

# Philip Stephens

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## Stripper

Along the tourist strip up from the dam,  
We two boys wandered, ogling storefront windows  
Where leather goods and T-shirts hung like ducks,  
And busts of Christ were chainsawed out of oak.  
We passed the cage where freaks ate snakes, cages  
Where men struck fastballs while their women waited.  
We went to the arcade, played pinball, skeeball,  
And eyed, back in the corner, a machine  
The sign said we weren't old enough to touch.  
And so my brother shoved a quarter in.  
Above the rifle, this word—Stripper—pulsed.  
Inside, a scratched slide of a woman glared.  
One hand on her cocked hip, she smiled at us  
Like she knew us but was oblivious of  
The black dot on her arm at which my brother  
Fired. When he missed, he fired again and struck.  
A different woman, stripped of her blouse, gleamed.  
A raucous volley followed. Each slide revealed  
More and more women posed behind the glass,  
Their hands on knees or breasts or reaching out,

Their faces grim or grinning as my brother  
Took aim at every target, picking off  
Hair ribbons, bra, skirt, shoes and stockings, garters,  
Until one woman stood, stripped to her panties,  
The target steady, her breasts thrust toward us in  
A confrontation boys knew little of,  
Her lips forming an O I thought voiced pain.  
The last shot laid her down. The screen went black.  
We hurried out the backdoor toward the darkness.  
But then there were the cries of whippoorwills,  
The docklights trembling on the distant lake,

A concrete walkway leading to a maze  
Hacked out of hedges, a sprawling topiary  
Where playful screams and cloying laughter rose  
From couples who'd discovered they were lost.