



5-1-2019

Skippings Rocks

Chad W. Lutz
Mills College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), [Photography Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lutz, Chad W. (2019) "Skippings Rocks," *Westview*: Vol. 35 : Iss. 1 , Article 36.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol35/iss1/36>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access
by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been
accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized
administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more
information, please contact
phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

Skipping Rocks*

—Originally published in Havik, *The Las Positas Anthology 2019: Magic Tricks*, May 2019, pp. 223-226.

By Chad W. Lutz

There's a place in town where the only two roads meet, marked by an old sycamore. Its bark is blotchy, and the few limbs it has left reach for the sky like the pleading arms of a dying man. I guess I should back up a moment and clarify that, by "town," I mean four ramshackle houses spaced a mile apart along a cracked and aging Midwest county road. Be it ever so dreary, it's where I grew up, and the tree was where the kids from the next town over wanted me to meet that day.

I'd met these people in passing, a chance encounter at the fair a few weeks earlier after the rides had shut down, and the vendors had packed their stands for the evening. They were standing outside the gates. One of the kids, a gangly, pasty-faced redhead named Robbie, said he recognized me from somewhere and suggested we all go down to the sycamore and "hang out." The two girls clinging to his hip, Stacy and Rhonda, thought it was a righteous enough idea and readily agreed.

"Come on, Chad. It'll be fuuuuun," the girls pleaded when I showed signs of hesitation. It's not that I was scared or anything. I just didn't know why they were all so hot to hang out with some dumb kid like me, especially when they lived not one but two "towns" over. The area around the sycamore was nothing but an glorified ditch anyway.

They pressed and pressed and blew long, frustrated sighs out of their noses with every concern I raised. Stacy, who was chewing on something like three packs' worth of bubblegum,

* The character of the father do not reflect the views of Westview or Southwestern Oklahoma State University

assured me, with Red 40 stained to her long teeth, she wouldn't bite. Rhonda flung her hair from side to side and played prosecutor with her eyelashes. Robbie, who had been silently flipping his cellphone open and shut, stood like a statue made of slow-melting ice and waited for my answer.

"I seen you before," he said in a slow, Johnny Charisma drawl. "You're the kid who buys his pops smokes, right?"

I nodded.

"Any chance you could score a couple packs for me?"

I actually passed on the action that night, lying that I had to get up early to help my father remove a stump in the Johnsons' yard the next morning.

"Damn the Man," Robbie said in his all-too-cool masculine bravado, shaking his head as if this were the shame of the century. The girls made like they were going to protest, but Robbie raised a hand in the air, and they instantly drew silent. He looked to them and then back at me. Then, he shrugged and began to draw away.

"Those things'll kill you, you know," I said before they'd got more than a couple yards.

"Yeah?" Robbie said, turning about face as the girls snickered beside him, one on either side.

"Carcinogens. They put rat poison in them. That's what I read in the Time Magazine, anyway." I kicked at a rock on the ground in front of me. It didn't move.

Robbie smiled.

"We'll see you roun'," he said and wandered off into the darkness with a wink.

The Johnsons, as everybody in town knew, were a hard, old couple who raised chickens and grew soy when the ground permitted. They ran a tight schedule, and if you told them you were going to do something, you'd better do it. Stagnation stunts perspective, I've found, and those people, even Mrs.

Johnson (especially Mrs. Johnson), were no exception. They'd never left town, not even on their wedding day.

Both of them were at the end of their drive as my father's black Dodge Ram pulled onto their property at six that following morning. Mrs. Johnson was wearing a nightgown and a light shawl, despite it being maybe a hair over forty degrees, and an expression as grave and grey as the cloudy sky brooding overhead. Mr. Johnson, meanwhile, sat in his old Ford pickup with the motor idling, the heater on, one of the windows cracked, and a steady stream of Marlboro smoke rolling out the slit. My father gave an unreciprocated wave as we pulled in and parked the car. Mrs. Johnson insisted on walking back the quarter-mile, simply pointing in the direction of the stump out behind the house. Mr. Johnson broke the silence of the morning as he put the old Ford in gear and backed the vehicle under the makeshift carport made from a weather-worn, canvas tarp and the shell of an old wagon. There, the Ford's engine died, and the sound of a rusty car door opening and slamming shut further demented the grey uncalm of the day.

