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## **In the Way Back**

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*University of South Carolina*

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# **In the Way Back**

by

Mark Rodehorst

Bachelor of Arts  
University of New Orleans, 2008

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## **Abstract**

This is a collection of poems that explores the intersection of place, memory, culture, and identity.

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## **Part I**

*How may a man make of the outside world a home? ...the safety, the surroundings of love, the ease of soul, the sense of identity and honor which, evidently, all men have connected in their memories with the idea of family?*

—Arthur Miller

*I am a part of all that I have met.*

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “Ulysses”

## Danse Intore

*after William Carlos Williams*

If, while the world's at work  
forgetting—while absent-  
minded squirrels, in search  
of a lost autumn acorn,  
root & rummage around  
an unrecognizable infant  
oak sprout, & the fecund,  
out-of-touch sun's  
alien offspring  
assimilate & naturalize  
into the crisp hip greens  
of gnarled oak trees—  
I, in my den  
opposite the TV,  
leap & twirl & stomp  
intuitively,  
drumming my slippered feet  
into the cypress floor  
& mouthing inaudibly  
to myself—"I'm reborn  
in memory; I live on  
in memory; I am best so!"  
while picturing my teeth, my bare feet & chest,  
my spear & grass wig  
among a thousand fallow-season hills,  
who will disagree  
that I am the quintessential figure  
of my own humanity?

## Coffee Regions

Once a year, backdropped against dry season's leisured dust,  
those brown bushes blocking my bedroom's view  
of the green & yellow valley would burst fingernail flowers.

Once a year on those now lovely bushes,  
those jasmine-scented flowers would give birth  
to cherries, first green then a quick, deep red.

Once a year, the three kids would pluck this abscess fruit,  
separate the white bean from the red skin & pulp,  
& brew a tea, sweet like watermelon, with this refuse.

Once a year, the family would drag out the ragged tarp  
&, in harmony with the rest of the village, wreathe  
the road & footpaths with a million inedible beans.

& once a year, perhaps, they'd wonder what all  
this business was for, besides the 5000 francs—\$10 American—  
they'd get for each 30-pound sack. Francs that one year

replaced an old flashlight, an older radio, or their oldest  
son's outgrown school uniform. Francs swapped one year  
for bug-resistant rice seed & unbendable shovels

or some shipped-in Chinese shingles & factory-  
fired bricks to refashion a worn-out thatched roof  
& the mud & manure walls of a latrine.

& in all those other places where those beans  
will be judged, graded, roasted, ground, & sold for \$10  
a pound as French Breakfast, Guatemalan

Antigua, or the once a year Carnival Blend.  
In those other places where I felt  
an earthy bitterness envelop my tongue

as I scroll through an every-day *Times*: "Spikes  
in Coffee Price Lead to Spikes in Coffee  
Thefts & Coffee-related Deaths."



## Daylight Saving Time

The smart phone's preset alarm sounds,  
& with lithe, relentless simplicity,  
the morning sun slips between the curtains  
& switches his eyelids open. The time  
has changed. Light, restiveness, activity—  
the world has sprung one hour earlier.  
The wonted clock ticks. The cat paws toward  
an automatic feeder. The vacuum bot  
moans to life. The digital coffee trills  
in the kitchen. The neighbor's motor turns  
over in a garage. While close by  
& around him, the never-in-a-hurry trees  
redress themselves to the ubiquitous  
twitters & tweets of all the birds of spring.

## Britney Spears on the Billboard

“The Pride of Louisiana”

She was a Pepsi-given angel up there  
in a tight top & tighter jeans. A bared  
midriff annunciation with Coke

bottle curves, she hovered over that manger,  
that babe, & that virgin put up & paid for  
by the Knights of Columbus,

who remind us to “Keep Christ in Christmas.”  
She hovered, too, over the faithful’s  
daily commute—those nuclear flocks penned

behind plastic, metal, & glass. My immediate  
family’s bored silence was confined inside  
a Chevy Suburban—my dad at the wheel,

my brother shotgun, me in the way back.  
We crept up the overpass like a roller coaster—  
one we’d ridden too many times—its drops,

its thrills no longer worth the wait in line.  
But when Britney was first plastered up there  
months or years or weeks before,

each of us erupted. My dad huffed & spewed—  
“Pride?! Would you look at that! She should  
be ashamed! It’s enough to make you want

to puke! I hate Pepsi!” My gaping brother felt  
my dad’s gaze, blushed, lowered his head,  
& stared at his shoes while swearing to forever

be faithful to Coke. But I’d just been Confirmed,  
so my belief in the miracle of divine  
feminine creation throbbed & dribbled all over

my soul. As I followed her soft, angelic turns,  
something rose inside me like incense swung  
from a censer. Such swelling, zealous pride!

I’d have crusaded for Pepsi then, challenged

my father & brother to trial  
by combat, settling once & for all

which is the one true cola!  
But after months or years or weeks  
of silent cloistered crawls

up an overpass, that same Britney exposed  
on a billboard, her virgin curves mounted  
on top the newborn savior of the world,

with Mary, Joseph, & my dad's  
irritated sigh & rolling eyes,  
came just a routine rush of blood

to one boy's flaccid pubescent spirit.

## Séance n° 5: L'Inondation

The rain assails the disintegrating shade hanger under which the children have gathered around her for a weekend French lesson. As raindrops jab the chalkboard, the hen & her chicks huddle near it, hungry & bored. Hungry & bored the children regurgitate her words, meet her eyes, she nods: “C’est ça. Très bien!” But soon she’ll get hungry & bored of drying the chalkboard, of stacking sandbags, of standing in mud. Hungry & bored, she’ll free them with a nod: “Ça suffit pour aujourd’hui mes enfants. Bon weekend!” & they’ll splash out, an innocent pack of chicks, half-drenched, frustrated, & maybe a little desperate. &, of course, it’ll be harder to learn to hunt in the rain—the hen scratching at the mud like a chalkboard so the chicks can mouth & masticate the air. When a young stomach is empty, a hungry mind has little room for a lesson of French.

