

Woolworth's, 1954

Where this floated up from, or why,
I don't know. But thinking about this
since just after Robert called
telling me he'd be here in a few
minutes to go clamming.

How on my first job I worked
under a man named Sol.
Fifty-some years old, but
a stockboy like I was.
Had worked his way
up to nothing. But grateful
for his job, same as me.
He knew everything there was
to know about that dime-store
merchandise and was willing
to show me. I was sixteen, working
for six bits an hour. Loving it
that I was. Sol taught me
what he knew. He was patient,
though it helped I learned fast.

Most important memory
of that whole time: opening
the cartons of women's lingerie.
Underpants, and soft, clingy things
like that. Taking it out
of cartons by the handful. Something
sweet and mysterious about those
things even then. Sol called it
"linger-ey." "Linger-ey?"
What did I know? I called it
that for a while, too. "Linger-ey."

Then I got older. Quit being
a stockboy. Started pronouncing
that frog word right.
I knew what I was talking about!
Went to taking girls out
in hopes of touching that softness,
slipping down those underpants.

And sometimes it happened. God,
they let me. And they *were*
linger-ey, those underpants.
They tended to linger a little
sometimes, as they slipped down
off the belly, clinging lightly
to the hot white skin.

Passing over the hips and buttocks
and beautiful thighs, traveling
faster now as they crossed the knees,
the calves! Reaching the ankles,
brought together for this
occasion. And kicked free
onto the floor of the car and
forgotten about. Until you had
to look for them.

"Linger-ey."

Those sweet girls!
"Linger a little, for thou art fair."
I know who said that. It fits,
and I'll use it. Robert and his
kids and I out there on the flats
with our buckets and shovels.
His kids, who won't eat clams, cutting
up the whole time, saying "Yuck"
or "Ugh" as clams turned
up in the shovels full of sand
and were tossed into the bucket.
Me thinking all the while
of those early days in Yakima.
And smooth-as-silk underpants.
The lingering kind that Jeanne wore,
and Rita, Muriel, Sue, and her sister,
Cora Mae. All those girls.
Grownup now. Or worse.
I'll say it: dead.