

BOWERSVILLE

Zack Carson

Gas Station at the West End

“What Shell are you in?”
is not common among
our more-deviant communities.

There was only
the one,
built a distance away from the overpass
that bypassed the town entirely,
and it stood as a last blast
of very bright halogen light
before the big, sheer darkness
that sucked in
the rural interstate.

I always imagined it
a flashlight, held in the town’s hand
amidst the black forest
of the universe.

Neither the other kids
nor I in the midst of our marigold highs
understood that if we drove the interstate
and pushed through the night
then, naturally, more light
on a new town’s horizon as night
gives a bit and brightens.

Traveling Girl

The black of the parking
lot, yes, there you can see
her.

Crass patch, like a faith token,
dreadful dark hair,
strange complexion in lamplight.
You should avoid speaking anything.
It's reported she carries
a knife, a child,
and that means she's never alone.

But these are mere
things that do not make her.
Ruined by her father
when she was in his project home
and it's understood she never told.
Broken baby in a hospital,
run-ins with old
boyfriends, never finishing the programs.
Those sorts of things make her.
You would move strictly
straight through the lot. You'll
avoid the lot it holds.

Las Vegas

She vommed up
the Vicodin and Vyvanse
and her head smacked back against
the tiled floor, falling onto that scratchy
and newly-damp green
towel that came from my mom's.
Her eyes veiled with a dark glaze
like those bouquets for graves
you get at the Dollar Tree
and she had a vision of Heaven.

*It looks like an Afterlife
but I don't know
these people.*

And she gasped having sighted
true beauty and fluttered and fell back
onto me.

John Eight-Clip

Side A

He had his
jaw broke a couple times
back in the Midwest,
like an oxblood
lobster with a
crushed claw.

He only slept inside
(even then just on
hardwood) when the van
frosted over
in the driveway.
I saw him eat
cat food in a ball
of bread once.

Side B

A hard and odd man
like a *Mad Max*
survivor who'd come
back from a future
without water or cops,
to show me
what apes we'll become.

Fox Womb

You got a nest
of rats and critters under your
trailer, miss. Shouldn't be too long.

Usually the park gets a little
crowded in the winter months
but not often somethin' like this
in spring.

Usually there isn't a woman
with a hair of forest fire
or a shape as fine as if it never had kids
peerin' over me from the porch while I got
a casket of rodenticide
riding my shoulders.
Usually I'm not forcing a hand
through latticework
to grab a clutch of baby foxes
still wet with amniotic.

Usually don't find myself fighting to daydream about absent husbands
or wonder what a fire spirit woman would want
to eat with me when I'm holdin' two rats by the throat
and it's springtime at the Pelican Shores Mobile Home Park.

[]

Pistol-whipped bastard from birth
and man, how such a story
is not doing him any favors.
Stopped eating to make ends
meet, the lizard fiend
and then he moved on to pushing
weed (sometimes ecstasy).
Good-looking cut behind his ear
from his one stint in county
where guards, prisoners, conjugal
visitors all have this sick patina,
how you'd look in a body formed from bronze
on this most oxidized of worlds.
His girlfriend drives him to get the things done.
Buyers have long admired her stoned devotion,
ironclad stupidity, and his
calloused ignorance of what it is
she's doing for his alizarin career,
to say nothing of his empty-chambered life.

Pawn Shop Scour

Your brother's got his
two-pack habit back, a real sign
he's on his shit again.
He's moved into the garage for the second time,
and though he's got the peach guest room
to himself,
(the floor shelled with empty red cardboard Winston-pack carapaces)
he's made a pile of your mother's nice green comforters on the old paint stains,
under the tool wall with the cork backing
that my dad gave us when we got married.
You know which comforters,
the ones
you two probably
used to camp in the backyard with
or read under
or cry about your deadbeat dad
under.
A little shifty about the guest room.
He says, *You know man, y'all are putting me up,
let me get out of y'all's way. It's cozy in there with the space heater.*

But I'm also missing a tie.
I'm trying very hard to convince
myself it is coincidence.

The box of DVD's in the guest room,
well, that looks different, a shuffle, not our clean confine.
Mighty Ducks. Your Criterion Godard Collection. The sixth *Star Wars*.
My signed copy of *Do the Right Thing*. They are not
there, but I didn't want to jump
to conclusions. Just a quick drive to your brother's
gig at the DQ, the old brick one, where he runs credit cards, just to ask.