Sun rays, beat through this flooding  
shade so the cassava, the maize, the beans, the chicks,  
the children will be nourished & fed.

**In the Home of a Black Sharecropper, 1939**

*after the photograph by Russell Lee*

With a schoolmaster's stick & white words  
chalked against a stretched black cloth, Mama  
teaches her sons a lesson. They follow  
her lead—The rain...Are fall...In! No desk,  
paper, pencil, or primer & yet this  
is how we make ourselves. She teaches them  
to respect certain principles. There's the loops,  
lines, & stems in the snippets of newsprint  
papering up the walls or the curve  
of manufactured glass clouding the light  
of the hurricane lamp, but also the counter-  
rhythmic tap & scuff of the frottoir, the pig feet  
jelly hardening the hog's head cheese, & that  
land-making river overrunning her levees  
when too much rain are fallin.

## **This, My Amazonian Landscape**

outside & around my Guyanais home  
are unfamiliar gatherings  
of trees I don't have any names for.  
This one—tall, thin, all trunk  
with round, bald fruit up top—  
I'll call Charlie. Charlie, who's got so much trunk  
he keeps a pillow in his car to sit on  
as he steers. If he didn't, he couldn't see  
over the wheel. & does he drive slow  
up & down Fleur de Lis Ave, maybe  
cuz of the potholes, but light-breeze-leaning  
left & right, he makes it a point to greet  
every man, woman, or child he passes by  
on the street.

& this one—closest  
to my door. Its wide stretching branches  
giving, giving, & giving  
this bell-shaped orange fruit—  
I'll call Carol. Carol who's always giving  
& giving this sweet-strange fruit.  
Insisting I eat this sorta foul smelling,  
sweet tasting, heartfelt fruit that as I eat it  
I'm reminded more & more of filé gumbo.  
Tho not of its sliminess, & not of its before  
& aftertaste, but because I didn't ever want to  
try it, & now Christmas has never  
felt like Christmas without it.

& this one—  
gnarled limbs & shriveled bark—I'll call  
Andrea. Andrea who's anchored to the riverbank,  
dipping her long, bare toes  
into the shallows, testing the current's strength.  
Who's voice is shrill as she shouts out orders  
before letting us jump into Bayou Lacombe  
for a summertime swim. Her bushy leaves  
shade her eyes while she looks out  
for shiny hazards—jagged glass  
or metal or oil slicks lazy rivering  
down toward Lake Pontchartrain.

& one day,  
I'll have find another tree  
that I can name Al.

*But what do your neighbors think?  
The family you rent your home from?  
The people who built it & every other house  
in this campo out of a Charlie,  
a Carol, an Andrea, or an Al?*

When I share it with them  
in the *lingua franca*, a language none of us  
know best, they—Grandmère & Mama Dada  
mixing cassava bread, Papa Dada smoking a siesta  
pipe, & their petits who just got finished  
swimming in the river—collectively contract  
their corrugator muscles producing a collection  
of furrowed foreheads, cuz all these trees've  
already got names. What they do want to know,  
however, is whether my rent will be on time  
this month, & if that pipe under the faucet  
in my rented kitchen is still leaking.

## Weekend Jaunt with Guides & Gun on the Jaguars' Trail

I was told how attractive this spot was—lush  
with slow rot, smoke, & sporadic POP!

of death all around tree, fern, vine, & shrub green  
existence. I was told about dominion, & what I took

to be gliding orange butterflies, to be fragrant  
red flowers or sweet yellow fruit,

became leaves in varying degrees of gaudy death.  
I was told how everything on earth

has its time—whether I mean it to or not, but Jaguar  
lying there, Jaguar dying there tell me why

you didn't reveal yourself. Ashamed of a few spots?  
Or a killer's instinct? I was told how dangerous

you were once & how rare you are now & how brave  
I must be & how congratulations are at hand.

& yet all I can do for comfort is gently stroke the snout  
of the gun—still warm, still hard & impersonal.

It's impersonal! Can't you see that?! I try my best,  
do what I can!—I bike to work through this

ceaseless humidity & heat! I almost always leave piss,  
flush only shit! I deprive myself of everything

but an occasional fish! & have you seen those  
heaps of kitchen scraps putrefying

outside my house?! Jaguar, tell me what I came to hear.  
Tell me to step over the empty shells gathered

around the roots like a threshold. To leave this pack,  
these boots, these clothes. Tell me I won't need

them now. That I'm welcome in this forest, this Amazon.  
That I'm forgiven, & I can finally begin

to forgive myself, this damp shade, & all this death



I drag around. Tell me to leave my body

to a green caress & be at rest. & lastly, tell me  
to let go this goddamned gun!

## **The View of the Rift Valley**

Like a serpent I coil-constricted difference  
in a eucalyptus branch. Was it inevitable?  
Me seeing what I saw as my eye  
hovered over the villages collected on the face  
of the valley? A world in miniature—  
mini houses, mini people. Some eating or closing  
a window. Others just walking dully by.  
Miniscule children at a watering hole. My eyes commanded  
everything created at once, & I called down with all  
the words I knew they knew to show how  
I'd reward them generously to saw the tree  
so I could come back down.

