

## Conversations Overheard Inside

*At The Back Of The Road Atlas.* \* All text in quotes was found scrawled on the last page of a Rand McNally road atlas.

Chicago to Las Vegas dates unknown.  
Eavesdropping on someone else's road trip.  
It was America, is America, it will be America.

"I guess we solved The Free-will Question. (No)"  
Hypothetical disillusionment—the Freeway makes monks out of men.  
It's good, when it's good to be wrong.

"Tiny bladder"  
16oz every meal—It became an issue.  
Stiff joints, playing Fight Club in the Super 8 sleep.

"What's the closest airport?"  
There is a fairground, and a strip  
Where planes take off to spray the patchwork quilt.

"Little fuckers over in What Cheer, Iowa."  
Exit 201 begged to be taken. Population: 678.  
Some towns have only known hard times. What did you expect?

"Yes, but at least we'd never have a reason to see her again."  
Women get easy to resent out here. Mile 937—don't look  
At the burning crash. Forget to call on your mother's Birthday.

"Oh I'd say another two or three miles."  
Tiny bladder. The country hangs along  
Interstate 80, a cheap charm bracelet.

"What would Jesse do?"  
In Bountiful, Utah did you piss in Salt Lake?  
Take off your clothes but don't want to get wet.

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“I’m still a guy.”  
Comfort in the 3am silence— it’s not about passing.  
Nod to the U-Haul speeding in the right lane.

“What is cold and wet down the back of my shorts?”  
Tiny bladder. Crazy straws and watered down whiskey.  
Barely any rest stops past Des Moines.

“Tie the kids to the back of the limousine.”  
What would you name them?  
One night stands with funny labels.

“Gunpowder and lead (lace)”  
And leather. Every station is The Best Country Music.  
They love it in South Africa too—something about the slide guitar.

“Boomtime.”  
Will you father miss his police scanner?  
Roll down the windows so the smoke falls out.

“The Virgin River: because it runs just fast enough”  
Utah, Arizona, Nevada. Into the Colorado  
Where it slows. What did you gain in these mountains?

“Your family and their fucking gum”  
All these fat and shiny memories. Deep fried things.  
Gum sticks, but you’re growing up, moving on. You found the road.

“Next time we know how to have fun on a trip,  
We just go to a restaurant then hangout  
In the parking lot taking Boomtime pictures.”

*Citizenship from Below* \* Mimi Sheller

The conquerors  
keep easy  
kinds of records—  
that make it easy  
for history to stay on the surface  
just scratching at the paper trail.

I take solace in archeology.

As children  
The conquerors—they  
went to see the fossilized  
dinosaurs foot prints on the banks  
of the ancient river. It left such an impression.  
And so they stomp heavy  
dumbly fearing immortality.  
Hoping to evade it  
like the dinosaurs.

I take solace in extinction.

In their last will and testament  
they request tall headstones,  
afraid of their shadows  
disappearing when they do.

I take solace in electric lights of citizenship shining up from below.

*The New Old-Hack*

*(you remember fighting)*

Oh god!  
wouldn't it be like dying?  
You showed me a minefield  
and told me how  
you walked across it  
every morning  
on your way to doing  
the things you love.

*(you remember defeat)*

And you stopped doing  
the things you love.  
And you don't  
check out books  
from the library anymore.  
You took a job at McDonald's,  
and you fell off  
Out of the sky.

*(you remember fear)*

You had a lover once  
a few steps ahead  
with heartbeat  
like steamroller  
and diamond colored dreams,  
just as  
sure—just as  
sharp.  
And when he was blown  
up  
you grew love letters  
from the dirt  
under your fingernails  
and you cried,  
but did not visit him in jail.

*(you remember a future)*

You tell me  
what the early 2000s  
did to us.  
You tell me a story  
about this paranoia  
that shattered your bones,  
about a quiet  
McCarthy era—  
unobtrusive  
Secret Service  
tapping through  
your maple bark  
and revolution's sugar  
flowing out  
on to the ground.

