

# Zombieland

Rochelle Hurt

What are the bounds of geography? Consider how railroad tracks, if you crouch down low and look ahead, seem almost like a ladder you could climb right out of your life. Then consider that where you live, the tracks are no longer used for anything but taking long walks, getting high, or laying your head down on the cold metal. Consider that kids believe some things they hear their whole lives, like how all rivers supposedly flow into the sea—a biblical adage that seems cruel once you learn that, like most of your friends and family, the river in your landlocked town won't get beyond the next state before it dries up and disappears. Consider state lines, good for cheap thrills to feed your much-needed teenage sense that you can travel far from home. Things must be different over there, you think. It's only a twenty-minute drive, but you can cross that line, at least. As a girl, you might think a lot about the lines you're not supposed to cross. There are so many, it seems.



In Youngstown, Ohio, the Mahoning River—notorious among locals for pollution and dead body jokes—meets up with the CSX tracks, and together they run out of town, but not before passing behind a house where a girl named Shannon Leigh Kos used to live. She lived there until October 8, 2000, when, having just started seventh grade, she was killed by three men she knew: William Monday, David Garvey, and Perry Ricciardi III. She stepped willingly into a car with them that day, and together they all drove out to the country. Three days later, Shannon's body was found in the Pennsylvania stream where they'd left it. To get to that stream, you need only follow the Mahoning River and the CSX tracks east from Shannon's house in Ohio.

Soon you'll cross the state line, as Shannon did with these three men, and find a place called Zombieland.

Officially named Hillsville, Zombieland is a tiny town freighted with ghost stories. City kids drive out there to smoke some pot and get freaked out visiting all the stops: the stone statue of the Virgin, whose arms change position from open to closed as a sign of welcome or warning; the St. Lawrence Cemetery's secret section of witches' graves laid out in the shape of a pentagram; the killing fields, where those brave enough can run through waist-high corn and listen for gunshots and phantom train whistles; the mangled green man with a hook hand, who comes out when the old gas pipe in the ground is lit; the blood house, where a child-eating witch used to live before it burned down. Then there's the favorite for its easy access: Frankenstein Bridge, haunted by the wailing ghost of woman who drove herself and her children off its edge. The bridge's low cement barriers are covered in poorly drawn graffiti, and the rumor says that when your name appears there, you're next.



What a familiar story: young girl meets older boy, older boy introduces her to more older boys, girl learns a lot about the world before she leaves it. For Shannon Leigh Kos, as for most girls, there are tragic particulars: she was sexually assaulted, stabbed, and burned at the age of twelve. More particulars: according to the statement that Perry Ricciardi gave to police, Billy Monday picked up his friend Shannon near her house in Youngstown that Sunday, got her some nacho chips from Taco Bell, then picked up David Garvey and Perry himself before driving them all out to Zombieland. There, they stopped the car somewhere off of East River Road to smoke a blunt. After a while, Shannon asked to be taken home, as it was getting late. Billy responded by pointing a hunting knife at her and saying he would “gut her like a fish,” a threat dressed up as a tease. Eventually, they all got out and went for a walk along the old railroad tracks, taking a path down to a culvert, where they stopped. A court record of what happened next reads, in part, as follows:

Monday grabbed her from behind. She fell back against Monday. He seized her and placed his left hand over her mouth and put

[Ricciardi's] knife to her throat. Monday then yelled, "Go, go!" Garvey then rushed to where Monday was and [Ricciardi] also moved forward and grabbed the waistband of [Shannon's] pants. Monday forced [Shannon] to the ground and [Ricciardi] pulled her pants down. Garvey pulled down [Shannon's] underpants. Garvey and Monday held [Shannon] down and Garvey pried her legs apart and held them open. Garvey told [Ricciardi], "Go ahead. Go Ahead." [Ricciardi] told Garvey, "I can't do this. I can't. You do it." Garvey then unsuccessfully attempted to have intercourse with [Shannon]. At this time, [Ricciardi] began to leave the culvert.... Monday began to rise, but [Shannon] started to speak. Monday told her to shut up and placed his hand over her mouth....[Shannon] began to plead with the men saying that she would willingly do what the men wanted, but Monday pressed the knife to her throat and told her that if she did not shut up, he would kill her. With this threat, [Shannon] fell silent....Monday then pulled the knife across [Shannon's] throat. [Ricciardi] started to leave the culvert, Monday began stabbing [Shannon]. [Ricciardi] heard [Shannon] say, "Oh, God." [Ricciardi] then heard a thump and [Shannon] whimper.