**To Bob Ross of *The Joy of Painting***

each time you created a painting  
each time you made a world in a half hour block of TV time  
I wanted to make it *my* world  
I wanted to live  
inside that clearing with that speckled pebbled pathway connected to that rocky beach  
    which won't know how it feels to be car-covered concrete  
inside that cottage sprouting from that sloping mountainside which cohabits with mantic  
priestess stars & lama-levitating mountain goats  
inside a mound near that toplessly-perpetual pine who not once worries over slash crackle  
cultivation  
inside a hovel along that purling riverbank which intricately weaves that sweater  
    textured snow  
inside a canoe approaching that unnamed island just beyond the breakers of a shoreline  
    which is forever unstreaked by sweet heartless crude  
inside that infinitesimal shack along the banks of that faded stirring sky which dwarfed  
    by that tricuspoid crag it bows to  
inside a tepee surrounded by that reposed plain which will never awaken in a road raged  
rush hour  
inside a hollow in that crooked auburn tree which yoga-bends its limbs in salutation to  
    the sun  
inside a barrel going over that waterfall feeding that crystalline stream which doesn't  
    puke due to lead poisoning  
let me live inside that which is so outside what I've inherited

## Standard Time

wake up  
call

rain  
on iron roofs

staccato snaps  
in 4/4 time

timpani  
*allegro*  
*forte*

cue the new  
rainy season

a live  
response 3 months' fluid dust  
groovin' down

corrugated ruts  
into cisterns

agricultural slap splatter & plop  
of dirt covered caked shovels

furrow carvin' time  
in volcano dark earth

children's school  
shoe feet strippin'  
layers of grit sole-scrapin' wales  
& wrinkles  
across mud streets

& my self buried  
deep

beneath a mosquito net settin' off so many  
of my own beats head fist  
bouncin' against ear  
drum mattress  
pillow blanket

So what would I rather wake to?

my young neighbor's  
death

the other night  
his heart  
stopped beatin'  
while he slept  
a cacophony sang his body

up

to the church where I was invited to  
gaze into his creaseless face

low roll ngoma ikembe & eyelids in a pillowed box  
lullaby

such peace & Céline Dion  
lit iron-vaulted in the flicker-  
sanctuary

such quiet

at  
a young man's  
wake

## The Lost Bayougoula

I'd like to believe  
that you've reincarnated,  
& your spirit squats in something  
as silent & still  
as a slash pine, one of the ones that lined  
the poison-ivied path to the bayou.  
It was easy for me then to believe you  
when you told me we were following  
an old Bayougoula road cut  
into a green past before any of our ancestors  
came over from Germany.

& I liked to believe that  
we were kin with them, too—  
the lost Bayougoula. You,  
broad shouldered, as tall as I am now,  
olive skin, darkish hair. We shared  
the big bridge in our nose, big forehead,  
cheekbones. In our pirogue  
on Bayou Lacombe, I felt close,  
duckweed & mud smearing  
our skin bright dark to keep  
out mosquitoes & sun.

& I felt close  
to the bayou,  
the sleeping water against  
our backs. I rested easily then  
on the tension of surfaces,  
& you floated beside me  
silent-solid & indérangéant  
as a water bug. If only  
I could believe you've come back  
as something as easy  
to love as that,

as something to replace  
my shame over our shared  
nose, forehead, & cheekbones,  
& the familiarity of your voice,  
your tone when you laughed & told me  
we were nothing  
but pure Teutonic white,

unpolluted, unshamed by Injun  
or any others' blood, when  
you told me I had better  
believe it.

## This is the Voice of America

Cock crow. Two down beats.  
& a slide. Hot morning. *On want de la musique.* Warm & gritty. *On allume* the radio. *Nos cliques & nos claques avec* Fitty Cent in warm, gritty shade & hot, morning wind. In the host family's *concession.* Where wild cultures of lizards— one-eyed, three-legged, four-clawed— scrap & snap & suck & gnaw at sugar-stained Coke bottles. Kola shells. Date pits. Hooves & horns. Blood & bones. Eyes & teeth. Leftover from last night. Elders chewed kola. Children ate dates. Goat got slaughtered, drained, & roasted. Bride & groom got toasted. Meat cut up. Partitioned. Coke kept it down. Next American dance & pop. Drum bumps. Bass hums. Heart murmurs. Now the lizards— green & orange & one-eyed & three-footed & half a tail torn off— sop it up, lick it off, gnaw & chew. Is it sugared-caffeine inspiration or god-given rhythm that makes abdomens twist, heads bob, throats bounce to Sean Paul beats brung via sand-laced shortwaves? When they're gone, they leave an eye, a foot, a toe, a tail, & some blood behind. Top of the hour. VOA News reports sugar's bad for you. & caffeine, too. But NY State Supreme Court says a ban's unconstitutional. A Coke control, no matter how righteous, calls for a full government consent. Our separation of powers, our checks, our balances are sacred, immutable traditions. Everything, *même notre pragmatisme*, in moderation.



**Part II.**

*Is it merely in a book? So am I then, merely in a book?*

—William Carlos Williams

## The Vampire Lestat Gets Nostalgic

This latest reboot ends with a question as to the monster's intentions, which will, of course, get answered by a sequel. But Lestat has seen this cycle already—Godzilla,

a malevolent, perhaps indifferent, force of nature in the first flick, mellows out, has a kid, settles down on an island somewhere in the Pacific. Yeah, humanity

tried to kill him—so what? Lestat can't remember how many times he's almost died over the centuries. What's more, no mortal in this movie seems to mind, or perhaps recall,

how the government knew about Godzilla since '54. Or how they tried their very best to keep that knowledge under wraps. Sure, that's bad, but who can remember how

the government poisoned thousands of folks in the 20s? Today, an old headline flashes across Lestat's mind as he lies half-asleep in his coffin. He spends

what feels like no time reminiscing with his smart phone—*Wikipedia, Vox, Slate* (look it up for yourself when you get the chance): “Congress Wets Denounce Deaths By Poison

Alcohol As Government Murders”—till the bells toll for 6pm Said Mass. He gets up, brews a K-cup of French Market brand coffee-chicory. He takes it

like a memory of the Great Depression—bitter, yes, but with a comforting bite of sweetness. On his way out of St. Elizabeth's day-school-turned-orphanage-

turned-private-residence-turned-luxury-condos (a place he's haunted for decades), he runs his soft hand roughly along

the caulked-up cracks in the building's façade.

Outside the cemetery, he stops by  
the statue of PGT Beauregard—  
mustachioed & handsome as ever  
in a verdigrisy gray uniform.

Lestat lets his fingers slide across  
his forehead, down his cheeks,  
around his chin. He's just how he  
remembers himself. But Lestat

can't help but notice how on  
that Confederate hero's pedestal  
the white wash tries its very best  
to glob over fresh protest graffiti.

