

The 3 birds frame

a river at dusk

where children play

pretending to catch bats—calling them souls—as in, “Emma, I’ve caught your soul

again.” Hop

scotch. Jump

rope. Billy-Will-You. All summer in and out of yards

I watch as you hesitate at the foot of a neighbor’s drive trace a finger across the faint
blonde hairs of your arm I am somewhere deep inside. Not yet even a thought.

1946: Men broken by war sleep alone on screened-in summer porches: Behind them

dreamlocked,

disembodied, the faces of wives who you will one day become. Here is the world—

Sparse. Silent. We are left from it: Bird

alone,

set before us the day

**July—
Attleboro**

First come the dog walkers Then tatted-out fifteen year olds with cell-phones

(—*Mother*

fucker their soft insistent calling)

After two skels and street people open yet again a beautiful opera of themselves

Other nights there are small cries—windows being pulled shut, a door

And years ago I heard as well my father who had once held a vision of this life

Awake in his bedroom late hands pressed above his chest praying *Do not unto us*

Do not for hours on end This was just before Florida where he played out

Really, alone (as so many of us, to one degree or other, will) some sort of final string

Just past dawn the trash pickers appear: Wagon Man with his Red Radio Flyer

The older couple from my block—battered gray carts fixed to their bike frames

And among them always the same Russian woman who in the deepest winter cold

—Two or three bags over each shoulder and bent it seems forever

Forward hair plastered to her pale stiff face—But it's summer that I see them most

On mornings when I take my dog out early and we stand together in the yard

The local train slowing just beyond a line of trees for the station a half-mile away

And two lights from the 3rd floor rooms of the wounded veteran like boats at a distance

Some of those mornings are a miracle

On the Fourth of July

it is enough that jets fly low overhead into the great american landscape
that the podium is set all wrapped in ribbon and bunting

that candidates step up to demote with great passion and a flash of teeth

it is enough, apparently, so forget for a minute standing sidelong on earth
desperate to reach someone— anyone— that connection is broke that gesture
gone forget the gaunt women who daily rifle through the trash in your alley
and seem to know you by name forget the living and the dead
the latest child found by the bend in the river the sun which has hammered
without mercy against windows for how many days until your small family

was forced into a single room: incessant, without end forget even the sidereal sky
beneath which you sit now on colorful blankets stomachs full and waiting—*again*
the baby insists *do it again* and you sail it across rocky meadows and green hills

Luther: Can You Smell the Death All Under These Floorboards?

Up in the dunes someone's heart is being cancelled

Up in the cottage dresses like red balloons in morning light bright as wire

And the sun which could finally be God

One day years ago I was stopped dead in the street by a dog

All teeth and low intent, he broke and ran through a six-foot hedge to get at me

Don't worry, the owner called out, he's only playing: *Right!* Remember those radicals—

The ones who coat-hanger wired a shotgun to a judge's head during their trial in the 60s?

Sometimes there is only one way of any person being granted the ability to hear another

Which is to say fuck the coral reef that used to be Pensacola

The ruinous deserts of Texas Oklahoma

There is a stab inside of *me!* Just one Or more A lot more

Anyway, owner comes grabs his dog drags it back to the porch I started off

Dog broke free again: out the door—same goddamn six-foot hedge, same snarl and threat

If I could have climbed into a car driven home and gotten a gun I'd of shot that dog

It would have been a low thing to do, but in the moment Same day I hear two guys

One saying about his cousin meeting Al Gore in a downtown restaurant and coming back

Talking if Gore had only been elected President, we'd had lived in a whole different world—

A *whole* different world, the other says? Says he don't think so Says: Al Gore had been

President he'd still eat wherever he wanted and the bus-boys and bus-girls—every single

One—would still be able to watch their legs blown off in some foreign country or another

Summer, the red moon is an endless loop just above streets where waves touch and touch

Up in the dunes the cancelled heart person might hang himself—

Or not Children run screaming into the sea

In Hiroshima,
1947,

old women
wash flowers in a field by hand.

At 3, the day appears
broken. Children

rush
past.

The women kneel.

2.

Highway 80—along a conduit of the upper pool, several girl's
slips
flutter the water, the girls—

each as if a reed bent from the preacher's hand,
folded

back, slight frames submerged to shoulder: *Pray for me now—*

I walk away.

A long hill and no bird in sight, the sky darkening,
summer gods half suffocated, and out below,

the grass purple-green, full to bursting: a sea,

the prairie's slow

fall
and rise
to harsh redemption.

3.

“Missed a big snake back there by the creek.”

The man is a cowboy. Fixed eyes, long-distance gaze. A yachtsman, searching land where land is everything. In the nineteenth century, whenever ships crossed paths under sail in mid-ocean, they “spoke” first with signal flags, and then if conditions allowed: hove to,

lowered boats, and the captains

each in his gig—exchanged greetings as they bobbed on the wavetops.

The first settlers here: Swede, Scot, Dane, some Irish and German. What sustained them? To be populated in number sufficient to the railroads’ need the land had first to be made real. North and South Dakota into Montana—

The Great American Desert—

”Uncle Sam sends you an invitation”

on pamphlet and handbill left in bar, waiting room, butcher shop: *The Enlarged American Homestead Act*. Half-built towns, the accidental conception faded now to antique, insufficient to the land. Yet, much as in Genesis, the company (Milwaukee Road/Great Northern Pacific) said let there be a city: and there was. Infant constellations flung into being for no reason other than let it be so: a map on someone’s desk and “about time for a new town.”

No trees of their own accord.

Pocket cemetery.

Deserted school on a hill—hay bales stacked in what had been the recess yard. A frayed ship’s rigging holding up the screen of an abandoned drive-in theater. A dozen ruined homes.

Joist, roofbeam, buckled by Montana winter and turned toward violin

curve. Stove-in chicken coop, tin bath with a hole in its bottom, wringer, bedstead, and inside

a scurry of wings: swallows who’ve built wattle-and-daub nests at picture height on parlor walls.

A flyswatter hung on its appointed nail.

An ironing board stood open.

And the frames stout. Floors like a yacht's deck. Meant for grandchildren and their children's children. Tongue-in-chiseled-groove: true believer. Here, the power of redemption. Europe's final religion. Forty miles driving alone—
and then the cowboy. We sit
in comfortable silence.
Truck pulled
even with car/ window to open window. I'd stopped to eat.

4.

In a cold
early fog—the feel of certain
mornings when couldn't be said

what should went so deep
and the only warmth
so faint, Father,
broken and close.
On the day of your death I was working,
had obsessed, as I often did, about heart attacks, and finally called
and both of you answered—or I should say picked up—Mother in the kitchen and you
from the bed where you often lay thinking, fingers drumming your chest. Only she spoke.
I could hear your breath and the soft click as you cradled the phone. And after, it was
was the smell of the couch where you'd fallen, and that alone, that I could ever truly recall.

What is it in ourselves which makes us think we could be any different?
Yesterday I sat pissing in a bathtub.
It was 8 a.m. I believe I was a little drunk.
Listen: I've been committed to hospitals and prisons, and once
held a loaded gun
to my head in a public place. No one's going to give me another try.

I draw this line, and another. They mean:
city—

It's winter.

A bag blown among leaves on a walkway.

Voices at a distance.

Each day, the old women. And the field.

Crow above: pull down light.

Section 3: adapted from Badlands: An American Romance, Jonathan Raban.