They left her body there, but, growing nervous, returned the next day to burn it. The partially burned body was discovered by a hiker on October 11.

Over a thousand dead girls surface somewhere in the U.S. every year. It was merely location that made Shannon's story special. While the news wasn't national—nobody cares about a dead girl in Pennsylvania—there was a lot of regional coverage. Moreover, Shannon is now included in every online guide to Zombieland as tangible proof of the town's inherent evil. Three weeks after her death, on Halloween, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* ran a story with the headline: "This time, Zombie Land tale is true." A *Youngstown Vindicator* article published right before Halloween in 2013 mentions Shannon's murder at the bottom of a list of urban legends about Zombieland. A *Week in Weird* blog post devoted to Zombieland includes the murder in a list of typical Zombieland ghost stories. Sometimes a tiny school photo appears in these articles, showing Shannon smiling, her dark hair parted in the middle, her head slightly cocked, a thin black choker on her throat. Yet the stories mention nothing specific about her life. She was a girl made ghost instantly, and a ghost will always get more press than a victim. How tidy this ghost

version of Shannon must be—ethereal, cloudy, shimmering in and out of view. She is far from dried blood and char, far from a naked lower torso, far from a muddy culvert strewn with garbage. Isn't it comfortably chilling to think of her like this—as something other than human?



Shannon's been haunting me for a year now. Her image from that one tiny school photo appears in my mind at random times: when I step onto an elliptical machine at the gym, reach into the mailbox to pull out a stray postcard, or stand over a pot of water on the stove—and at times not so random: when I pass a cemetery in my car, look at old family photos, or tell a new acquaintance that I grew up in Youngstown, Ohio.

I went to Zombieland a handful of times between 1998 and 2000. Like most teenagers in Youngstown, I was drawn to crossing the state line, getting high, and hunting ghosts. Like Shannon, I usually went there with older men—a particular boyfriend and his buddies, all over eighteen. I liked the attention that came with being the only girl in the car. I don't remember hearing of Shannon's murder when it happened. She was three years younger than me, and went to a different school, so I never knew her. I made the popular Zombieland stops fearing nothing but the Virgin statue, the green man, the wailing woman under Frankenstein Bridge.

I remember clearly the first time we stopped on the bridge. The buddy who was driving parked the car right in the middle of it, turned off the lights, and honked the horn, once. We all rolled down the windows, but agreed that he should leave the engine running, just in case. We listened to the hushing sounds from the stream below for at least a minute. Someone said they thought they could hear the wailing woman, so I leaned out of the window a little more, cocking my head. My boyfriend laughed quietly. Someone else said, "Let's go, come on," so the driver turned his lights back on. I was struck by how oddly familiar it all felt—this waiting for a light that never comes, wanting something different to happen, for once, no matter the consequences.



In junior high, my girlfriends and I were fear addicts. We watched all the gory new horror films, questioned the Ouija board, went on haunted hayrides and corn maze walks, and forced our parents to drive us to every haunted house in the area. These things we feared—evil witches, masked chainsaw killers, forlorn spirits—were removed from the reality of our lives. We didn't worry so much about our families' precarious financial situations, for instance. When we snuck out and walked across town to meet older boys at night, we certainly didn't think about rape or murder in any concrete way—though inklings of it followed us in the streets, offering tiny thrills. We knew that, as girls, we were always potential victims, ghosts in waiting. Our mothers, fathers, aunts, and grandparents didn't let us go a day without a reminder: *always lock the door when you're home alone—especially when you're taking a nap or a shower; never take rides from men or boys you don't know; make sure you're never alone with too many of them; always take a friend; here—I bought you some pepper spray.*

Men occupied a double space in our minds. They were, according to our parents and the news, a primary source of danger in our lives. And yet everywhere else we turned, there was another message: men are the keys you've been searching for—the unknown and the ultimate goal. We read *Cosmo* voraciously, making mental notes about blowjob techniques and ways to seem less needy on the phone. We compared sexual encounters with older boyfriends and memorized lyrics to popular love songs, working them into journal entries. So the vague dangers of girlhood were inextricably tangled together with our ideas about sex and romance. Impossibly, men were to be loved and feared at once.