## The Abbeville Reds

### *Iris*es of Louisiana

Yes, we're pretty—y'all sure do  
regard our brilliant yellow signals  
in the center of our bright red sepals

reflected in a smut gum-swamp.  
& isn't it a real pity that *sunrise* to us  
doesn't signify a ruddy faced sun painting

a tangle of color across a blue canvas?  
Down here, we got frogs, shit-faced,  
sludge-covered, rubbing slimy asses

across our rhizomes, passing out  
a stream of fly stank skin-breath,  
while making themselves at home

in the tuck between our thick  
as wrought iron leaves. So have y'all  
out there yet figured out whereby which

holy fuck up we cropped up down here,  
where the salvinia spreads its green  
like a strip club with no cover charge

lays out a puke stained carpet?  
Or were we abandoned? Or are we  
the stubborn ones who in the midst

of some great garden migration felt it best  
to stay behind? But *écoute*, don't get tempted  
to put words in our petals—we are more

than unanswerable questions in a legless  
cypress seclusion. A krewe of vireos'  
syncopated sopranos answers brass dawn's

baritone call, & we stay open all morning  
for half-drunk butterflyed flutters,  
for manic beak-needles' humming pulse.

We throw out our bright excess to the flame-  
buoyant weight of winged strangers come down

here to savor this proboscis smacking  
flavor-full paradise of our making.

## Jean Lafitte Nat'l Historical Park & Preserve

I hate the commute. Hundreds of times I've turned  
downed my head, downcast my eyes as I confessed  
that to my dad. This morning, during my second cup  
of coffee, I confessed it to him again  
when he called from his sales route to warn me  
about the stack-ups he saw as he passed by  
every onramp around New Orleans.

“Just take the Huey P.  
No, no, you'll beat everybody  
if you take the ferry.”

My face flushed as I confessed to him  
that the Crescent City Connection  
is the only route over the river  
I am comfortable with.

“Bring your book then, boy,  
cuz you'll get stuck up there for over an hour.”  
He sighed. He must've been sneering, too,  
as he switched off his phone.

But father, let me tell you,  
I'd rather not have to come across  
the half-hidden potholes along Franklin, wade past  
the no left turns on Tulane, & float thru  
21 miles, 45 minutes of highway traffic elevated  
over river, then suburbs, then canals, till finally I am granted  
a mixture of swamp, prairie tremblante,  
& serenity at the gates of the park.

\* \* \*

He was a boy, 15, a native of Virginia,  
In New Orleans for the first time,  
he stood atop the levee watching  
as his father steadied himself into the belly

of a pirogue. The first man who followed  
him in talked with his hands & with an accent,  
wore a silk shirt, & bowed a whole lot. He kept  
a pistol in plain view. The next one was dark,

had oak trunks for arms, kept tight-lipped  
& shirtless. When this one did talk, he called  
the first one “Bos.” Now four days have passed  
since his father went off with “the Bos

on business” toward the terrifying mystery  
of the swamp. & his son doesn’t seem  
to notice. He blushes at the sweet wine  
served in silver mugs, the foreign-talking

women in walled-off gardens, the blood  
spilled over whist, the roses dropped  
by dark-haired girls from behind a half-drawn  
jalousie. On the fifth day, his father comes back

red-faced & euphoric. He’s come back from Bos  
with good news for their growing plantation—  
six chained men “stronger than oxen, freshly  
shipped in, & gotten at a great price.”

\* \* \*

“Son, I sell things to people...but ‘sell’  
is the wrong word. You know Esau ‘sold’  
his birthright to Jacob... For cheap.  
Maybe ‘offer’... I offer up the things  
that people need to be happy. I know  
what they need, & happiness  
can never be gotten for cheap...

“You see, son, I’m a vehicle... I move  
all around the city like blood,  
like water. You know everything needs water,  
& I’m the one that drives it  
all around this city... That’s my route.  
The city is like a tree.  
Like a human body... I’m the blood,  
& my route’s the veins. I know how best to reach  
every part of the body. I sell to the Garden District  
& to Central City. To the Lower Quarter  
& to Tremé. A salesman’s worth is decided by the clients  
he sells to, & son, I dole out to everyone  
cuz I know what they need...

“Your grandfather... tho he’s  
retired now, did the same... But he offered up  
protection. He was cop... a cop sells people  
protection with his body. I sell with my body, too,  
not only my mouth. It’s also a good hand shake...  
A good business suit... Seersucker  
in the summer. I’m always talking cuz I know  
what people want to hear. They want to hear  
about what I’m selling... That’s my business.  
Your grandfather didn’t need no talk.  
He carried a gun... For all of us... me & all  
six of my brothers & sisters.

You’re my business,  
you know, you & your brothers & sister.  
You need to know what it is you’re going to sell  
cuz one day you’ll have some business  
to take care of of your own.”

\* \* \*

Before Jean Lafitte got to be called “Bos”,  
he set out to know the bayous that run

like veins till they find their mouths  
at Barataria Bay in the Gulf.

Jean set out to have the bay serve  
as *his* mouth, the bayous, *his veins*.

This body that he made for himself  
would have big tastes—hams & damasks,

butter, wines, & jewelry. The goods  
would get to his mouth in pirate sloops,

brigs, & schooners. pass thru his veins  
in barges, luggers, & pirogues, then

get shit out in markets & magasins  
everywhere from New Orleans

to St. Louis. Jean grew to know that a client



believes it's best not to wonder where  
the good quality shit is coming from.

\* \* \*

An hour stuck over the Mississippi  
& I had to shit. I know two cups of coffee  
will do that to me. I'd have gotten out  
my car, dropped these National Park Service  
khakis, & shit right off the bridge  
if there hadn't been so many cops around.

I prefer to shit first thing when I get  
to the Visitors' Center  
in one of its compost toilets. Thru the screen  
vent near the ceiling, I hear birds sing.

I know their voices, can pick them out  
& name them now—vireos, tanagers,  
grosbeaks. I know that the nitrates  
in my animal waste enrich the mud,  
the stagnant water, the cypresses, the tupelos,  
& blackgums. Their branches are the stages  
where those birds sing to me. It's bliss  
to shit when I know it's an act  
of giving something back.

