

Brief Illumination

There's a story my uncle once told me about a special train
that would clatter past Parchman Penitentiary after midnight,

those headlights shining on the walls like Rosie's salvific breasts,
her outstretched hand holding official papers that would free

the sorriest of men. Lead Belly did time in cells such as those,
though not too much, seeing as how the governor of Texas liked

his strong, gravelly voice, how he made his 12-string Stella guitar
swell with low, rhythmic finger picking. An hour east of that rail line,

Peggy leans closer to me and whispers "That is the prettiest thing
I ever heard" as my friend fiddles freely on the darkly-lacquered

porch of my family's vacation home. This is the same Peggy who
served me pancakes and bacon as a boy, who will make sure we're

fed tonight, who will clean our sheets in the morning. Tomorrow,
my friend and I will kneel in the syrupy dusk among tufts of cotton,

those earthbound clouds that provide no shade. Her hands will finger
a boll, her eyes will glance over at mine as if to say: *You don't see this?*

My uncle said Lead Belly was a bad man, but he was pardoned.
This isn't such a bad land, but it's hushed, hardened. As night falls

I think of the mournful wail of that train whose fleeting light hit
every burgh on its way north, of the screeching hope on those rails.

Tomorrow, we'll inhale a last sweet breath of clay and pine, fire up
the engine, swerve around a desiccated armadillo, rattle on south.

Green Tables

Escalera by R.C. Gorman, lithograph, 41 in. x 29.75 in., 1988

One mouth can't tell the whole story,
try as it might to silence other tongues.
Already my English has missed the point.

The saltbush, pinyon-juniper, ponderosa pine
of Gorman's Chinle childhood greened to
the tributary's edge where his hands would

form figures from the silty clay, astonished
creations and their young god at the mercy
of a river that would be dammed in decades.

The woman in the lithograph doesn't give
one damn to all the weight she's shouldered,
glancing aside like she's proud of it too.

In a dress the hues of musk thistle, crescent
milkvetch, pointleaf manzanita, of perennial
rockcress, thorny skeletonweed, yarrow,

she's hauling herself up a ladder, as am I,
scraping my shoulder on a narrow stone
opening in Mesa Verde that leads out to

an empty wall of sky, separating the ruins
in the wounded white flesh of a sandstone
cliff from any contact beyond the chasm.

Ancestral Pueblo people lived here for
a hundred years, blackening the walls
of kivas with smoke during wet winters,

scaling the rock to gather yucca, sumac, to
hunt rabbit, deer. Then one day, they left,
some settling in what would become Chinle.

Why did they stay so long? Why did an
entire civilization tough it out for a century,
then vanish? And why is she still climbing—

the woman—to where does she expect to
ascend? Purple and pink as dreams she
emerges from the painting into a floodplain

where a boy is playing in the mud, coaxing
life out of silica and quartz, leaving charcoal
scrawls on the walls of a canyon whose

floor is a vast green riverine surface where
wide-eyed figurines, a child's budding
spirit, and her sturdy bones can feast.

State of Being

We'd both been so nervous that first night
we shared a bed,

the first night I'd shared a bed with anyone

so I powered on my tablet and read some
Steinbeck, you know the passage:

*and now that you don't have to be
perfect, you can be good*

and good lord the ease that encircled us

for we were just friends who liked literature
and learning and had hit the road together

as one does if one has privilege and time
and, say, there was that one day

—

in some tiny Tennessee town
where a bearded man in pressed Civil War attire
gestured toward a Confederate flag

beyond which sat eight stone hearts, each
the size of a calf, emblazoned with the words:

Prepare to meet God, with instructions
on the nearest to *erect on Jupiter 1990-S*

as if extraterrestrials would comprehend
hearts engraved in English

—

or when we filled our hearts and bellies
in an old car repair shop in Ozona, TX

where a woman with a gap-toothed grin and
penetrating glare served up heaping portions

of barbeque brisket, pinto beans, coleslaw,
cornbread, lemonade, and as we took
our leave

I thanked her husband for the meat, to which
he silently tipped his dusty hat

—

and that older woman who sidled up to me
on the dingy dance floor
of the Buffalo Chip Saloon in Tucson

teaching me to waltz with a vice grip,
steering my hips and telling me

how she once saw
beetles so big you could rope and ride 'em
and what do you say to that?