We didn't know that a girl could be a feared thing, too. A girl could be a zombie. We all were. We painted our dead hair and nails into something pretty, but we didn't talk much around boys and men—we only watched, our mouths wide with amazement as they performed tricks with skateboards, bikes, and rollerblades; our eyes glazed as they postured and bellowed at one another; our arms stiff with longing as they jerked the steering wheel and took us skidding down dirt roads at night. We reached for them and squealed in unison. We were blind with need—to be loved, to be wanted, to be seen. My god, they could have done anything. We were oblivious to their aching fear of us.

What you probably didn't know at twelve, Shannon—what we didn't know—is that misogyny prowls the intersection of attraction and fear. Sometimes men find you there, holding your girlness like an invitation—and it terrifies them. Relentless, your girlness stirs like strong wind, growls like gravel, prods like a sharp stick. Your girlness is a weapon that can, at any moment, be turned on you.



If they could talk, many of the women who've turned up dead would say they loved their killers. In recent years, almost half of murdered women were killed by intimate partners, and many more by acquaintances—perhaps men they might have considered loving before they knew what they came to know in the end. In this context, Shannon's story serves less as Halloween fodder than as a warning.

Yet Shannon wasn't quite a woman, and her killers knew this. Perry Ricciardi said that Billy Monday and David Garvey had planned the murder, that they'd wanted for a long time to rape and kill a girl, any girl. Shannon was an acquaintance and thus, at twelve, an opportunity—someone who was, they said, “too young to date, not to young to rape.” In court, Shannon's mother read a statement that described her daughter as naïve, too trusting of people like Billy. “Shannon just wasn't somebody Monday didn't know. He knew Shannon. That's what makes it even harder to understand,” she wrote. “If he could do this horrible thing to someone he knew, what could he do to someone he didn't know?”

But what was she doing with those men in the first place, you might ask. Shannon had known Billy for about two months, and according to some accounts, they may have been more than friends. So perhaps she was a girl playing the role of a woman, as so many of us did—putting on makeup and clothes that would make us more visible to our audience, overemphasizing our sexual gestures, not letting inexperience spook us out of a chance to prove ourselves. But why would she get involved with Billy Monday, who was nine years older than her? This I can tell you.

When a twenty-one-year-old man mumbles into the phone: “Do you want to be my girl?” it doesn't matter that you have only met him once; or that he

is, like any other man, a strange potential source of attention and danger; or that the stubble covering his face is foreign and exciting to you, who grew up in a house without men; or that the vague references to drama involving ex-girlfriends who are much older than you and have jobs at places like Quaker Steak & Lube and Denny's only make the invitation more enticing; or that the position of these women in the world may in fact be closer to your mother's than your own—something you've noticed but haven't yet thought about—just as you've never once thought about kissing, holding, or touching this man, that you never will—because in fact you've never had a real physical desire to do this to any man—because as far as you can tell, desire inevitably flows in one direction—that is, from an unstoppable male source and into you—but never yet, at twelve years old, has desire flowed *from* you—never will, that is—so you say “yes,” you want to be his girl. Of course you do.



Wayward girls wander too far, across the boundaries they're given. Wayward girls are unpredictable. Sometimes they run the wrong way, toward the oncoming train.

I don't know exactly how many times I shut my teenage self into a car with men I barely knew. In the seventh grade, I began to count the afternoons I'd spent with them—men who got me high then took me home, miraculously leaving me unharmed. There weren't too many, but I liked to count them anyhow—friends of friends, a hair past teenaged. I didn't need to pick locks or crawl through windows to see them; sometimes I simply walked through the school's front door and folded myself like a little napkin into the backs of their cars. Each time, I knew I was crossing some boundary, but when I looked closely and tried to find the line between the stupid things I'd already done and the dangerous things that lay before me, I saw only a scattering of dark spots on my life.

The men—these acquaintances and boyfriends—always told me I looked so old for my age, and they passed me blunts and bottles I stained with lipstick. It was only a matter of minutes before I seemed to be in a different body—one with soft, pliable hands and no skeleton. I felt ready to be opened and closed without damage, to be handled like a bath towel or a rug—stretched, soaked, tossed, beaten clean, rolled up neatly. I wandered the strange houses

they took me to still wearing my school uniform and laughing into my shirtsleeves, which swallowed my face until I felt invisible. I knew I must have been invisible, because these men never touched me—not much, not more than a hand on my shoulder or knee, unless I whispered “okay” when they asked for more. But this ghost body was not exactly what I wanted—I didn't want them to slip through me; I wanted them to run right into me.