\* \* \*

The barrier islands in Baratavia Bay  
that Jean picked to be his mouth  
already had people living on them.  
There, the men fished, hunted, & on

the highest ground they could find,  
fashioned broken trees into small huts  
with thatched palmetto roofs & galleries  
so they could sleep shaded in the free air.

Outside these huts with their white  
picket fences, women tended gardens,

& inside, boiled sea brine into salt.  
A family piled into pirogues the rabbits,

shrimp, & salt they didn't keep for themselves  
& slow-paddled it thru the network  
of bayous to sell in New Orleans.  
Did they know happiness? Was this

a kind of question they would even ask  
themselves as Jean sold them on more—  
more to be gotten, more to be taken?  
They built a Temple for their Bos—

the grandest warehouse in all Louisiana,  
& across from that, a barracoon, well-stocked  
with what Louisiana hankered for most  
of all—black bodies to do the thankless

kind of work. Jean was bred to know  
that a man was only worth what  
he could sell, & Jean, never without  
a pistol, sold everybody on everything.

\* \* \*

An hour on the bridge.  
& I had to shit. I got out the car  
with my National Park Service badge  
& found out from a cop  
what had gone wrong.

“A late model  
Mustang clipped a few cars & then  
slammed head on into a guardrail.”  
“Anybody hurt?”

“The driver. He's dead.  
He'd been shot multiple times in the chest.  
We didn't find a gun. Just a couple dimebags  
of marijuana covered in blood. Must've been  
a small-time dealer caught up in something  
he couldn't handle.”

“Any idea why  
he was going over the bridge?”

“Was like  
he was driving toward somewhere important.”

“You know, my grandfather was a cop.”

\* \* \*

They were only boys when they crossed over the river, went out to Bayou des Familles, my dad & his older brother. They'd gone out there, they told each other, to become men. They thought they knew how to do it. Their dad was a cop. He never yelled, never had to. He carried a gun at work. A Smith & Wesson .38. A four inch long barrel with a cocking trigger. To them that was enough. My dad looked up to his brother. He took my dad out to the bayou, & they got into a pirogue with a gun. He pulled it out, pocket-sized, short barreled. He didn't tell my dad where he got it from. He didn't tell him either about its hair trigger. My uncle fired off a few rounds into a tupelo's trunk, into the coffee-stain water, thru the tops of the tallest cypresses around. When he gestured the gun toward my dad, he saw the outline of my grandfather in the sockets surrounding his eyes. But the insides were still blue, the color of my grandmother's. My dad's palm floated over the handle, his finger grazed the trigger. Just grazed it. The bullet flew past my uncle's left ear. Almost grazing it. In that moment, the swamp was at its silentest. My dad had to have got to crying just then. I know my uncle must have, too, right after. Nobody said a word, nobody could even look at the other one on the way back home. My dad knows I don't want to know how it feels to hold a gun.

\* \* \*

The house they built for Bos was on an elevation & made of brick coated with a porcelain-tinted mix of pulverized shells & plaster. Bos demanded a galerie be wrapped

around his house like the curtain wall

of a castle. He lay in a weaved silk hammock during the heat of summer afternoons, strapped with a pistol. From time to time he peered

at his kingdom thru a spyglass. Altho it was still & sunny, Bos knew that that could change in a matter of minutes. A warm breeze blew in from the Gulf with a hint of bitterness

like blood. Then came lightning, lashing wind, & natural passion. He heard a grumbling like thunder in the distance—"why should one ordinary man give out all the orders!"

His palm hovered over the handle of his pistol. A swarm had formed & shot quickly across the island. It billowed near the Bos's hammock. One of them, still a boy,

rushed forward, shouting he'd take no more orders from anybody... When Bos stood up tall. A man. 6'2". Fired a single round. & the boy fell dead. The Bos's kingdom grew still.

\* \* \*

I never stop marveling at New Orleans, how small it is. I knew the man who died from gunshot wounds on the bridge this morning. He was a friend who became my sometime dealer who, since I stopped smoking, became somebody I know from the old neighborhood. I last saw him at the park we used to play at. I was there to shoot hoops with my brother. He was pushing his son on the swings that the both of us used to jump from.

He was the kind of guy with a big laugh who told stories to liven things up. That day he said, suppressing a smile, he still worked in the city, but had just moved over the bridge with his fiancée. I didn't ask if he wanted to make a fresh start, turn over a new leaf. If that

was what crossing the bridge meant to him.

His son looked just like how I remembered he looked  
when we were young. Same smiling eyes.  
Or was that cuz I can't remember him  
not smiling? I never asked if he thought  
he wasn't cut out for his line of work. I can't imagine  
him carrying a gun. How different would it  
have ended if he did?

\* \* \*

I finally got across the bridge & relieved my body  
at a gas station in Gretna. I bought  
some cigarettes & had a smoke behind  
the Visitors' Center as my screaming load  
of city kids bussed in from across the bridge.  
They always get still out on the trails.  
They bunch together butt to gut  
like a too close-knit family in the middle  
of the boardwalk. I hulk between them  
& spiders, copperheads, cottonmouths, alligators.  
I pick out for them crawfish holes,  
camouflaged frogs, & bird songs.

At lunch, I latched onto a circle of them  
as they told stories to each other about a grandfather  
vet who digs hunting, about fishing one time  
during a reunion on the North Shore, about a rabbit  
one keeps in her bedroom, a raccoon that loiters  
on a Winn-Dixie dumpster, & a hawk that swooped  
down on a pigeon right in the middle of Jackson.  
It's a part of my job, but I didn't know which story to tell  
when I asked the circle, "Any of y'all...?" when I turned  
to everybody, "Does anyone here know Jean Lafitte?"