"Your boy gon' help block the win' today, Griz?" Mr. Johnson said wheezing through a fit of laughter, addressing my father by his old war nickname.

"Gotta get 'im out the house one way or another," he said, extending one giant paw of a hand to Mr. Johnson. And then, turning to me, with a wad of singles and fives extended in one hand, "Reds. The carton. And hard packs. None of that soft shit."

He smashed the bills down in my open hand, and before I could even nod in acknowledgement, he was off clapping Mr. Johnson on the back with a hearty cackle at the joke he'd apparently just made and asking if the man had any beers he'd be willing to part with.

About a quarter-mile up the road from the Johnsons' place, there's a gas station called Ed's General, where a man named Habib has pumped nothing but 87-grade and fixed flats for the last decade or so with his wife, Pari. The original proprietor, a man named Jacob Dower, found a lump in his left breast some years back and sold the place to Habib. It was rumored Dower split for some place warm: Florida or one of the Carolinas. If that's true, he was one of the lucky ones. Like me.



My father has been a proud patron and life-long Philip Morris customer ever since he was twelve. Despite smoking a pack and a half a day, he was still somehow able to spend most of every morning doing manual labor, either on our farm or one of the other three in "town." Sometimes, he does odd projects around the house, from what little my mother tells me, but mostly he's out in the fields digging up rocks so the tiller blades don't end up looking like dull shears. What my father has never done, as long as I've been able to walk, that

is, is buy his smokes himself.

I always wondered why Habib never thought I was smoking them myself, or why he sold them to me at all, for that matter. "You a nice boy," he'd say to me with a smile. "Good to you father. Good boy. I hope I have good boy like you some day." I hated that. Made me feel about an inch tall. One time when I was ten, I opened one of the packs to see what the fuss was all about, but I instantly gagged on the tarry smoke and threw up. The only thing I got out of it was bed without supper.

"It's good exercise," my dad would insist whenever I'd protest making the weekly trek down County Road 45 to Ed's for a re-up carton of Marlboro Reds. I always wanted to point out that if it was such good exercise, he shoulda just made the trip himself. But in the twenty-five grueling years I lived with him, there was only one time I can remember anyone talking back to my father. That person's jaw has sat a little crooked ever since.

Like clockwork, I returned to find Mr. Johnson and my father drunk and no closer to pulling up that stump than mankind was to landing on Pluto.

"You get them damn smokes like I asked?" His voice pounded out like thunder the moment he caught sight of my outline drumming up the drive. I raised the plastic grocery bag in the air to a smattering of half-applause, knee-slapping, and slurry laughter.

"Atta boy," he said, clapping Mr. Johnson on the back. "I tole you that boy good fer something'."

It was three weeks after the chance meeting at the fair that I strode onto Ed's General dusty parking lot for yet another carton of my old man's smokes to find none other than Robbie and his merry band of misfits, Rhonda and Stacy, leaning

against the Coke machine out front under a sweltering mid-July sky.

"Well, if it isn't the Man of the Hour," he'd proclaimed, raising a sweaty Coke bottle in my direction. "Got a second to spare, Champ?"

I looked left and noticed a fire-engine red Nash Suburban with white-wall tires and its signature wood paneling, a 1942, the kind you see hard bodies loading surfboards into on postcards from California. One of its wood panels was missing, but outside of that, the thing looked immaculate.

The Nash was parked cattywampus just inside the grass, making it impossible for anyone else to park on that side of the lot. I envisioned Robbie flying into the parking lot, kicking up a storm cloud of dust, throwing the car into park, and saying smoothly to the girls, "We're here."

