

Sweet Chariot

The first time intruders rode in; they torched the granary. Daddy and Grandpa reacted by drinking themselves into a slurry atop a stone sledge, a wreck of an implement more beetle-infested than their sharecropped bottomland fields.

A week later, Grandpa slouched in a rocking chair plucking gospel hymns from his spittle-slicked jaw harp, while I swept the front stoop. In the gathering dusk, a caravan of headlamps snaked their way up our lane. I set out to fetch Daddy.

He stepped from the cow he was milking and said, “Cassie, this ain’t good. Take out across the fields, git you into town with yer mama. Don’t come back without the authorities.”

I couldn’t just up and leave so I clumb into an empty water trough and watched in horror as white-sheeted ghouls tossed a rope over the skeletal limb of a leaf-failing live oak and dangled Grandpa from it.

Several of the ghastly individuals jumped Daddy and tied him to the bumper of the sheriff’s sedan. A pair of deputies took turns dragging him ‘round and ‘round, nearly running into my rusting hidey-hole. Then the barn took fire.

I can still hear that awful squall coming from frightened livestock; the stench of burnt hide is something I never need to smell again. The invaders were too occupied with their carnage to notice a despised black child run for her life.

I made my way to the Fox Hotel. Mama was still in her maid’s uniform when she answered my frenzied pounding on the staff quarter’s door. “Child, what’s up with you? What’s wrong for Pete’s sake?”

“They come for the farm! Grandpa got strung up and Daddy’s been killed! Everything, even the gardenias and red ferns are set to burning like the gates of hell *and* the law is behind it!”

Mama tried borrowing money but couldn’t raise passage for the two of us. With the train shrieking into the station, She handed me her purse and cried out above the clamor, “You need to get to your auntie’s in Tupelo!”

Never a devout woman, Mama folded her hands in prayer, stumbled slightly, and then pitched head first onto the gleaming rails. The train kept coming . . . the screeching grew louder . . . and it never stopped.

April 20, 1968

5:57 a.m.

“Someone’s laid-up on that truck’s bed.”

5:58 a.m.

“Jack, put the Remington on him. Judging from the length of his hair, I’m guessing he’s one of them there *Native Americans*, probably drunker than Billy B. Damned. I’ll try rousing him with a kick to the bumper. Hmm, Dakota plates, better run ‘em, could be that fugitive the feds are seeking out of Pine Ridge.”

5:59 a.m.

Face down; Cody’s cocooned in a khaki-colored blanket. Pushing up, looking over the sideboard, he sees two lawmen, one with a shotgun pointing at his head. Both wear fatigues, badges aglow in an early morning shimmer of sunlight. “Come out of there, slow like . . . up against the cab.”

6:02 a.m.

Dazed by the intrusion, Cody complies. He leans into the truck door, knuckles white with effort. If he obeys, red welts of authority might not mingle with scars wrought by an abusive stepfather. The lesson learned as a teenager banished to the Virginia Military Institute? Keep quiet and gut it out.

6:03 a.m.

“Spread ‘em. Jack, it looks like the boy’s been through this before. You been a bad injun? Pull out some I.D., easy now. She-it, with a name like this, check it out, he could be whiter than ol’ Buffalo Bill’s *be*-hind. Look son, if you’re needing a place to shut-eye, find a rest stop.”

6:05 a.m.

With that the deputies load up. Their Bronco crunches onto the roadbed, snorting, bellowing, leaving Cody standing alone, mouth agape. Dusting himself off, he wads his blanket, opens the door of the flatbed, and tosses it on the seat.

6:07 a.m.

Yawning, William Cody climbs behind the wheel and starts the engine. The throbbing Detroit diesel causes the notice to report from his draft board to slide off the dashboard onto the passenger’s side floor mat. With any luck, he’ll make Canada by nightfall.

After Being Busted for Shoplifting

Mom drops me at the curb, pissed doesn't begin to describe her agitation, she points to the front door. I stride past the sole elm fighting for survival on our near treeless boulevard, its slipping bark stippled a dreadful gray.

The neighborhood cat, a seal point, sits in the center of the walkway licking a paw. The Siamese' aquatic eyes dilate in a show of innocence, as a bedraggled starling flutters feebly in its shadow.

I square my shoulders; march up the sidewalk, climb the staircase, and reach for the knob. Inside, my stepdad's working on his fingernails with a knife; spring-loaded, pearl handled, Miss Manners he's not.

I notice his glazed eyeballs and hear him say: "If you're gonna be a crook, wise up smartass; don't get caught. Fuck up again and you'll end up a swirl in the cesspool of life. He's only this talkative after downing more drink

than a normal person should without tipping over. He drains his bottle, smacks his lips, fixes me with a glare, and flings his knife, embedding its point in the doorjamb; a punctuation mark inches from my head.

The blade is for show; his fist the blunt object clubbing home whatever point he's trying to make. My blackened eye and broken jaw will heal, my stutter, probably not.

Mother's soon to-be-ex is looking at five to ten, with the possibility of parole. His lawyer put me on trial. *Me*, the teenage punching bag, the one in the way of: his knuckles, his drinking, his uncontrolled fury.

School resumes the same day city crews cut and cart away the remnants of the lone elm. Telephone poles now provide the only shade along our avenue. Guidance counselors label me special needs.

They claim I have emotional shortcomings. Mom blames herself for falling in love with a thug, for me leaving school, and finally, for quitting on my father, who broke her spirit.

My own disposition sags to an all-time low when agents from animal control impound the neighborhood cat. I argue for the feline's freedom, only to be laughed at for my stuttering inability to appeal to their sense of fair play.

Rush!

He's been romping the pedal
and hogging the hammer lane since sun-up,

the centerline stripe an all-consuming jolt
of visual amphetamine—

gulp, whip, whiz, gee, rush hour;
speedometer wheeling ninety per.

Roadbeds narrow, signposts blur . . .
throttled by a cluster of eighteen-wheelers,

his rig's diesel chokes to a rumble,
until a lull in traffic provides an opening.

Euphoric, he bellows:
“Nothing's going to stop me now!”

Sundown, fighting fatigue,
he furiously palms his eye sockets,

then screams songs at the windshield,
while pounding the dashboard with a fist;

the visage of a rock and roller gone mad:
“Goodness, gracious, great balls of fire!”

Abruptly, he exits the freeway,
a blackened screech screams his departure.

Headed south on a northbound ramp,
rumble strips bounce truck and driver mean.

The lack of a centerline begs his attention,
where is he?

The rapid flashing of oncoming high beams,
pisses him off.

“What the f . . . ?”
Becomes his last utterance.

The Fall of Saigon

Collectively, we signed on for this hitch.
There's a job to do and *BY GOD* we're going
to do it, or so we're told. Then, Glory loses her way.

Her focus wavers—the shrill verbiage of peace
mongers buffets her will to prevail—
who would have guessed?

Glory begins to quake, nothing major, lasting all
of two seconds. Comrade Ho would be amazed at the
resolve she manages to elicit from us, the few—the proud.

Strategists, tired of chasing recalcitrant conscripts back
into her hoary grasp, have been observed packing
munitions and finalizing exit plans.

Still, Glory prefers the company of thirsty regulars who
swill the nectar she serves. Her last appearance starts slowly,
more subtle than the surreptitious high noon striking of colors.

Sarge likens it to lying gut down on a stockyard platform
while cattle trains rumble through, faint stirrings
urging on a thundering herd.

A tremor catches her up short—flagstaff dismantled,
Glory slips away. Rancorous explosions followed by swiftly
departing helicopters casts us all on a new mission . . . Retreat!