\* \* \*

In the dream, my dad wakes me, smiles  
as he tells me it's time for me to meet  
the Bos. His breath is calm. It's sweet  
& it stinks like the swamp. Both of us

are in the belly of a pirogue. I mimic  
the splash-pulse of his paddling.  
But I don't want to disturb him.  
I know my dad has a temper. My uncle  
told me how in the Navy my father  
punched out his superior officer.  
He became a small legend then  
& spent a week in the brig.

I feel no wind, no mosquitoes.  
I see no moon or stars & the air sticks  
to my skin like pancake syrup  
on a vinyl tablecloth. I know that soon  
rain will fall. In the bow, my dad sings  
to himself, or maybe to me, a lullaby  
I know from my grandmother—

“Fais do-do, colas mon ti frère.  
Papa est là-bas sur la rivière.”

**Part III.**

*Perhaps, then, this was what travelling was, an exploration of the deserts of my mind rather than of those surrounding me?*

—Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*

## **I am not Rik Smits**

What can it be like to handle  
a basketball for the first time

at 14? For a 6'8" Rik Smits,  
it must've been like gripping

a bitterbollen or a buttermilk  
drop from the Mackenzie's

a couple blocks down  
from the cottage I lived at

as a kid. To help him practice,  
did Rik's dad nail the wheel rim

of an old motorbike to a windmill  
like my dad did a ragged crab net

to a lamppost? When I was a kid,  
he used to tell me that during Betsy

the water in a few neighborhoods  
got high as the eaves & streetlamps.

That happened the summer he  
turned 14. The summer I turned 14

all the boys in the neighborhood  
had a big race up & down

the 17<sup>th</sup> Street Canal levee.  
When I got to the floodwall

& found myself near the end  
of the pack, I jumped up & slammed

the lip of the wall like a rim.  
At that age how many strides

did it take Rik to run up a dike?  
At the top, peering down over the seawall,

did he notice the mismatch in height



between the hulk of the sea  
& the gingerbread eaves stuck out  
like thumbtacks all over the polder?

At 17, 7'2" Rik uprooted  
to America. By then  
he'd developed a bad ass drop-step  
& become a mismatch for most  
on the low post. My dad  
used to say our 'tit cottage  
withstood every drop-step  
Cat 4 Betsy could smack into it.

My teammates christened me  
"Rik Smits" in high school cuz I  
was blond, white, rangy, tho just  
6'2"—undersized & slower,  
but a solid defender on the low post.  
My dad had showed me how  
to take a charge. "Raise up tall  
& strong. Stick those shoulders  
& arms in close to that frame.  
Square those hipbones. Keep still & shut  
your eyes if you gotta."  
When Cat 5 Katrina's wind  
& water 2-on-1 fastbroke  
the floodwall & levee,  
our squat cottage raised tall  
as it could on its pilings  
like legs. Like the rest  
of our neighborhood, like most  
of New Orleans, we lost it all.  
I don't go by that old block

too often. How often  
does Rik go back to Holland?

## As always, for my birthday

my grandmother sends me a card.  
Pasted to its light blue envelope  
under a NOLA postmark  
is \$2.28 *par avion* to Boite Postale 641,  
Zinder, Niger, West Africa.  
But inside I don't find  
a golden scripted quatrain  
set in a pastel background  
proclaiming the treasures of a grandson.  
Instead I find Snoopy sitting  
at his familiar spot atop his red doghouse. A thought  
cloud bubbles out of his head which is bowed  
over a typewriter.

Inside the cover, opposite the punchline, she's looped  
fluffy-lettered questions above my life here:  
Have I started a garden? Do eggplant grow there?  
What kinds of animals have I seen? Are they like  
the monkeys, leopards, & tortoises she recently saw on TV?

Well, I planted some eggplant, but it didn't sprout.  
I've seen nothing too exotic yet—camels  
on market days & giraffes once from a bus.  
But there's 23 months left to see everything  
I can. I'll bring back some pictures—  
when out of my own head bubbles  
a thought. Will she ever again  
be more than a picture I can bring back?  
In her living room she sits at her familiar spot  
on the blue couch across from the grandfather clock,  
humming aloud softly to herself, mulling over  
a puzzle of the Serengeti. While out of her head  
a thought cloud bubbles about her grandson.

## Mere Becoming

*after Wallace Stevens*

A village at the end of the desert  
rises in a deepest azure haze  
beyond the windows of our white

Landcruiser making an easy glide  
across the region's pockmarked road.  
The village consists of gold-

colored structures glittering  
in the sun. These structures are  
brittle houses common to the region.

They're made of mud mixed with straw  
& dung. Around the houses is what  
looks like well-kept white sand. A common

practice in villages like these is to sweep  
the area directly around the house  
of its excess sand. Appearing almost

hovering above this sand are the children  
that live in these houses. At this distance,  
in this light, they look like carved

figures, stylized with slender limbs  
& round bellies. This is a common  
symptom of malnutrition in children.

The white Landrover pulls close enough  
for them to ask us for money. When I  
swing open its star-spangled door,

I see black flies jostling & dangling  
around the corners of their eyes.  
I give them some—not nearly enough

to go around, bat the flies out their eye  
sockets, & think these kinds of thoughts.  
I don't know what else I can do.

## La Toussaint à Cayenne

Last night lingers in vague memory—dark rum, boîtes de nuit, masquerade. This morning, in my humid-soaked search for coffee & a Guyanais equivalent to beignets, I think of New Orleans, where I'd wake

to see unconsciously how the Spanish moss beards the immortal oak trees like the chins of the portraits we couldn't salvage from my grandparents' Katrina-warped walls. En route to the boulangerie,

second-lining in a Caribbean, slow-motion style behind a grandma & five grandkids dressed for Mass, clutching candles & gold & red flowers to match, my lips bounce to the Earl King throbbing of my head—

“I can hear music  
Somewhere out there!”