I looked back at the trio, wondering how anyone so cool could live in a place so lukewarm. Stacy and Rhonda looked more eager than ever. In that July heat, they glistened with what I could've been convinced was pure sex. Rhonda, I remember, had on these jean shorts that started at her hips and barely made it past her tight, youthful thighs.

"I gotta buy smokes for my dad," I said, not knowing what else to say.

"What was that?" Robbie said, untwisting himself from the sly pretzel he'd been leaning in and inserting another dollar into the vending machine. An ice-cold bottle of Coke tumbled out of its insides. He picked it up and walked it over to me, as if I knew what to do with it.

"Take it," he said, and placed the bottle in my hand. I wasn't thirsty, but what was I going to do? Deny the king of cool?

There was something instantly odd about the way the label felt. It was a five-dollar bill wrapped around its iconic red

packaging.

When I looked back up at Robbie, he was grinning from ear to ear.

"Once you're done buying smokes for your old man, whadya say we go down to the old sycamore?"

I was just about to hand the five back to Robbie and make up some lie about having to set the dinner table or do a month's worth of laundry when Habib's voice came bouncing through one of the station windows.

"Good boy! You here for father's cigarettes, yes?"

I dropped my hand back into my pocket along with the five, and lowered my head.

Without saying anything, I started for the door.

Before I could, Robbie jumped in my way with the kind of agility only a cat, a big cat, like a tiger, possesses.

"Tonight, at sundown," he said, pushing a meaty finger into my chest. "Don't be square. Be there."

I dug my feet into the ground and headed for the door. I couldn't look at him, so I looked at the bottle instead and so meekly my head could've fit right inside.

"Good boy!" Habib shouted. "Come, come. I have special price!"

Shortly after dinner that night, with the sickening musk of Marlboros mingling with the smell of my mother's meatloaf, I told my father I was going for a walk.

"Where?" he grunted from his seat in front of the television, his gaze never wavering. We only got four channels, but just like his cigarettes, my father maintained a religious kind of devotion to each one. He called them "The Four Winds" and laughed every time he used the pet name.

"Just down to the old tree."

"To do what?" his tone changing from a grunt to a growl.

"To watch the sunset," I lied.

"What kind of queer shit is that?" he replied. But my mother, ever-sympathetic, even to the fly caught in the spider's web, ignored him and said with a polite but tired smile, "Be back before dark, Chad."

My dad wouldn't.

Heading north on County Road 45 takes you to a Walmart-anchored blip on the map known as Buxton, where the greatest thing to happen to its citizenry, outside of rolling back prices, was a 1987 playoff berth into the high school football semifinals. But, unlike my "town," the kids in Buxton were cool.

The kids there talked about movies and music, what was happening at the university in Columbus, and ten-dollar notions like presidential executive orders and why marijuana should be legalized. The kids in Buxton also had cell phones, not like the kind you can use to get on the internet today, but cell phones nonetheless. Hardly anyone talked about tillers, soy, or the price of manure. And when kids bought Marlboro Reds, they bought them for themselves.

I remember how much I'd wanted a cell phone back then and how I'd sometimes stay up late writing down numbers I'd like to call if I ever had the chance. My favorites were 686-0574 and 688-8073. Who knew what cool people were waiting on the other ends of those lines?

About a quarter-mile past Ed's General, I saw the fire-engine-red outline of Robbie's woody wagon, the thought of which made me laugh out loud. I was a teenager, not a priest. I remember how bright and vibrant the red stood out against the sickly, stagnant green of the knee-high corn fields and the marshy, tall grasses that bordered the roads on forever. Just to the left of the Nash Suburban was the old sycamore and its dying arms reaching high into an otherwise treeless sky,



pleading to be put out of its misery.

Stacy and Rhonda climbed on the roof of the car and started whooping and hollering and shaking parts of their bodies that made the air seem electric, while Robbie hung back in that same pretzel stance he'd had at Ed's General against the sycamore tree as he flipped his cell phone open and closed. It made me blush, but it also filled me with excitement.

