

PRACTICE ACT READING TEST — 35 MINUTES

PROSE FICTION: *Three Laws*

It's easy to imagine Mercer, but trickier to remember it. In my mind I reassemble the city from a stock of memories that grow a little more ghostly each time I summon them. The morning always appears first—the liquid shine of fresh-washed sheet glass, two veterans in Roosevelt Park asleep beneath the shadow of a beezee anchor; stray dogs swallowing bits of soft pretzel scavenged from behind the fair grounds—these scenes I return to often, and they've become like old, handspun lace—intricate, diaphanous and fragile. I sometimes wonder, when at last that lone thread of true memory wears through, whether or not the whole reverie, like lace, will unravel.

Of course it's possible to approach Mercer from without; to finger it on the globe, or trace the serpentine belly of Highway 51 across the pages of a road atlas, right through the hills of Pennsylvania into town. But that's not the town that I remember. My memories begin in the center and radiate outward like a ripple, dying off as they collide with the hilltops that surround the valley.

The poet James Wright once wrote that no one would choose to die in Mercer. He might be right. But the people who inhabit Mercer when I remember it don't die. They don't have the energy to die. They say that, in the universe, energy can't be created or destroyed, but transferred, transformed—that's something I learned after I left for school. And all the energy must have left Mercer a long time before I did. I can imagine the last clay-red train sputtering out of Rodney Station—cargo load just half-full of ore—leaving Mercer and the ground beneath it hollow.

I suppose that's the trouble with a mining town. It thrives on the land like an unwary parasite, marveling at its own good fortune. But when the host gives out, it's hopeless. With every shard of anthracite picked clean from the river bed, I can see the kids who live outside of town, staggering home along the banks, galvanized buckets dangling empty from their hands. Maybe that's what bothered James Wright—not wanting to die on dead land. But when I remember Mercer, the people there live on arrested, unable to grow or die, and a few mad miners persist, still hollowing out the mountains from a mile underground.

Sometimes I try to imagine how the town has changed—which store windows on Market Street are empty, boarded up, or shattered, and whether the train yard is overgrown now in either rust or wildflowers. Left alone, the universe tends toward maximum chaos. That's another thing I learned at school. If that's true,

then I guess Mercer must have fallen apart entirely, and suddenly I see the valley sinking, as the mountains stretch out and fold in overtop, like kneaded dough, burying the town, breaking it, and redistributing the pieces throughout the soil. Other times it seems more likely it's just my memories of Mercer that are being swallowed up. I guess eventually there will be two Mercers—the one I left in Pennsylvania, and the one that I return to, built up and founded entirely in my mind.

But tonight, at least, I'm remembering the Ferris wheel on the fair grounds, its girders lit by ten dozen lemon-yellow incandescent bulbs, writing huge, desolate zeroes in the late August night. Light in motion I remember clearly. I can see the white-hot glow of furnaces through a glass factory window; the probing gleam of headlights sliding across the ceiling as a car turns down my old street. There's an old trick used to prove that light travels as a wave—close up, light shining through a keyhole will just take the shape of a keyhole, but if the beam travels a greater distance, it refracts, and reveals the gaps and fissures of darkness hidden within. The lights of Mercer reach me in the far-field; blurred and fractured by the long journey they've taken. Like starlight, I can't even be sure the source is still extant. But if light is a wave lapping against us; an ocean oscillating through illumination and shadow, then time is the tide, and it pulls a sea of light onto the shore, engulfing and flooding it. Then light recedes, taking with it what was left too near waves, and leaves the rest, at last, in darkness.

1. Which of the following can we infer describes the narrator?

- A. A traveler on a visit to the town of Mercer
- B. A former resident of Mercer recollecting the town
- C. A current towns person residing in Mercer
- D. A poet who says people won't choose to die in Mercer

2. What attribute of the lace does NOT make it a fitting metaphor for the ideas being expressed in paragraph 1 (lines 1-13)?

- F. its frailty
- G. its complexity
- H. its color
- J. its thickness

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Michael Brown



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