**Zombie Ride-Along**

Another town, another attack:

Shots, then a show of conflagration.

Blood rushes from our limbs, grooving [Our Zombie Life]

the old channels,

pooling hearts and minds.

We bring to our bright screens our heat

and our tears, proclaiming, as one,

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.

••• •••

Confess, they’ve rubbed off on you, these states

of drenched things that teach how little

there is that easily floats, how few

of us can resist a new regime. [Way Down and Out]

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, that mass market that falls

to pieces when it meets water.

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.

••• •••

Honestly, I don’t know where to go

from here. It’s not a matter of will.

The muscles impel, mere reflex, [Caw]

probably, vestige of parent fear

encoded and passed down.

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.

••• •••

Once the story ended, you might

go back and do anything, kill

the innocents you had set free. [Free Play]

What else?

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.

••• •••

The downtown strip is too quiet.

It’s an hour before lunch, fall

harvest time. Small piles of soy beans dot [Hot Sauce]

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.

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.

••• •••

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

from this place is outside the largest

house in town. A straw militia man

holds a rifle on his shoulder

and sports a child’s helmet. Beside him

sits a guillotine and small cannon.

Halloween? Sheets curtain the windows

and as you pass, you think you see

(Is it a wish?) a hand pull back

an upstairs sheet. You slow,

but don’t stop

until the car breaks down south of town.

Suddenly, you’ve got more time to kill.

••• •••

So how do I share with yours and mine

this particular breeze? At the start,

everyone seemed shiny and flat,

sheets upon sheets. Perhaps our deaths [Selfie]

alone gave us depth, and this flatness,

this sheen, we named hunger. In time, it

assumed a leadership position

among us, our holy mother

of movement.

(Now, hold on a sec,

before you get the wrong idea.

Let me segue, let me keep you

since I’ve got you.

Remember those

B-sides of your youth, how you felt

sorry for those songs, sad ballasts

to siblings who stayed out late, climbing

the charts? They float in our oceans now,

fresh expanding islands that mean

we wait for nothing but our deaths.

How will we know it when it comes

for us? We’re rolling, B-sides and all.)

••• •••

The tow truck arrives from somewhere else,

its owner a teacher at the high school,

which he points out. A wooden sign [Mound Bayou]

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.

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.)

••• •••

Like almost every small town, this one

sports cosmetic touches, lime and pink

building fronts, but it’s deeply asleep. [Shut-eye]

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.

••• •••

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.

••• •••

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.

••• •••

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?

••• •••

You were beside yourselves with rage.

You’d driven for hours, a straight line

across the top of your map. The wheel [U.F.O]

you gripped had warped in the long silence.

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.

••• •••

Now you’re north of Vicksburg. The road

is here as it’s always been, two-lanes

through the white and chocolate fields, [A Kennedy Came

the greens of rice and soy and corn. through Here

You pass a patch ribboned with flowers, with Tears in His volunteers sprung up in orderly rows. Eyes]

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.

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.

••• •••

That old store is just the kind of place

you like, even before you see

the sign marking it as the site [Onward]

of Roosevelt’s “Teddy Bear Hunt.”

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. [Chem Trails]

Halfway to heaven, they are heedless

palm prints, great nothing’s heavy-handed

marbling of the world.

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 [Original Force]

china dish above the fat, flat lines

of our sight. Smells like someone died,

but it’s only the fields.

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.

Old news, [Turn the Dial]

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.

••• •••

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.

••• •••

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. [Lamech Killed Cain]

Tell me what you have not done. Confess,

did you chew or let the wafer rest

and grow wet and heavy on your tongue?

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. [Tamales]

Now that the thought sticks in your brain,

too, it isn’t going anywhere.

There’s our sign, that square of blue that pales

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.