

Zombie Ride-Along

Another town, another attack:
Shots, then a show of conflagration.
Blood rushes from our limbs, grooving
the old channels,
pooling hearts and minds.

[Our Zombie Life]

We bring to our bright screens our heat
and our tears, proclaiming together
the suddenness of our pain, pleading
to let some good be born of this.

Buy my book, this one quickly shares,
which alone might console and explain.
The rest of us decide, without
conviction, not to chirp a word.

Is this innocence, surviving
at the cost of mind?

The country,
still, is better, where blackbirds shawl
the treetops, mimic the huffing wind.
At night, the scent of skunk slices
clean through the walls to where dreams spool
and roll in bellies that growl and burst.

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Confess, they've rubbed off on you, these states
of drenched things which teach how little
there is that easily floats, how few
of us can resist a new regime.
Once on this very road you saw,
just beyond the telephone lines,
a funnel cloud touch down. Then it passed
and you were safe, both of you churning
some other bit of earth, writing
yourselves in the book of common
sorrows, a mass market that falls
to pieces when it meets water.

[Way Down and Out]

Nowadays, you venture out in search
of soaked birds that for the moment
cannot fly. The feral cats would feast,
if they could stand the rain. Listen,
even the wipers like to complain.

...

...

Had you driven along this road
when you were younger, you might have found
these scenes ludicrous and sad. You would
have driven fast. Some part of you
wouldn't want to acknowledge what
you were seeing, what you failed to see.
You would have feared them, all the known
unknowns of your trip now.

You're south
of Clarksdale, chasing a storm, those bands
of Mississippi gray which promise
to chaperone your journey back home,
slowing any return to your world.

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Honestly, I don't know where to go
from here. It's not a matter of will.
The muscles impel, mere reflex,
probably, vestige of parent fear
encoded and passed down.

[Caw]

Sinew
and pearly-white teeth are fine gifts
and well worth showing off. Fast feet
are not. This, friend, is where we are.

Alluvial soil, detrital dirt,
turning world. Even when the levees
more or less hold, the earth is shifty.
Trails, roads, even whole towns vanish,
leaving only the metal which rusts
but remains, roofs and gins that collapse
on themselves, glinting in the sun.
Further out, solitary hardwoods
by creek beds dagger the landscape,

arbitrary, monolithic
monuments. Are they markers, scrawled
history, or shade for lean lunches?

Here, we plant saplings for the dead
and farm to the doors of old houses.
Here, our quickness of mind brings us
burgers and fries, and a bit of luck.

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Once the story ended, you might
go back and do anything, kill
the innocents you had set free.
What else?

[Free Play]

Well, it was mostly that.

Nights, then days and nights, crafting a verb
from your loneliness, tensing at
creaks in the hall. Against walls, you
rounded them up, pixel by pixel,
taking your time, then dropping them,
one by one. Writhing on their stomachs
at what was not your feet, did they
say a single word? Only later,
when, married to your sleep, you lived out
in less tangible worlds fantasies
for which you had trained. Even there,
you found some doors would not open.

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...

The downtown strip is too quiet.
It's an hour before lunch, fall
harvest time. Small piles of soy beans dot
the roadside, spill-off from trucks; wisps
of cotton bandage the bottoms
of abandoned buildings. Movement.
The bars of the post office door
swing out. Two girls who ought to be
in school head toward an empty house.

[Hot Sauce]

You're walking north on Fava Street,
named for a family who set up
shop here, running a grocery store
and a grill, the one building lit
on your side of the street; the one door
that grates and swings. You are a stranger,
sight to see. The woman behind
the register cannot contain
her surprise before her face goes flat,
a shield. You look away, look around,
as your friend starts talking. She points you
to the tables in the back. A pink
glow from overhead lights shines through
jars of pig's feet, pickled in their brine.
You order a burger, just in time.

