

A REASON IN THE WORLD

Once Mama goes
I'll use up the chicory and sorghum, swap
the Mason jar of Kennedy half dollars
for green rectangles, get in the pickup
and just drive. I'll swap steep gravel roads
for fast interstates-- Joe-pye weed
for squared lawns and scalloped bushes--
coon dogs belling in the gap for traffic pulse
and streamers of light like music I can sing.
I'll drive until I find a reason
to stop or a reason to turn around and come back.

Wet tires sizzle, heatless. My rhythm sometimes
fades like the station the radio loses
on the way. The next state's too-early frost
is a ditto of ours, limp crops leaning
like lines of ragbag refugees from some new war.
Old stores with gritty sharecroppers lean
over Pepsis and Moon Pies. Me,
separate as the lone gas pump out front,
not wanting to explain my hurry, not really knowing
the lyrics to "Where you headed, stranger?"

Away from you, I might shout. Away
from what I know and don't know. Away from
familiar nothing to maybe only different nothing
that just replays in another key.
I'm after live songs, trumpets, guitars enough
to fuel my tank to Chicago. I'll sleep
under sheet music, inhale hot jazz for lunch
and wind me in a gospel-slapping choir robe.

Practice runs I call these Sunday gigs
and right backs. Short rolls on the treble staff,
quick upwardly mobile riffs on a limited scale
and down again. Mama's not gone yet.

But I've taken the whole trip
on so many midnight turntables, her words
on my back like a hand-me-down coat
that weighs too much and warms too little.

Yesterday I found a forty-year-old road map
in Mama's Bible, the highways traced and dated
with quarter note rests all the way to New York
in red. And by a different, dimmer route,
all the way back in blue. She never told me that.