself ever repeating: an endless series of driveway basketball games broken by a week-long fishing excursion to the nearest artificial lake.



He might be said to have spent many of those years failing god and religion. All he really liked about the masses he and siblings were forced to attend at the red-brick cathedral across from the city detention centre was the honkytonk band complete with banjo and fiddle that wailed out the hymns. That and the wicked joy with which the worshipers around him would laugh when he answered the individual clauses of the Affirmation of Faith with a loud, derisive I don't.

The annual fishing trip with his
dad and brother: drifting for hours
from one shore to the next in a kind
of upside-down tomb with limp rods,
thermos bottles and polish sausage; a
crescent sandy beach (he hated sand)
full of bodies; nights spent lying
sleepless next to his brother (who
would punch him every time he snored
or coughed) or dreaming of ice forts,
stockinged princesses, a talking dog.