No sooner has your patty hit
the grill than the lunch rush spills in.
Workers fill the place for the chili
they've been smelling for blocks. Your eyes plead
"feed them first," but she won't have it.
Neither will they. The world rarely fails
to show you how mean and small you are.

She hands you one of the best burgers
you have eaten. When you stand to leave,
the young men give you too-wide a berth,
the kind of deference the bosses
must not notice after a while.

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Does doubt live in this world you have won?
Where would it hide? Behind those closed doors,
under lines of horizon, beyond
the distant spaces which call you home
and promise the busted mystery
of the long and open road? My God,
what have you done? What will you become?
*I was not myself then; I am not
me now.*

The last image you take

but don't stop

...

[Selfie]

(Now, hold on a sec,

Remember those

...

The tow truck arrives from somewhere else, its owner a teacher at the high school,

which he points out. A wooden sign
tells you the town is the oldest
African-American settlement
in the country, but you won't see this
until it's in your rearview mirror.
The year of founding marks the place
as one of the longest lasting
interior towns, a colony
founded by a freed slave. Of course,
the whites soon tried to buy it back,
returning the farmers to the fates
they'd fled.

[Mound Bayou]

What desperation led them
to this spot? Even now that the hard
work of cultivation has long been done,
you can see how inhospitable
it must have been. Swamp and forest
and nothing for miles. Perhaps that's it—
a spot miles from the real dangers.

(You're not more than twenty minutes
from the river, but this thought does not
console. Your resolve to do justice
to this place pools in the wet heat.)

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Like almost every small town, this one
sports cosmetic touches, lime and pink
building fronts, but it's deeply asleep.
Those lucky enough are elsewhere,
the rest have hidden themselves away.
Though this time of year it would take
a hurricane to cool things off,
you happen to have one coming,
an easy thought for someone like you—
This is someone's home.

[Shut-eye]

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...

Mute the voice.
You ask for guidance and I give
you platitudes, a knitted brow.

[G.P.S.]

Latitudes? Attitudes. Our course—
a meandering, mending stitch
across the fair countryside. To those
standing still, the pleasures are obscured.
It takes, almost, a narrator:
They'll sit awhile here instead of there.
They'll trade those lights for whatever
is on your flashing screen.

Who stops
anymore for just a drink? Only
such travelers as we. We alone.

Recalculating... Find the route
to that dive that's known for the staff
who toss hungry guests their dinner rolls.
They shoot across the room like stars.

From the roadside, a sign yells at you
to Repent!, but you are too far gone.
Off-road, a small graveyard beckons,
where Sweet little Sammy lies, dead
before he could crawl. His foot stone
is a tree trunk that must have sprouted
and fallen long after young Sammy.
The ground is higher here, though not
by much. Your friend tells you these plots
are all over, hidden by brush,
a gentle kind of forgetfulness.
Your head swims with the names of places
sleeping Sammy never learned to say.

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There is a sweet life. But obtained
by you and me? Roadside, the scent's
so strong you think it must be something
placed and tended, something pruned and plucked.

[Honeysuckle]

They like fences and poles, but farther
and soon there won't be fences and poles,
just fields between solitary trees.

Do you remember? We combed the fence
and sowed the yard with petals; school
was out and you felt old at ten.
I'd forgotten the scent was so strong,
but the taste on my tongue stuck with me.

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You reach the light where two students
died last year, struck on their way to class
by a patrol car in fast pursuit.

[Shall We Pray]

You remember them as you pass
and think how treacherous a road
this road can be, mostly at night,
when the brightness of your headlights
only serves to remind you how much
you're not seeing. You dream of it
sometimes, driving straight into an F5,
stalled truck, or family of deer
surfacing out of the deep dark
so fast there's nothing to do but sigh
and go limp. When the impact wakes you,
you find you cannot move.

