

Better laid plans [Fitzwater]

Bicycle rides lead inevitably to sex.
That was the plan
and this was to be a long ride

Plenty of time for sun and salt upon the skin,
for conversation, sublimation, evaporation,
passwords and cheap lines you didn't require

'Let me be your guide on the portage path,
invent a new past for us
away from that man

Forget that greyhound bus, \$98.00 +tax'
on a blind stretch of Broadway
July '16, Akron, O.

I wanted you in ways I don't remember,
can't know now, I beat it out of me
in the colorless dawn before I woke

In the belly of the morning,
with red blood and swollen liver,
sketching your arrival and inflating for you

Photos from days of skinner selves,
grinning for the camera against
a backdrop of staghorn sumac

Picturing happiness you can't quite speak
but feel it between your teeth,
crashing your body against mine

In my cheap wood-paneled apartment,
scotching an elbow on the low windowsill
was the summit of this life, I believed

We must have been brave,
calling up and fucking on a dime,
we must have fit together

Like spokes on a wheel.
Thank you for this fantasy we made,
we don't speak, but we're living in it still

Instructions on loss [Riverview Rd]

You must cover your grief in seven inches of fresh powder,
roll it over in your Snowcat in blue hours before dawn
so it has that rippled, corduroy shine
and carve, schussing diagonal over the low brow
of the hill, allowing stainless steel edges
to fight gravity and the accumulation of ice in your chest
over many years before you are frozen out

You must take a drag and pretend
not to notice concern on the face beside you,
over salisbury steak, rice pilaf,
the iceberg salad and tea lights,
the endless nights laid out before you
prone on the bed in white cotton boxer shorts

You will be soft
and so was the night you held to
the patter of rain on leaves and lovely stuff like that,
the hurting time, across weeks and tables,
greying hair, the childhood bed and the unfamiliar
geography of your wife's body

You'll sleep, waiting for your own birth,
the warp of wood around him
shaking hands, remembering who you love
remembering his cough in crowded rooms,
lying still, turning green,
tar macadam slowly fracturing on a hillside of ice

You will sit and wait for your ride to end
as the car slows and gravity reaches out to hold you,
the bumper of the Toyota in front of you lit
by the screaming headlight, your cursing father
in the snow, and purple night
settling on dim fingers, the dead marsh by Riverview Rd

Childhood, sketches [Boston Twp]

We must have been bored out of our skulls
when your sister's boyfriend drove us in his van
to tour the haunts of the backwoods
gleaned from a GeoCities page

Crumbling "Helltown" awaited us:
the upside-down cross beneath the "satanic" church's rotten steeple
(even at age 11, clearly an architectural mainstay)
the eerie backward motion of "Gravity Hill," car in neutral
(I didn't feel the pull)
idling at the side of the road, the brave kid among us
yelling abuse at the melon-headed mutants
who stalked these woods at night
peeling away as quick as the Dodge would carry us
all shrieking with laughter, heading home
to potato chips and a nap on a green leather sofa

Older now, and we don't talk
perhaps you're married
or living in a duplex with your dog
however, wherever you are
mold becomes us
bastard children of crooked New England
from dust to midwest dust

Roads were hacked into the Whittlesey land (the colonel
stole their name before he stole the earth
from under their feet, swapped it
with the rust-colored carpet we wove)
tracts drawn and split, the groves receded,
railroad stations, banker's homes, hotels and wooden schools,
opera houses raised in mill towns you've never heard of
where W.C. Fields stopped and drank for a night

Now the damp, grey ribbon of roadway
cracks beneath snow and sun,
straight, narrow and neat
bounded by empty lots, clumps of weeds
where the river and canal narrow dangerously,
the life of one spills over into the other
and we are changed

In every direction, if you look
the farthest thing you see are trees

The dull green of leaves in photographs
remind us that we used to suspire,
now the breath of rust, the damp, descending
 from barred clouds
as the V-twin engine mutters through the valley

Ballad [Lonesome Lock]

This was a nasty stretch of the canal,
no more than a mile or two in either direction
were towns, taverns, churches,
mills and post offices
but barges slowed up here

The river bent and spongy land
sucked the breath from the air,
the low, crooked nature of trees here – a shout
for help would catch in the branches,
they say robbers prized this water

Mills have crumbled,
trees deadened, fallen,
the river caught fire, sank, blackened like a tire,
it rained, settled, greened a cautious green again
and the sun baked Stumpy Basin

They laid the turnpike, erected a wooden walkway
where girls on training wheels skid to a halt,
joggers go with phones and well-tanned triceps
and saggy men photograph geese in the fog

The canal leaves behind its share of orphans
they dance in the margins of my skull,
bright swamps and stinks of July,
dead limbs fingering the sky,
pools, long and neat, nearly rectangular
a few yards from the riverbank,
painted turtles have their run of the place now
bullfrogs are the only shouters

This is where you live, where you break the branch,
here you walk the trail like a ghost
when your lips returned a smile
and I married those lips here you live
and in the tin box in my mind

Please understand, you're about as real as your toes
and you only control those
about two thirds of the day,
the rest is given over to misfiring synapses,
acid, heat, light and the dull electric
impulse that floats between our bodies
when I touch your hand, asleep