With a charming name like Billy Monday, one could go a lot of places. That Sunday, he was off, and he was going to get any girl he wanted to. He was going to get high and then get down, because it was Sunday and he was off and he was Billy Monday. He was going, in his mother's red Dodge Shadow to the laundromat on Midlothian and Fifth to pick up Shannon, who had walked a block from her mother's house so as not be seen getting into a car with him. Shannon with the dark ponytail and the short shorts. Shannon who talked like an older girl—kind of edgy and brash—but asked the naïve questions of a little girl.

“Would Billy really gut me like a fish?” That was the question Shannon asked Perry Ricciardi in the culvert on the afternoon before she died, calculating the distance to the road, sensing the taste of nacho cheese still in her mouth, wondering what kind of joke this was turning into.



Events leading up to and including Shannon's death, as summarized for the trial of Perry Ricciardi:

October returned and  
Ohio abandoned survival  
At this point, to stay  
would be the decision.  
yes or no.  
to say, "yes"  
meant wanting the consequences  
After a while, to go  
home was trouble.  
gut like lead

impossible to see the difficulty  
coming .  
the entrance said 'yes,' right?"  
"Yes." "No."  
never  
the details  
fell against her throat  
then to the ground  
time to leave  
her feet began  
to speak. her  
mouth to plead



A friend once asked me if I'd rather have the ability to fly or to be invisible. I took it as a question of access. It was a no-brainer for me, but he was surprised when I said: "Fly, of course." If you were invisible, he argued, you could go anywhere you wanted. In my experience, I told him, that hasn't been true.

It's difficult to find information about Shannon—no memorial sites or tribute pages aside from a couple of general listings on sites that cull from crime reports on murdered children. If there was an obituary published somewhere, no trace of it remains. Perhaps there wasn't much else to work with—no cheerleading photos, no honor roll, no ballet recitals, no mission trips to Central America. Although she did take classes in the gifted program at the vocational center in Youngstown, Shannon was described as "troubled" by her family, according to at least one newspaper article about her death. I wonder what the trouble was—a lack of resources or understanding. Shannon lived in a working-class neighborhood with her mother and stepfather. After her death, neighbors gossiped to reporters about overhearing loud arguments between Shannon and her stepfather, and papers mentioned that she'd been under house arrest at the time of her murder—the result of being charged with "unruly" behavior at home. Quick to link this behavior to her own death, one headline in Sharon, Pennsylvania's *The Herald* read "Neighbors: Dead girl had 'rebellious streak.'" In considering Shannon's fate, the article quotes one neighbor as saying: "I figured she might get herself into some trouble over the years. She is rebellious, but nothing like this."

Court documents show that Shannon's delinquent status did play a role in her murder. Monday saw it as an opportunity, and while they were in Zombieland with Shannon, he told Ricciardi that it was the perfect time to do what they had discussed, because nobody knew where Shannon was. Perhaps he assumed that nobody would even notice her absence. When Shannon's mother called police on October 9, the report was filed as a missing person/runaway, given Shannon's history.

So perhaps the "trouble" was that needling in the chest that one gets when she suspects she doesn't matter, fears that no one sees her, guesses she won't ever leave this place. Did Shannon know what the neighbors thought of her—that she "might get herself into some trouble over the years?" Did she wonder if they were right? Did she imagine a future for herself? Maybe

she'd been made to feel like a little speck of garbage right up until that last moment in the culvert, when she had a change of mind about her life and thought: *it does matter, it's mine.*

Shannon: a girl named after a river named after a girl. According to Old Irish legend, Sionann went in search of wisdom. Daughter of the sea god Ler, where else but water would she look? She was warned against going too far—as all girls are. And as many girls eventually do, she found too much. The well burst and its wisdom inundated her. Drowned, she was carried out to sea, immeasurably wiser than before.



What's found in a culvert? More than you might expect: all manner of minnows, some water snakes, tadpoles, frogs, snails and their old shells, clouds of mosquitos, water beetles, whirligigs, dragonflies, mayflies, plenty of eggs and larvae, moss on rocks and pebbles, floating algae, an astonishing amount of bacteria—along with signs of human activity: beer cans, bottle caps, potato chip bags, cigarette butts, a broken lighter or two. Amid the trash and water, a culvert can teem with life, some of which will stay there until its death, and some of which is just passing through.