It's late
morning. The old folk have gathered
around tables in their yards. It seems
every building's boarded but a church
and the convenience store. A man
in blackened overalls crosses
the street. You think he must be younger
than he looks because he looks too old
to be alive. He's picked up a bike
from the gutter, a girl's bike, purple
with a white basket tied to the front.
He hunches as he rides, so his knees
almost reach his chin. He has not looked
in your direction and you can't take
your eyes off him until the road
curbs him from your sight. You wonder
what the preachers tell their flocks, frying
on folding chairs in the Sunday heat.

Who's hovering over that fed field?

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You were beside yourselves with rage.
You'd driven for hours, a straight line
across the top of your map. The wheel
you gripped had warped in the long silence.

[U.F.O]

It was the way they nimbly moved
that caught her eye, the way they blinked
in the sky as if they were the points
of needles stitching a black skein
of lullabies. Later, against
her stiff pillow, she went to that couch
she kept in the safe room of her mind,
watching her grandmother gently work
in front of her father's fire.

What
were they showing you by poking through
that night if not the effort it takes
to keep together our torn world?
She wanted error, the thread dropped low
enough to carry her back up,
so she might surface to newness,
having tied off her life down below.

...

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Now you're north of Vicksburg. The road
is here as it's always been, two-lanes
through the white and chocolate fields,
the greens of rice and soy and corn.
You pass a patch ribboned with flowers,
volunteers sprung up in orderly rows.
Your friend and guide says he remembers
riding through these farms as they burned,
bands of orange fire, the black smoke
funneling out.

"What's that," you ask,
"at the field's edge."
"A boll-weevil trap."
Sounds like a song. An old, sad song.

[A Kennedy Came
through Here
with Tears in His
Eyes]

The place seems two-dimensional
against the gray sky, a triptych

of columns, cell tower, and school,
the grass hip-high on its roof. You feel
vaguely guilty, but everyone leaves.
You stop for a stretch, but don't see it—
the sparkling ground, glitter of glass
from houses that were not built to last.

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That old store is just the kind of place
you like, even before you see
the sign marking it as the site
of Roosevelt's "Teddy Bear Hunt."

[Onward]

The porch is smiling broadly, wood
panels stretching back down to the earth.
A group of hunters greet you, but
you know so little you cannot say
whether they're on their way to bed
or blind.

Inside, you feel the chill.
You used to find 16 oz. bottles
by the road near your house and bring them
to this very store when it was set
deep in the Appalachian mountains
where you grew up. It even has
Mallo-Cups, which cost you four bottles.

...

...

Do not look to the sky, for nothing
written there will be of any help.
Clouds do not conspire with the wind.
Halfway to heaven, they are heedless
palm prints, great nothing's heavy-handed
marbling of the world.

[Chem Trails]

The church points
its golden finger straight to God.
It seems angry, but it might be
your mood. It looks too accustomed
to the hard work of ownership.
At the stoplight, the thought you've buried
since you began this trip suspires

to the surface of your mind. It's all
for you. This happened so you might
see it this very moment. The light
changes; the finger's done its work.

...

...

When it comes upon us, will we think
we're nowhere near our destination?
Deep blues—the sky is like a spit-shined
china dish above the fat, flat lines
of our sight. Smells like someone died,
but it's only the fields.

[Original Force]

Oh, that's
a family plot. You can tell because
the headstones still lean. The others
got wood, which went faster back to dust.

Port Gibson to Natchez, Natchez
to Dolorosa, where the road
swerves out from the river, something
keeping these two from straying
too far away from one another.
History, you suppose. You're close
to the border, and well on your way.

...

...

We are photons shooting deep in space
but are we carrying on as waves
or particles? It all depends
on if we're being watched.

[Turn the Dial]

Old news,
What's strange is that some other minds
now think we will have decided
what we will become before we reach
the place we are or are not watched.
Let that settle in enough to feel
the staccato-thumping of your heart,
clutch of your blood revving the world
that rushes by at your fingertips.
What else moves you like this? The skunk
that crossed your path and whirled? Or was he

a scorpion? That bird astride
the yellow lines—will it become
itself and fly?