I wondered who someone like Robbie would call. But no sooner had the thought entered my mind did it make way for what I knew was the truth: Robbie never called anyone. No way. Not someone like him.

Anyone called Robbie.

We spent that evening skipping rocks under passing cars. The object was to time our throws and get them between the tires without hitting anything. None of us came even remotely close, and we laughed as the drivers twisted into a frenzy,

hearing the rocks pound around beneath their feet. The sound was like dropping marbles down a drain.

"Does anyone have a joint?" Stacy had asked after an hour or so, a large blob of gum passing from molar to molar. Rhonda agreed and said that'd be sick, but Robbie disagreed.

"Let's let Ace weigh in on the festivities," he said, flicking open his phone and closing it again. A fresh Marlboro cherried between his lips as he spoke. "After all, Champ here is the Man of the Hour."

I still remember being caught with my tongue in my throat. They wanted to know what I wanted to do. I could hardly contain myself. Was this even possible?

At this point, it was around nine o'clock, and all that remained of daylight was a whitish-salmon lip in the westerly sky.

"Can I see your cell phone?"

It was the only time I ever heard Robbie laugh.

"Sure thing, King," and he tossed me the device just as sure as he would a pencil or some other seemingly indestructible item. I was so nervous I almost dropped it. "Who you gonna call?"

"Ghostbusters!" Rhonda giggled.

I was beet red.

"What do you guys think about the legalization of marijuana?" I said stalling, turning the cell phone over in my hand. "Do you think President Clinton will sign an executive order to legalize the pot?"

Robbie walked over and took his cellphone back.

"Nobody calls it 'the pot', Mayne. And let's not spoil the evening."

Just then, a black pickup truck, emerging out of the darkening night thundered down the road headed right for us. Before it even came into full view, I knew exactly whose truck that was. I'd recognize it anywhere. There wasn't a single

doubt in my mind as to the person behind the wheel or their intentions.

Taking aim, I launched a medium-sized rock at the oncoming vehicle, which struck the windshield head on, shattering the glass and bringing the pickup to a demonic, screeching halt.

"I got an idea," said Rhonda, beginning to move toward the red station wagon. "Let's get the hell out of here."

"Why you little fuck!" my father boomed as his truck door slammed so hard it swung back open. He was breathing like a locomotive. His feet whispered scratchy threats as they scraped against the pavement. "This yer idea of a fuckin' 'walk'?" And then to the others, "And who're these fuckin' punks?"

I walked out into the road with my hands up to try and cool my dad, as Robbie and the girls stood their ground.

"Hey, let's just get out of here," I heard Robbie say and turned to watch him stamp out a cigarette that was only a quarter smoked. It was the first time there had ever been a waver to his voice.

But my father's presence and the low rumble of his idling truck were like an ominous magnet whose pull couldn't be ignored.

"Which one of you threw it?" he bellowed, grabbing me by the collar and dropping me to the ground with his free hand before I could get a word in edgewise. Two seconds later, I felt the hard edge of a steel-toed boot digging into my ribs.

Robbie took a step forward but retraced his steps when my old man whipped out a hunting knife, six-inches long, from his belt loop with a single flick of the wrist.

My father grunted in approval, satisfied nobody was going to move, and set his sights back on me, as I rolled around in the street holding my right eye.

"Think you're hot shit, crashing my windshield. Now, which one uh y'all threw it?" He looked from Rhonda to Robbie to Stacy and then to me again.

"WHO?" he roared, his voice so shrill and sharp it seemed to split the night.

When no one said anything, he bent down, and with the skill of a butcher, began carving into the cartilage of my left ear. The sounds of my screams echoed into the night.

"I threw it, you big dick," Rhonda said, throwing up a rock she picked up and hitting the old man in the head. He grabbed his skull, groaning, and then gnashed his teeth.

"I threw it, too," said Stacy, spitting out her wad of gum and kicking it off to the side in one fluid motion. She picked up a rock off the road and socked my father right in the forehead with it.

My father tumbled backward onto the road, right in a pool of my blood.