what does one say to the chopped hair
of Chiricahua Apaches in the exhibit
the next day,

strewn about as if the museum floor was a
hair salon for crying out loud

—

and I wonder how loudly those
Apache fiddles can resonate, the ones

Anthony Belvado constructed from
agave stalks and horsehair strings,

and farther down, that wall of rusty
thumb pianos and Cape Town ramkies,
dials drilled into Castrol oil cans

back in the car she turned the music up
but we were stuck on the same months-old

playlist, stuck on playing at being lovers

—

how playfully I leaned out the car window
as we left Telluride, the rainbow

behind us so magnificent it was corny

and I kept repeating *it's right there,*
it's right there! as she drove on and grinned,

the aspens glinting golden up and up

—

and now up in this skyscraper, I know
my massive Lego saber can't save her

and there's no need for a knight in
quick-dry clothes and hiking boots, no need
for a hero of any kind

but I swing anyway, the plastic blocks
crumbling at the first swipe

and later, on the hurtling hearse of the 'L'
train, among the other passengers,

each of us in our separate selves

I'll think it is ok to make eye contact:
the eyes of the terrified beseech

—

to the east, bees whirl and whorl around
calico aster blooms on Indiana roadsides

tall ironweed stems and iron forges blast
across the hard billowing plains of Ohio

silos scattered across Pennsylvania
farmland store oats, rye, barley, soybeans
and who can say what else—

but we haven't seen any of that yet
and even when we do, can't
promise I'll know what to make of it at all

—
so what should I make of this moment?
or this one?

what state are we in anyway?

what state are we in the midst
of being?

Abandoned Fairytale

You can't miss it: along US-30, the towering
Pied Piper of Hamelin, patriotic in his
red pants, his blue jacket and cap, golden
instrument pressed to his lips—

*From street to street he piped, advancing /
And step for step, they followed, dancing*

But the fairytale park has been closed
for decades, the rest of the giant statues—
the goofy pink egg atop a stone wall;
the whale with a knight on its tongue;
the brown shoe (conveniently roofed);
the mushroom with a door and chimney,
as if someone resides in the stipe—
are dingy, deteriorating. So much is
abandoned, left in the past.

*There was an old woman who lived in a shoe, /
She had so many children she didn't know
what to do*

What to do with the ten thousand miles
behind us, with the hundred or so left to go?
Do we continue to merge like streams,
or do we diverge, disentangle, drift apart
like tides until years utterly obscure
the other from view?

*Simple Simon went a-fishing / For to catch
a whale: / All the water he had got /
Was in his mother's pail*

While a sack of pale scenes dangles
at my side, the flayed light simmers
out of the sky and I'm back in Memphis,
sequined pants sparkling on an animatronic
Elvis; back in Phoenix, the dusty shoes
of Japanese internment camp prisoners
stacked up like bones; back in North
Platte, the Buffalo Bill Cody shrine
jutting from the Nebraskan flatness,
wooden and phallic.

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, /
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall*

We drive on, past cracked Schellsburg
storefront windows, empty and eerie,
past all those museums we'd perused
glimpsing ourselves reflected back
in the panes of glass. Everything
after tonight will be remembering a
remembering. The mind recalls
itself, recollecting what cannot
be collected again.

*Old Mother Goose, when /
She wanted to wander, / Would—*

Furnishings

Sheepish bloat of a furniture store at night, items
faintly illumined through
the glass displaying the square footage it takes to
suggest arrangements

we can make in our pleasantly enclosed lives.
Starfish of ceiling fans, thrones
of headboards, wooden dining tables holding forth
for flocks of prim parsons chairs.

And this vehicle a vestibule for the body,
a house for aching
bones, a chamber for whatever nimble soul
may be a part of the deal.

In an airy, ancient apartment in Wilmette
I've lain with a girl I knew
I wouldn't stay with, have seen how much
that silence can say.

The room was lovely, too. Plush king bed, gray
linen comforter, a surplus
of natural light, sensual postmodern canvases,
a sculpture of a tree in the corner.

I am still wandering streetlight-stained highways
while a furnished home beckons,
am still exhuming and examining the past,
listless, listening.