*My mother, the professor of childhood, gave a lecture on Snow White.*

My mother always sounds like she is about to weep.  
Her students nod.  
Mirrors mirror film.  
Spinning  
was a metaphor for telling.  
She speaks  
by jumping off the edge of thinking deeply.  
Walt erased all the spinning mothers.  
Who does the telling anyway?

Mother,  
it's a man's world.  
We held the apple in our hands and it filled with poison  
It is called faulty pedagogy.  
You teach about children,  
so you know.  
I absorb you  
—with all your flaws.  
You watch.  
What is foreshadowing for, now that all the stories have been told?  
My brother—  
my father—  
you,  
raspberry prologues into your belly.

Hold me like newborn ears,  
because the world whispers soft and incessant.  
Tell me a new story now.  
No place for jealousy.  
No motive but love.

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*Echoes of Tuskegee* \* some notes on my experience during the night shift at the Fresno ER.

*I have a confession:*

I wore blue latex gloves,  
walked the linoleum hallway from triage and  
in the early California morning,  
under doctor's lax direction I  
saved a woman's life.  
She was still alive  
at least  
when my shift ended.

I am not proud;  
I am terrified.  
of what it means to owe someone  
nothing after the night shift turns in.  
Of what it means to research amateur  
on a stranger's body  
and never to say,  
"May I"  
or "Thank you."

*Haunting me:*

Alabama haunts me  
from the thirties to the seventies.  
For 40 years The Tuskegee  
Institute kept black bodies  
in petri dish  
share crop quarters  
growing cultures of medical atrocity  
—growing cultures of "progress."  
Brought to us by:  
*Racialized front lines.*

History has mouthfuls that  
I don't know how to talk about and  
when I try to swallow—  
I cut up my throat.

I should bleed out lab rats.  
I should bleed out syphilitic sores grown on black bodies after science had a cure.  
I should bleed out their children; sick by birthright.  
I should bleed when surviving means breathing, but does not mean life.

*My platelets—my whiteness:*

scab over like mercury and  
underneath these seamless scars  
we have not changed—

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growing sores  
on black bodies  
after science had a cure.

Everything is syphilis,  
from night stick, to  
achievement gap, prison  
bars, dreams unspoken,  
fish tank overpass,  
dying for my sins  
Garner, Brown, Martin.

There is no consent in social experimentation.  
So how can I condescend to ask for consent?

*I want to apologize:*

Woman,  
You are probably dead by now.  
You were maybe 40.  
They said you had overdosed on something.  
You were unconscious when they found your body.  
Your body  
I am sorry.

I know you had a life and  
a story and  
loved ones who remember you.  
I know that your death is not a lesson and  
I must learn to be better.  
I do not know your name.

*I am sorry.*  
I know how your naked body fell  
across the hospital cot  
in coma humiliation.

The doctor asked me if I wanted to practice CPR and  
I didn't say, "How is this practice?"  
Your breasts spilling  
milk over asphalt  
away from my fists and  
I didn't cry, but  
I should have.

I know how your broken breastbone clicks  
in and out as I pump your limping heart.  
I know how half opened eyes roll back and  
can't make contact and  
what could an apology possibly mean to you now?

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*If I had said:*

“Stay with me now.”  
You were never here with me.  
Separate lives—separate lessons.  
You had learned how to be victimized and  
I was learning how to rape.

Woman,

Yes, your heart began to beat again  
as I beat your chest.

I do not know how long  
you survived after that—  
brain dead and pale blue-black  
on the cot.

I know there is nothing right  
about living or dying  
surrounded by white coat  
strangers singing “Staying Alive”  
by the Bee Gees  
in bar room cacophony,  
so a scared little white girl  
can learn how  
to keep the beat  
on your still  
breaking  
heart.

The Tuskegee experiments  
—echoes themselves—  
echo through the nation a quiet and effecting call—  
ignore—violate—ignore—  
violate—ignore—violate—  
ignore...