In the Way Back

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In the Way Back

by

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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 tricuspid 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

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
the

hill
to the church

gaze into
where
I was invited to

his creaseless face

& eyelids

in a pillowed box

low roll

ngoma

ikembe

lullaby

such peace

& Céline Dion

in the flicker-

lit

iron-vaulted

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 & indérangeant
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

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.
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 theirselves 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 krewé of vireos’ syncopated sopranos answers brass dawn’s baritone call, & we stay open all morning for half-drunk butterflied 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, lugers, & 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 Barataria 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 & galerles
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 17th 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 throb 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 tourist? 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 towled 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 çé 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.