Do our vanished loves
choose to comfort or divide us
when they let themselves be seen? Angels
and devils both have wings. Both can soar.

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Most times, the truckers remember they
just want to get free, somewhere else
and new. This is one of their stories...

[Breaker, Breaker,
Bedtime Story]

Like many, to earn money, the girl
cleaned houses with many rooms. One house,
especially, pleased her, because
it faced east, and she loved the light
that filled the place, the way the dust
flashed when she snapped her rag. Each morning,
though, she found another room to clean,
as if at night a whole crew showed up
to enlarge the house, room by room.
Sunlight did not shine through the windows
of these new rooms and, before long,
she found rooms without windows at all,
just walls, ceilings, and floors covered
in the dust of their construction.
She worked faster, harder each day,
until, one afternoon, she came
upon a door, behind which she heard
sounds of a different kind of labor,
whirring saw, and hammer and drill.
She opened the door to find a man
working feverishly. He was stooped
with age, although his hair and beard
were yellow with dust and bits of wood.
She saw, at once, the way his eyes sagged
with grief. "Please, the girl cried. "Please stop.
This house is large enough. Already,
we are too far from the light of day.
When I walk home, the sky is so red,
my hands bleed."

“I will not,” snorted
the man.

“The dust gets everywhere,”
the girl cried. “It has blinded you
to the way things are.”

“I cannot stop,”
the man said, a bit more politely.
“I must make rooms and, so, you must
clean them.”

Desperate, the young girl
took the old man’s hand and led him
through the halls of the empty house
he had built. Finally, they arrived
at the windows she loved, but the sun
was shining on the other side
of the sky, softening everything,
for it was very late in the day.
The girl and the old man rested there
until morning and when the light,
the lovely, yellow light flooded
the rooms, the dust on the man’s clothes
and hair became shooting sparks of light.
“I’m burning,” he cried. “Take me back
to my work.”

And then it did seem
as if he were on fire, not like
a wick, which burns and burns, but a match
which flashes and is snuffed out. The girl,
in amazement, moved to the windows,
but she did not catch fire. She snapped
her rag, moving to the rhythm
she made, dancing for joy and sorrow
among a sudden shower of stars.

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There’s the Ruins, and there’s the Fort
where rains pour. Your speech turns martial.

[Self-guided Tour]

*Days buisey scenes had past away.
The camp in sleeping silence lay.*

So wrote one James Addison Boyd,
who was later killed in battle,
as wave upon wave broke upon
and then swamped the earthworks. . Against
your will, you'll feel it then, that old
southern ache, your birthright, tyranny
of pride disguised as civility.

You'll feel it so strongly you'll head back
in your mind to the ruins, those columns
connected by iron. An empire waist,
you joked, noting the Kudzu that grew
from their tops. Leaving, you saw the sign
which warned the whole thing was unstable.

...

...

Dear blinds in fields beneath the road.
Are you nervous? Fiddle with the dial.
In time, the static sounds like code.
Tell me what you have not done. Confess,
did you chew or let the wafer rest
and grow wet and heavy on your tongue?

[Lamech Killed Cain]

He was blind, but nevertheless
a great hunter. His loyal children
cleared before him his path and saw him
to his prey, but one day...

Happens
often here. Entirely plausible,
because, you know, the horns, which may
have been given as punishment.
Did he smile? Did the heavens fill
with laughter? The original killer,
brought down by a blind hunter. Might've
been any one of us? Might still.

...

...

You like them, you know it. And best
from the back of a truck.. Don't worry,
there's always one just up ahead.
Now that the thought sticks in your brain,
too, it isn't going anywhere.
There's our sign, that square of blue that pales

[Tamales]

the sky. Take them right out of the shuck
with some sauce. Hot fuel for the mind,
which no one needs.

It's a zombie life
we lead. Friend, here's where you get off.