

JEFFREY HILLARD

River Road

Most nights this road's frontyard is a shifty, brooding face.
Gaunt, not likely to give in, this river charms the usual outgoing stars
to stare down at it; and the reflection of that starlight —
in its persistence — is what we see the river break
into pieces. Soon, it seems another land in itself:
successive dark knolls, parted by puddles of light, that arc out of view.

On the river's one side, light is feasting
in houses that must regard it as some poor, useless land:
they lean, as if concerned. Until morning,
crossing over on the ferry, fog could well be first light
gauze-like above the road whose ending eludes even the city.
Alongside, houses are strung with laundry flapping like stadium pennants.

Little distance between, most families know one another,
or why the cause to live here is as unanswerable as death.
Like coats of paint over years, tradition wears through the thinnest
dreams here: fathers, their sons always respond to the cool draft
in the evening, shirtless. This afternoon, though, several women
gather on a porch to hear of a daughter's rape. The girl,

flimsy skirt and high heels, was mistaken for a prostitute;
after the suspected act, attempted to run home through heavy traffic
and was struck down. In minutes the neighbor's porch swells,
the side gate opens and slams from gusts of passing trucks.
And for another quarter, the ferry takes you back, away — supposedly.
Where midway a coal barge flails the sky with gray exhaust,

the shadows of houses and the road wilt against the river's edge.
Off to a side you manage to see a fat man walk
into his backyard holding a mug. He flings his last warm beer
toward an embankment already sucked into the river.
Behind him stands his wife, hand to forehead.
She is not waving goodbye.