« Madame, comment s'appellent ces fleurs ? »  
« Chrysanthèmes immortelles. »  
« Mariage ? Enterrement ? »  
« Non, la Toussaint. »

& I think of New Orleans, where on early All Saints' Day mornings, I'd be a sugar-hungover grandkid dressed for Mass, strolling down Esplanade toward St. Louis No. 3 with my grandparents,

where my pale, uncalloused hands would soon be scrubbing the yellow, purple, & green bacchanalia build-up of mildew & age from the deep crevices of our shared name & those given names, like Isadore

or Aloise, that no one's given anymore. & happy to do it because it made them happy. & happy because I knew that, like everything my grandparents had me do, such as saying grace before breakfast or wiping

my own ass, it was somehow important. But how can I ask cette grand-mère guyanaise if she peut supporter un autre grandfils? One that's older, paler, & dressed comme une touriste? Because despite

une gueule de bois, I think I'm still happy  
to light a candle, lay a flower, & scrub the triumph  
of weather & age from a few more names, like Dada  
or Dalmat, I know next to nothing about.

## Where Y'at in Rwanda?

Having traced by steps the distance  
between the houses & the school you teach at,  
the houses & the fields your students work at,  
the houses & the church your neighbors pray at,  
your tongue callousing along the footpaths  
mimicking each velar-labial “Mwaramutse”  
in the morning, “Mwirirwe” after noon,  
your stiff charcoal Sperry’s sanding to eucalyptus  
brown, your pasty skin varnishing bronze,  
you should take a break.

Maybe let yourself do a bit  
of “fieldwork” near the market? Set yourself up  
at the bar. Get yourself a good spot right up against  
the porch railing, becoming inconspicuously  
on show.

Is this what it’s like for a float rider  
at Mardi Gras? A few privileged feet  
higher than the throng on the street. Masked  
by your pen & notebook, by your cup  
of banana beer—from local sources, naturally.  
& altho you shouldn’t drink that homebrew shit—  
your students told you, their American teacher  
of English, it just ain’t respectable. & altho you told them  
you wouldn’t, everyone knows everyone indulges  
on Mardi Gras, er, market day. Agaseke, gourds, & goats.  
Paraded-in pagnes & jeans, sunglasses & sandals.

Can they forgive you a little luxury?  
Is anything wrong with a bit of decadence?

As they laugh & march past, with their free arms,  
the arms that aren’t hugging food-filled paper sacks,  
they snap selfies of you on their cross-cultural cellphones.  
You raise your cup to them. Throw down  
a few imported things—plastic pens from China,  
hard ginger sweets from South Africa, cookies  
from Kenya packaged like MoonPies.

& you, too, aren’t you  
another imported thing?

## Saison de Paludisme

*Lawd Almighty, I feel my temp'rature risin'.*  
—Elvis Presley, “Burning Love”

Summer buzzes around my ears. I haven't strength  
enough to swat it. My eyelids seal like a window  
no human body can open. Like smoke, my sense  
of self seeps from my skin. It floats like mosquitoes

over every corner of this bush taxi. Delicately  
packed with the clucks of chickens, the smooth  
rough of plastic sacks, my baggage somewhere,  
& 18 human passengers, plus one ox on the roof.

& for one moment in this dark 15  
passenger shut, I'm an ice cube melting  
with 17 others inside a glass of sweet tea.  
& in the next I am one of 18 briquettes

bathed in lighter fluid then lit. & I burn into these  
17 other bodies like a thermographic photo  
snapped at a family summer barbecue. Like  
a variegated groupthink. Icterine. Tangelo.

Byzantine. Harlequin. Have I ever felt more human?  
Paroxysm. Headache. Muscle aches. A burning that's  
a lot like love. & the seal breaks. To the al-haji  
jammed in the seat beside me: “Sannu, mallam.” Sweat

thru his white boubou runs in a triangle down his chest.  
He sweats the way my dad does—the summer darkening  
the cyan & daffodil dyed silk of his Hawaiian shirt.  
The al-haji removes his earbuds, greets me

in French, & frowns as he feels my forehead.  
I say I feel ok in an un-Gallic accent. “C'est la saison,  
vous savez.” He struggles to open a window.  
It doesn't budge. He offers a bud to my ear. “A little

musique américaine—el-VISSE!” as if the alhaji believes  
a deep-throated southern drawl set to a 3-chord  
progression could lighten me. Could carry me thru  
this plexiglass. Glide my body west over the Sahel's



acacias & baobabs. Thru the Saharan wind,  
across a blind of cloudless sky. Toward a summer trip  
in the Rodehorst van. Me & my brothers in the way back.  
One asleep, the other in a Gameboy, me in a book

about basketball. Mom & dad up front with Elvis  
all the way to Fort Walton, where on the beach  
in towed hunks laid out across the sand  
each familial unit gets burnt by the sun.

*I am the stray sheep...good citizen.*

*I tender my service to defend it; and the only reward I ask is...an act of oblivion for all that has been done hitherto.*

—letter from Jean Lafitte to Governor Claiborne, 1814

### **At play on Bourbon**

I've too cherished  
that old New  
Orleans authentic  
embrace felt in wide  
sleeved silk tongues  
in spiced dark rum  
it's candlelit blush  
its velveteen touch  
a preservationist's  
imagination's  
Creole creation's  
blue-eyed goateed  
Y'at accent at the piano  
idiom preachin'  
"Indian Red" callin'  
*We're all Indians  
of the Nation*  
collective transformation  
like a pirate turned  
privateer reincarnation  
urgin' on toe-tappin'  
tourists respondin' *We won't  
bow down No Yes* an exposed  
brick hint of the brothers  
Lafitte's legitimate[d]  
blacksmith's shop

## At home on Dauphine

& too come  
down off the city  
streets to quaint bright  
pink with blue trim merci  
de ne pas fumer white plaster  
crown molding French doors  
customizable old  
styled jalousies for  
ventilation ou voir  
s'écrouler le monde  
just a short promenade  
au célèbre Café  
du Monde moderne et confortable  
air climatisé en luxe  
more than enough  
room for 2 not quite  
a studio deux pièce  
bathroom with long  
gal'rie gas lighted charm  
tho close qtr'd parking  
(free!) all inclusive  
in this [multi-  
familied] slave no  
call it "chambre  
de l'esclave"

