

Billy Baxter's Wooden Car

One day I was walking down Station Road when I heard an engine rev,
the sound naked and raw; Billy yelling above the shriek
of loose belts and a cold start.
churned up mud on old clapboards
the small house blackened by exhaust
I built plastic models; at fifteen Billy built the real thing.
I sat on a picnic bench bolted to a chassis made of two-by-fours;
all of this to support an engine, axles and wheels that moved us through the mud.
He just drove us in circles, past the front porch, across the rough-cut driveway,
around the mound of tires and back to square one. "It's a Chrysler Slant-6"
Billy yelled above the roar, tapping the steering wheel.
"Got this from a '57 De-Soto" he said.
I had this thought that he had been dipped in oil, never to be completely clean,
but I didn't care. I rode the circle many times with Billy that summer.
When school started I kept looking for him in the halls, in the lunch room.
I walked past his house and I saw his car beside the porch, one flat
tire and a bent axle.
On a Sunday morning I climbed onto his creation.
A woman walked onto the porch, a toothless witch gumming a cheeseburger.
"Billy don't live here no more" she said; "moved in with his grandpa in
New Jersey; was doin shit with his little sisters.
I realized that all he ever talked about was pistons and drive shafts, never about
his life inside that dirty house. I think she wanted to tell me more but I
didn't want to hear anything else.

Back Talk

I am you and I've come back to visit you. I'm like that distant star you see in the winter sky, so infinitely far away, like I was to you when people were of two kinds, children and grown-ups with a boundless vortex in between. When you looked at your father, smelled his dirty clothes, you didn't know that some of those distant stars no longer exist. It's been said that, if you travel to infinity, you'll end up staring at the back of your head. Well, mom and dad have died but I won't tell you when because you'll just use it as an excuse to stop taking your medication. You remember the leak in the ceiling and the broken windows? You just expected everything to be as it always was no matter how distant that star was. You just came out of a mold and were already labeled. Well, you were right you little shit. I still live in that rusty old tin can and the ceiling still leaks when it rains. I have nothing, no money, no dignity, no hope. Why couldn't you muster up just a shred of audacity to think that you could become a mechanic or a plumber. Thank the lord that you broke the mold and I have no children to feed, no children to smell my clothing, my fetid breath. If you knew that you would be the end of the line, would you have let me become just another black hole in the night sky?

The Boy with the Crystal Trinket

It lay under your mother's empty bed. Reach for it child through the layers of dust and take it in your hand; hold it gently like it was your mother's fragile heart.

Do not leave it with your father. He has anger issues. Hide it from your uncle. He is a corrections officer. Do not give it to your grandmother. She will soon be with your mother.

Put it in a small box beside the two animal books and find someone to cling to, someone at the hospital or the lady with the soft voice who comes to visit on Mondays and Thursdays.

Do not bring it to school. Children steal things. Let it absorb the light of day and shimmer in your tears at night. Take it to the park where she carried you inside and out.

I was assigned to help build your skills. You showed me today that you can tie your shoes but the bow was too small and your laces dragged. I can help you with that but I don't know what else to do.

The Deacon's Lament

Five years after Uncle Kenneth came home from
The Big One two things happened;
I was born and Kenneth began to paint.

His sky was an empty home void of children,
each stone in the stream a cobblestone from
Church Lane just outside Manchester.

She is looking down into the water.
He will only allow himself a subtle profile, a reflection
in the stream sluicing around her perfect toes.

The *Instructions for Servicemen in Britain* said not
to show off and never to criticize the king or queen.
There were no rules about falling in love.

He left her in a village outside of Essex after Operation
Overlord. He left her there like a half glass of Guinness
left at the pub because there was a plane to catch.

He flew home to Mama and joined The Dutch Reformed Church.
When the calling came, he became the Deacon.
He polished pews, painted Bingo signs and painted a memory.

We learn of the broken hearts of fathers and
uncles only when we ourselves have grown old,
when wars are history and wounds have scarred over.

I sat on his knee while he read the Sunday comics to me.
She was on the wall in a golden scalloped frame.
The cigarette in her slender fingers was very natural.

If I knew that she was more than a piece of his imagination.
If I knew that each brushstroke of her golden hair was a heartache,
I would have said I was sorry.

Please Brush the Snow from My Shoulder

When the wind was captured inside
the soft blanket of white and the sound
of machines was dampened to a whisper,
I tried to catch the snowflakes on my tongue.

They did not rage from the sky. The
percussion against the window pane
was not from shrieking banshees darting
sideways in the howling wind.

When my mittens were caked in white
and my cheeks rosy, Mama met me at
the back door. She warmed my hands
and brushed the snow from my shoulder.

Mama died in the spring, many years
after the cold wind escaped, moaning
and howling relentlessly and turning
my fingers a ghostly white.

If you were still here, Mama, you could
wait for me while I fill the gas generator
as the Gulf Stream meets the descending
arctic freeze in a counter-clockwise air mass.

When the chains are taut you could clean
the blood from my knuckles. I cannot do
this much longer, Mama. I am tired and my
arms can no longer reach places they once did.

So meet me at the threshold and stand on
your tiptoes to give me the illusion of being
taller; capture the wind for me and
please brush the snow from my shoulder.