Not accuse, no way.

But they haven't seen him
for two weeks and anyway
he wasn't so great at the window or with customers
and that dick manager said he was sure
he used someone else's piss for the test
so it was going this route unless he shaped up...
And at 24 Hr. Guns Ammo I saw a silver
box set with that design we've spent so much time
marveling at, the Godard.
I wasn't sure if it was really ours. You know.

Obviously we can't *give him up*.

But maybe
getting the garage back
wouldn't be so bad.

Darker Handcraft

When her house lit up
my youngest sister was cawing
and sweeping
with her hands
to try to get into
a flight
out of my arms
and back
across the street
to get the bird
yet now in a cage.
Her momma
was still at work
and something in
the cavities of the basement
had popped and made
the house smolder
so I grabbed her and her dog
and were borne cross the street.

We have no jackets
and between the shades
of winter,
a squadron of bats
bursts fore and above the neighbor's house
standing behind us
and we are engulfed
for a moment
in a kind and terrifying
split and lop of the night,
out of which a wheel
of red fur and small arms
tears out.
Hundreds dive lower
to kiss our cheek.
They bounce into us and
there is a warmth.

Then ascend, scattered past
my sister's house,
disappear through
the heaving smoke.

After a Day's Worth of Community Service

The relaxation tapes I got
as a reprobate
from my officer never worked.

In the dark, at 1 AM
I would hear
a mousey and lilting voice
guiding me to sink
into the foam pad,
breathe deeply
exhale all tensions
as if they were visible
like a thick black smoke.

*You may think you deserve to feel this way,
that negativity will prepare you
for what comes
or negativity is a just punishment.
I am here to say that is not true.*

Oh it is true.

I tried to expel
but the smoke boiled
in my muscles and back
and roiled in my stomach.
I never tried
that hard, because I knew
that the smoke was bolted
to me like rivets.

If I have to have it
I want it.
I want to keep it like a big, hawking
black crow that perches on
my head and never flies
and always stares.
It rides with me

on the subways
and it glares at all the riders.
The agent at the turnstile
knows it stays with me
on the train, just as
she knows her uniform is blue.
It visits my girlfriend's mother
with me.
It nests in my hair when I sleep.
I never dream too deep
it always pulls a bit on the scalp.
Something more relaxing on the other side
of the tape I hope.

Lament for All the Dead Cowboys

How many horses died
to get me where I got?

I could have
been the master of sweet calf,
in snake leathers,
with an armful of songs
and women
who are into that sort of thing.

A true American dealer
of the cows and steers
and a galloper, interloper
of the wide white interiors of
the landscape.

Those careers went the way
of cathode ray
TV's that got the VHS
slot that I see
at Dollar Tree:
a slow push to neglect.

That's \$8.45 for the beer sir
and as I reach to give him his change
I wonder where the horses are sleeping.

Loaded Gun in the Closet

He kept one
and Mara Lee never knew
if it was for him or her.

He didn't hunt. He worked roofing
and he came to
resemble his profession: blistered as tar,
sun-damaged and blackened
with crusted heat.
Granular to the touch
and therefore she stopped.

But she'd gotten felt up
by her passions before,
enjoying the throb,
so she couldn't just
leave them to dust along
with her desert ovary.
He worked such long and boiling hours
anyway, and the clerk
had a boyish, vulnerable
and weak charm.

After the boy finished
and as the sun gave way
to its withering blues,
she came to and knew
it was an awakening-scarecrow threat
in the farm-field.

List of Local Nicknames or Insults

2-Tone Redneck
Mammoth Fucker
Gas Station-Drugs Enthusiast
Prick Faggot
Hands-Holding Weakling
Food Lion Security Guard Descendent
Parking Lot Handjob Reveller
No-Condoms Mary
Lonely Bleachers Porn Hobbyist
Lord of Gross Cum
Red-Faced Bastard
Drive-Thru Window Drug Service
Dog-Fight Killer Sam
Abandoned Likely School Shooter
Crack-Faced Charlie Manson
Deserted Library Attendant
Prison Food Connoisseur
Plebeian Asshole Cop Fuck
Not-Smart-Enough-to-Not-Get-Pregnant

Midnight in America

This shift would be better
if it didn't end with the cool
blue morning and the red sun.