## Progress & Development

& too celebrated  
for a faubourg serving  
Storyville storied  
Birthplace of Jazz  
brunch before breakin'  
ground on 1, 2, or 3  
bedrooms old  
crafted cent'ry shade  
porches new 'Fitte mix'd  
housin' renewal  
tear dem down antiquated  
'n infested housin'  
projects for dis-  
place our city's  
revival  
[su]r'vival

*What hitherto has been forgotten?*

## The Maroni

*Treasures have been found in many places.*

—*Louisiana: A Guide to the State* (1941),  
The Louisiana Writers' Project

Y'all are the people of this river.  
At sunset, its golden currents limn  
the deep, lucid water beneath.  
I'll remember it this way. & me fishing  
& swimming with y'all. It's also the avenue  
that carried the school & church canoes  
in from the campos each morning. & y'all  
showed me how to hitch rides on a passing  
pirogue to St. Laurent or Chez Chinois  
in Suriname. This river is free water  
for my cooking pots & my body, for  
my clothes & my soul. These are the currents  
of my daily cleansing.

But let me just  
muddy the geography one last time  
before I go. On Pecan Island, Louisiana  
in 1925, they thought they knew  
where to find Lafitte's cache of gold.  
From sunup till sundown, just a few hours'  
worth of work, they toppled centuries'  
worth of oaks & marsh grass, tore up thousands  
of years of accumulated sediment.

& just minutes  
after sunset, my landlady's daughter  
appeared meandering with difficulty  
downstream. With one arm steadying  
a wheelbarrow, she stopped & fed  
with her one free arm  
pet monkey last season's leftover  
cassava bread & beans.  
This was just as the currents  
began to flow thick with the new flour.  
Her other arm juggled a hoe & a rake  
caked with bright orange mud.

& pet monkey is still tied to the tree—  
was born bound to that tree. A fat rope  
girds its belly &, like a sixth limb, grasps  
a fat branch from which to swing,

forward then backward, unable  
to let go, forth & back,  
so pet monkey can  
never go anywhere. & inside  
the wheelbarrow, beside the new cassava  
& freshly caught fish, were a few ounces  
of the crudest gold. Gold to be purified  
by mercury. Gold worth more than our meager  
memories, more than a river's unforgettable  
aureole—& so gold gets dredged for  
in the deepest waters where the fishermen  
ply their hooks & nets at dawn.  
It gets distilled in the shed  
beside the cassava mill & the stoves  
for baking cassava bread. In our golden veins—  
systole, forth,  
diastole, back—flow the grayest mercury.  
In our prokaryotes,  
eukaryotes, cerebellum,  
a quicksilver gray lingers  
like six-limbed pet monkey  
appended tightly to a tree.  
Never going anywhere. & yet the golden promises  
of Jean Lafitte continue to shadow me  
like a ghost.

## Popeyes at Closing Time

& then we came in outta that love-bug dusk, outta that  
September sticky, torsos shirt-stuck, skin love-  
bug sticky, swarming sticky-itchy, bushy-wilded  
weed clover strung around spindly mangrove  
wrists & necks, this savage sweet clover love-bugs love,  
this Dutch white clover introduced to some places  
as animal fodder, to us as a drained swamp  
lawn perennial, as white sweet flowers outside  
colonial-style homes, bordering roads of sticky traffic  
slow moving like a big brown river through a littoral zone,  
& then we came into the cool inside  
the Paramaribo Popeyes inside this cool colonial  
Dutch Guyanese capital, outside that hot Caribbean  
dry season swirl, outside hot neon lights outside  
the \$5 minimum Torarica Hotel & Casino, outside  
those brightest blues & yellows outside the all wood  
St. Peter & Paul Cathedral where lighting  
a flameless candle for charity's sake cost us 5 bucks  
(Surinamese), & then we came into the cool inside  
the Paramaribo Popeyes inside this sovereign  
new world capital where all we wanted to know  
was if we could get some hot 2-piece mix—  
drumstick & breast with Cajun fries, make that Cajun mash,  
& some Creole red beans—Louisiana fast  
in Suriname. But before we do that who here knows  
Ndjuka? Wyboo, you're Surinamese, ain't ya? But I hardly  
ever hear ya Taki-Taki. Me, I've come to grasp a thing or two  
of that Dutch-English-African Creole— so should I order?  
Mi teki wan 2 piece kip...ok Maartje, so I mixed in  
a li'l Dutch, but y'all get what I mean. & myself, mo  
gé louisianais, un bon mélange of (as per  
the Popeyes display near the restrooms-là) Indian  
(Amerindian tho there's some good roti next door),  
African, French, Spanish, Italian, German, & English  
(really? have you tried their food?). Voilà, not one  
mention of American, so we can just relax inside  
cuz they're looping *The French Connection* on Popeyes TV  
& we can have some Parbo (the beer from 'round here)  
tho it reminds me too much of Bud Light.  
Still, let's just relax inside cuz this ain't  
quite America (that's what we say  
back home) & “Louisiana Fast” means Popeyes's  
in the weeds again (as colloquialisms go). So let's just watch

as Popeye (Gene Hackman) gets behind the wheel again  
& again in that *French Connection* traffic jam  
in the streets of Paramaribo or the Paroise of Jefferson  
cuz en ville back home the drive thru goes  
even slower, but the people you get to know inside  
are mellower having gone to Mass on a Wednesday,  
except they use fewer candles & call it church,  
which makes us feel a little guilty  
since we came into St. Peter & Paul's much too tipsy  
& got much too angry at Popeyes when they told us  
there was no white meat left for our mix. They make it up  
to us tho with a charitable bean to rice ratio cuz of that  
they got too much to sell. Still we'll never know how  
they fix it so good, but my brother guesses,  
*swears*, the secret's just good ole Liquid Smoke,  
'cept I can't find it in Suriname, not at  
the big Indian market in the big Asiatic  
part of town. Tho whether we can concoct it  
for ourselves or not, inside a Popeyes at closing time  
we'll make a real good mix of whatever  
leftover we can get.