For three days, Shannon's body lay in Zombieland beneath Robinson's Crossing, a section of abandoned tracks that passes over a stream. This stream, Coffee Run, is a rivulet that flows right out of the Mahoning River. The culvert straddling Coffee Run is where her body was found, partially submerged in the same brown water that flowed behind her house in Youngstown. If you were to follow the river and tracks from her neighborhood for a mere seven miles, you'd find this spot in no time.



When I look at the fuzzy school photo of Shannon online, I feel compelled to apologize, possessed of some misplaced guilt. *I'm sorry*, I say to no one in particular. Maybe I mean *I'm sorry this happened to you*, or maybe I mean *I'm sorry for leaving*.

Youngstown is a place made of leaving. It's a Rust Belt city that's been



scooped out and filled up with absence. Absence hangs from the trees, absence catches like rocks under your feet, absence watches from doorways, absence seeps from the river and shushes you every time you open your mouth. It is waiting for you to leave like so many others. My friends and I often looked for wisdom in the spaces most suggestive of this absence: abandoned ballrooms, crumbling parking lots, soft patches of grass beneath electrical towers. Suspended in time, these unsanctioned learning places could always quiet my fear of the future. In high school, we all referred to Youngstown's local university, YSU, as You Screwed Up. It's a good school, but the joke rested on the idea that college was your only ticket out of town—especially if your parents didn't have college degrees. That was the gift they could give their children: education as exit route. My mother always impressed upon my sister and me the importance of learning as means—not necessarily of leaving, but of general agency. Despite boys and drugs and cops, we both got grades good enough to purchase eventual tickets out of Youngstown, leaving a few friends behind.

One of those friends—my closest for several years—tried to leave long before I did. Jessica left home again and again: through the back door, through the basement's torn screen, through her bedroom window. Each time, something dragged her back—a breakup, a black eye, an accident—until her mother started locking her up. She went to juvie the first time at fourteen. When she came back, she taught me how to play Spades, and we often played in the smoke-filled kitchens of the men we knew. They'd invite us over to get high and see what else they could convince us to do. On a team, the two of us could usually beat all the men in the room. We lost touch eventually, but one day a mutual friend of ours called to tell me Jessica was on Dr. Phil. Sure enough when I turned on the TV, there she was in dress slacks and a ruffled white blouse. Heels, too. She was teary and scowling through thick mascara and heavy rouge as Dr. Phil leaned toward her and asked, "Don't you want to do better?"



*Oh God:* the last thing anyone heard Shannon say. If she said something else in the culvert, there was no one around to hear it. If a girl falls in a forest. If a girl falls.

It's impossible to know Shannon now: what she would have been like as a friend, what she sounded like when angry or laughing or surprised, what little habits—like chewing on pen caps—she might have had. Shannon lived, as one newspaper article put it, "on the edge of Youngstown." Her house was at the end of a main road, where residences drop off and corner stores and empty lots emerge. On any given day, she could have taken a five-minute walk down to the tracks and the river. I imagine she might have gone there with friends to smoke cigarettes—or by herself after arguments with her mother or stepfather. Maybe she kept going over the bridge and took a sharp left at the dead end that marked Casey Industrial Park. There she would have found a gravel footpath leading through brush and trees and eventually down to the grass on the riverbanks beneath the bridge. Perhaps there was a little concrete patch beneath the overpass where she could sit quietly with her thoughts, lingering in the burnt smell of exhaust.

I can't tell you for sure if she did any of these things, because Shannon—the body, the girl, the amalgamation of fears and desires and memories—doesn't exist anymore, and there are no public memorials, remembrances, or obituaries—just that lone school photo. There is no trace of her in the spaces of Youngstown she once occupied. I try to scare up her face, her friends, some remnant of her personality, but Shannon is a closed door. Maybe it is her absence that haunts me—another girl erased in an already fading place.

The last time I went to Zombieland on a visit to Youngstown, I stared intently at the statue of the Virgin who was supposed to offer welcome or warning. I waited for some sign that these legends had been real, some evidence that she *could* move, at least. But she was as solid and predictable as everything else in the world, as far as I could see: her stone arms stayed crossed in front of her body, her hands clasped in prayer, refusing me. Despite my memory of them changing on certain days, her arms had never been open. It had always been a warning.