Outside the plant I hustle a smoke
and pressure my way
into the bad locks on the car door.

I am the first and last on this pavement for four months.
I pull into Cooke's Gas-Up and coerce
a sag-eyed mother of three for a couple beers.
A Sunday. You know what time it is?
-It's the only time I got.

The store is white and filled with sweets
and I'm sure it will prove to be
the single Heaven to people like me.

The old man across
the street has been curving his head
upward at some painful angle, on his porch
keeping watch
every morning since I took
this shift.

I can't see no flak or olive drab,
no parachutes and no planes, granddad
I'm sure as shit you can't either.

Nothing coming from the sky
but sunlight through the cones of ancient eyes.

I think a year ago his wife died.
I wonder if he remembers what that was like.
One time he asked if the Krauts were coming,
and as I passed by with a bag of beer
I thought
in some way, I'm sure.

Factory Girl

I took this shift
because of her, and

the factory swoons
when she's above me
on the catwalks
and I wish I could catch
the rain of her sweat
as it drops through
the blue metal trellis.

These black machines
brighten with her gaze.
All the grime recedes
from her blonde renaissance,
somehow phobic when
she walks by with her clipboard.

Once the grid collapsed
and in the dark of the outage
on third shift
we drank coffee in the foreman's office.
My buzzing synapse
crushed and flooded
my brain with a blood vision,
where I saw an angel in a mist of oily red
somehow sitting next to me,
complimenting the coffee,
and somehow being more blonde
than a golden tooth.

Pettimore Kids

He said he were gonna
kill him if he got his sister pregnant
and that redneck did,
so he brought the gun.
But like he told her
from the front seat of the Ford
while rain flicked down in
the bright white of the bracket lights,
he weren't gonna need it.
She begged and pleaded
and cried he didn't
mean it,
but he shot off
and she broke down like a puddle
in the tidal dark.

In the neon beer light
two knives brush
past one another
and the second
retracts into a
fetal
and destroyed pose.

Fable of the Rain Dogs

She would be the queen
of drunk mothers if she
didn't go to all those PTA meetings.

Can a woman work
a fourth job without napping
and dreaming about eating her teeth?

She's grateful for the boy
the way people rejoice in fingernails
when they need something to pick themselves with.

If her little flagon of rain hadn't dumped down,
she might still have a scent for home
that she would refuse to return to anyway.

What scents does she inhale now?
Wetter ones, liquid ones,
that only she can recognize through a downpour.

Paranthesical Girls

There's got to be
a less bizarre way
for a dropout to earn
a living.

The parenthesical girls

are always outside
this greasy
place called Vincenzo's
on weekends
even though the kitchen
stops serving
at midnight.

Already dim
but now extinguished through
the windows.

What is between
her eyeliner
and mascara?

All beauty
looks similar
but ugly survives
like insects and slashes outward like God
if there is one
and not just some obtuse
and bizarre Nothing that pervades
like the dark mass of hyphen-trees
on the edge of town.

John looks up
from the hand-rolled window
and sees a phantom face
and head
obscuring a streetlight.

The phantom's hand
grips the invaginated
opening where the window
recedes and he
notices the rose
nail polish
has split and cracked
and something may be under
the nails that is red as well.

Downer's Grove

Walk in the sun
and now work in it.
Plow through the jobs
that come with maintaining
an apartment complex.

Davis keeps the grounds
fresh and without thrush,
unspoiled lush, free
of branches. He doesn't
even cuss much.

20 years of this
and his tan is still red.

As he stains himself green
in the basking sun,
he does not see the women,
or his children, or
the slow hands of days
that sweep by in
great swathing arcs.
Getting older he is enveloped
in not much at all but steady
work, employed to binding
copper together between
the walls, or pressing
his weight to move
some *goddamn yuppie's dryer*.
This is the work that closes in on all
pockmarked, heated beings.
*If you ever try to tell me
what the value of work is
I'll split your fuckin' head.*

Alimony
from the toils of one old man
who spends weeks

getting the lattices standing upright
so some little shit can break it apart again.

Today he will repaint
the west face of the complex,
that which catches
the most sun.