

The Girl from Perth Amboy

All that summer, it was as if my motorcycle
knew the way—
Schraalenburg to Old Hook Road to Kinderkamack.
She was new in town, joked that she'd always wondered
what things were like north of the G.W. bridge.

Her eyes froze you, pinned you like daggers,
invited you in to wander, lost.

Whenever she spoke of Perth Amboy, she shook her head.
A nothing town, she said. Rusted-out and crumbling,
a place of has-beens and lost causes.

We rode everywhere together—me and that girl
from Perth Amboy.
She clung to me as if I were her lifejacket,
her last chance—
legs wrapped tightly around mine,
hands tight around my waist as we leaned into turns,
accelerated down freeways.

She thought she was tough, always wore black,
thought she could maybe play bass in a punk band
or one day go to art school.
But that summer we mostly just rode—
up to Bear Mountain, down to Sandy Hook,
west to Lake Hopatcong, the Poconos.

She said she'd maybe like to go out to the west coast—
move to Seattle or Frisco or someplace—
switch oceans for a while,
watch the sun set in the Pacific.

Once, we rode all the way down to Cape May,
took the ferry across to Delaware,
fed the seagulls gliding alongside the boat
from our hands,
the seagulls like emissaries from another world,
like souls, she said, *like souls*.

Later, I heard she'd gone back to Perth Amboy,
got married, lives not far from her old place
near the Outerbridge.

And I was left wondering what if
we had hit the road to Frisco?
What if I didn't crash the bike,

then head up to Boston?
What if I'd followed that road deep into her eyes,
disappearing in the haze of infinity?

Metro Messenger

It was a delivery truck, of that we were sure,
but what we were delivering we never actually knew.
Rugs mostly—a single Persian rug picked up
 at a deserted warehouse on the lower East Side,
dropped off at a gas station in Jamaica Plain—
three rugs picked up at a Teamster's loading dock in Hoboken—
 all the union guys studiously not noticing us—
delivered to a ramshackle townhouse in Bensonhurst.

So yes, it was rugs mostly, but what was in those rugs
 we never knew—
were smart enough not to look,
knowing that, in this case, curiosity would surely
 kill the cat.

It was my brother's job—first job out of college—
but over winter break, I was hired to ride shotgun
(no gun actually, just a stack of New York metro maps).
Metro Messenger, the van said with swoosh marks
 to emphasize its speed. *Phone Dispatched*.

We were paid ridiculously well, had more down time than up,
 phoned in after each job for instructions,
sat around a lot in burger joints and bars,
 waiting for our next pickup,
the black van out in the parking lot looking like
 an avenging angel, a dark messenger.

Our base was an old stainless steel art deco diner
 by the Holland Tunnel—Jersey side—
its circular counter where everyone faced the grill man,
 who moved the mountain of golden onions
flipped the burgers,
everyone sipping coffee, reading newspapers,
the frying-onion-and-sizzling-meat smell intoxicating
 while trucks and busses dieseled by outside,
the incessant internal combustion seeping in from the streets,
 setting the counter and coffee cups vibrating,
the roar of traffic deafening yet unnoticed,
 like cicadas on a hot summer day.

I was reading the Russians then—Dostoevsky,
 Turgenev, Tolstoi, Chekhov—
dog-eared copies of *The Brothers Karamazov*
 and *Ward Number Six* on the dashboard,
our conversations about Raskolnikov, Bazarov, Pechorin,
 my head full of samovars, *kvass*, roubles, and serfs,

my heart hungry for the steppe....

So yes, we were delivering rugs that were most likely
not just rugs,
but sometimes perhaps they were—a set of braided rugs
delivered to someone's grandmother in Queens,
a pyramid of stairway runners delivered to hotel in Yonkers.

No matter. Whatever the cargo, we were cool with it.
As long as someone would pay us to cruise the canyoned avenues,
race along labyrinthine bridges,
ghost through tunnels under dark rivers,
radio blaring,
brothers seatbelted side-by-side, the curve of the windshield
our common eye,
onion-and-hamburger diners waiting to replenish our coffee,
caffeine lighting our eyes from within like midnight dashboards—
hell, it was maybe the best job we ever had.

Aunt Zosha's Sky Blue Skylark

White-walled tires, white vinyl fastback roof,
 bucket seats and stick shift—
Aunt Zosha worked the clutch in a miniskirt
 and black boots,
the cigarette butts in the crowded ashtray
 all with a kiss of lipstick.

She had us kids sit four across in the backseat,
told us not to put our sneakers on the white vinyl upholstery,
blared the radio, singing along, eyes hidden
 behind huge sunglasses,
always incognito in mascara and eye shadow.

These boots are made for walking, she'd sing,
 lighting her cigarette,
the dashboard lighter glowing like a ray gun—
revving the motor, working the stick shift and clutch,
 peeling out just to give us kids a thrill.

We'd drive to the old neighborhood in Greenpoint—
to Uncle Stanley's Laundromat by the old trolley car barn
or—if we promised to keep it secret—
 her gypsy grandmother on Ash Street
(our great-grandmother, we'd whisper).

While the old woman eyed us across the table,
serving tea or vodka, asking which we'd have,
legions of faintly remembered relatives came and went—
 Ziggy, Stachu, Pavel, and old Bolek,
 Rachel, Bonnie, Agnieszka, and Chloé—
playing cards, dancing, the record player blaring,
everyone drinking cups of tea or vodka or both,
Aunt Zosha speaking Polish or gypsy to the old ones,
till inevitably we adjourned to admire her sky blue Skylark
 parked outside—
took some cousin or friend for a ride,
cruising down Manhattan Ave to McCarren Park....

Back at our grandmother's in Auburndale, we'd say
 we stopped at the Horn and Hardart's or Baskin Robbins,
felt our lie flush our faces like vodka,
 exhilarated,
hearing that gypsy music start up in our hearts,
 pulsing through our reddening ears.

Dreaming of White Castle on the Pulaski Skyway

We'd cruised *beneath* the skyway often enough,
tooling around on the boat,
a couple of quarts of beer, playing guitars in the stern,
Monica's sax cutting through the whoosh of traffic,
cruising along the chemical coast,
up through Arthur Kill into Newark Bay,
gliding across the gunmetal calm surface,
oil slicks along the shore making rainbows in the twilight,
the Pulaski Skyway looming gigantically ahead,
its maze of girders and struts arching high
above the water
like the exposed skeleton of some dinosaur or dragon—
gargantuan spine, massive ribcage, lashing tail—
the lines of cars moving along the roadbed
like frenzied ants devouring the last morsels of flesh
from the bones.

So after our last drop-off of the day in the delivery van,
my brother and I decided to take the Pulaski Skyway
back from Queens
even though the Lincoln Tunnel was faster—
take the Pulaski Skyway just for the hell of it
after delivering a couple of Persian rugs to a drugstore
in Flushing,
thinking we'd head over to our cousin's house, make a run
to White Castle around the corner,
shoot the shit....

We could almost smell those burgers as the skyway rose higher
and higher in the air,
those little square hamburgers with finely chopped onions,
small enough you could maybe eat a dozen yourself,
the warm bagful of burgers hanging from one hand
while you reached in and devoured them
one by one
in three bites....

Hurling homeward on the Pulaski Skyway,
the sunset and the fires of Elizabeth spread out before us,
making it seem that all New Jersey was on fire—
an inferno of smokestacks, gas jets, and chemical tanks
charbroiling the sky—
we listened to the radio's electric guitars reverberating
off the windshield,
someone singing about love in a dark time,
the tantalizing whiff of those White Castle burgers
beckoning us onward

to this conflagration we called home.