"Looks like we all threw it," Robbie said bouncing a rock in his hand.

I almost couldn't believe what was happening. Who were these kids: three strangers I'd only just met, advancing on my father like big cats backing down a poacher on some African plain.

I watched my father's lips peel back through a red blur of pain. Slowly, and grunting, he stood up, knife still in hand, eyes sizing up Robbie, Stacy, and Rhonda.

"Fuckin' niggers," he said steeling his eyes and sneering. Time stopped. All that could be heard was the truck idling. My father stared at them. And they stared back at my father.

They. Them. They. Them.

"I think you better scat," Robbie said, as Stacy and Rhonda stepped forward in the faint glow of the trucks headlights, new rocks glistening in their hands.

The wind blew between them, stirring the old sycamore tree. Its dead limbs scratched and clawed against one another.

"Dad," I called out, slowly gaining my feet again. "Let's just go. Let's just go back, all right?"

He lowered his eyes to his knife. The tree limbs scratched at one another.

"Put the knife away, Dad."

Little by little, the knife fell to his side and then dropped to the street where it settled with a weak clink. As soon as it hit the ground, I kicked the blade away and wrapped an arm around my old man.

With my voice wavering, I said, "Let's go home."

"My dad says he can get me a job at his law office in Columbus once I graduate. That's pretty cool, I guess. I don't know. He says I can work there while I go to school and then maybe go full-time or something when I get my degree. I think it'd be cool to work in a law office. Maybe I can meet some sexy bad guy." Rhonda's eyes were like flashbulbs as she talked.

She paused to take another draw from the bottle of Beam Robbie had taken from his dad's liquor cabinet and then tapped Robbie's shoulder with it. Robbie waved it on, and so the bottle came back around.

"What about you, Sly?" Robbie asked. "What's on the menu for you once you're done cooking in this small town?"

The bottle had been to my lips, but I brought it to a rest in my lap.

"I'm gonna be cool," I said, mind swimming from the four or five slugs of whiskey I'd already taken. "I'm gonna write articles for the Dispatch and travel the world." I raised the bottle again, only to find it was empty.

"A writer, huh? Sounds busy. You know what busy is?"

"I know what busy is," I said, smiling. But, I gotta get out of this place. My father..."

We rolled on in silence for a while, and then Robbie said something I'll never forget. He said, "Eh, this place ain't so bad. People can get turned on anywhere. Dig? That's life."

"Not this place," I said, taking a drink from the empty bottle and letting my head loll around on my neck some.

Outside, the world was nothing but darkness: cat's eyes on the concrete and a green mile sign every minute or so the only proof we were still on planet Earth. I felt like we were tumbling somewhere dark and beautiful, somewhere corn never grew, where things like walks to buy my dad smokes couldn't happen, not even if they wanted to.

"Nothing cool ever happens here. There's just corn and the Johnsons and that stupid sycamore and that's it. Nobody cool ever came out of this dump."

Stacy and Rhonda laughed.

Robbie didn't. He said, "What about you, Ace? Ain't you cool?"

"Let's just be cool, Dad. Let's just be cool, huh? Drive me home?"

I pointed toward the open driver-side door fighting the wind.

"Let's just get in and go."

"Chief," Robbie protested, but I waved him off.

My ear was bleeding all over me. My shirt, soppy and red. Against its white, the blood made me look like a human candy cane.

"Home?"

He squinted his eyes.

"Yeah, home."

"And what about my fuckin' windshield? Huh? Who pays for that?"

"I'll take care of it when we get back," I said, insisting with

an outstretched arm for him to trust me. "It's time to go."

He grunted and growled like a large mammal, a bear.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't stick you and your friends right here, right now."

Dropping my arm, I stepped right up to his face. "Because there's more of us. And the sooner you accept that, the easier this can be."

Another growl rumbled from somewhere deep inside his throat. We stood face-to-face, neither of us breathing.

"Just get in, Dad," I said.

"Chad," Robbie stammered as I rounded the car. His eyes were as big as the moon.

"It'll be cool," I said. I got in the passenger side and buckled myself in. My dad followed.

He regarded the kids from Buxton one last time but couldn't find anything to say. He stepped into the vehicle, shut the door, and we began to drive.

My dad was a man of routine: drink, smoke, TV, work, sleep, eat. There were certain things you knew about him. He watched one of the Four Winds after dinner and then went directly to bed. He worked, if he did, between daybreak and noon every single day. My dad never, ever drove without smoking a cigarette. Sometimes, he'd shake things up and he'd slap my mom and I around, but this was a constant that always held true.

We were veering right to make a full U-turn when he started rummaging through his pockets for a smoke and his lighter. He steadied the wheel with his right knee while his hands moved from his shirt pocket to his pants pockets, left one first and then the right. We'd made the turn when he dropped his lighter, and I remember thinking about my mom and what was going to happen when we finally did get home. It made me want to throw up.

Right knee still holding the wheel, he accelerated out of the U-turn with his left foot, and headed straight for Rhonda, Stacy, and Robbie.

“Teach those fucking niggers to throw rocks at my car.”

He was still fumbling with the lighter and now had one hand on the wheel.

The truck gained speed. Faster. Faster.

Through the spidered windshield, I could see the Buxton kids scatter. My dad honed in on Stacy and followed her down the County Road.

“Dad, no!” My ear was pounding. My heart enormous in my chest. But he ignored me. The speedometer climbed. 25. 30. 35. 40. Stacy’s figure grew and grew in the cracked glass.

“Dad!”

He ignored me.

“Dad!”



He ignored me.

“DAD!” I yelled and grabbed hold of the wheel.

The truck veered hard left.

“What are you doing?” he cried, trying to pry my hands away.

The spindly face of the old sycamore towered over us, the light from our headlights reflecting off its old, white flesh and turning into a violent, brilliant flash. I closed my eyes and waited for the impact. 40 ft. 35 ft. 30 ft. 25 ft.

The truck folded into its trunk like aluminum foil. Its metal frame whined and moaned. Everything went light and dark again and again. Things became blurry. Sounds became distant. I felt the tug of the seatbelt and the pop of the airbags. My face felt like it was being punched by a very large glove. It jostled my head sideways, and I had just enough time to watch my father’s mouth become a giant “O” as he flew from his seat through what was left of the front windshield and hit the tree’s trunk in front of us head on with a loud snap, dying instantly. He lay there like a ragdoll on the hood of the truck, with its guts sizzling and gurgling and hissing beneath him.

Things were still blurry. Everything inside the cabin was dusted with glass. The world kept strobing light then dark then dark then light. Sounds mixed and garbled. But a number, a number I knew one day I’d use, one of my favorite numbers popped into my head, and I knew what I had to do.

686-0574

686-0574

686-0574

686-0574

686-0574

686-0574

686-0574

I muttered the word “cell phone.” The faces hovering over me seemed confused, so I said it again.

"Cell phone."

All of a sudden, there was weight in my hand, and my fingers were searching the face of the object with a familiarity I always kinda knew I'd feel when the moment came.

686-0574

Its ring filled the entire universe. Again.

"Licking County Sheriff's Department," a voice on the other end came through.

I handed the phone out to one of the faces and carefully unbuckled my seatbelt. I tried to lean forward, but a pain in my side made me draw air.

The weight lifted from my hand and, with it, the rest of the world.

The next morning, I woke up to a heavy pounding on the door and an even heavier pounding in my head. Groggily, I crossed the room and opened the door. It was Mom with a plate of blueberry waffles and a glass of orange juice balanced on a serving tray.

"I thought you might like something different," she said, but paused before exiting the room. I remember her smile and how it had faded so violently then as she burst into tears.

"Your father's dead," she said, wiping her eyes and composing herself. "They found him crashed into the old sycamore this morning."

Try as she might, the composure unraveled, and she collapsed down on the bed next to me. I put an arm around her.

"What do you think about North Carolina?"

Overhead, the Milky Way sparkled.
