

David Ensminger

Themes on a Missouri Trailer Park, Part II

In the longness of summers
in the pool with the fake green glow
and the sloughing off of burnt skin
and the tinge of chlorine...
on the surprisingly smooth body
flying down the slide, and the under-
sized buoys bobbing like plastic eggs...
in the fence pressed together like uneasy
fabric, in the fresh face free of makeup
in the swim cap and lone tree...
I suppose there was dramatized a struggle
for human definition, a medicine show
of the mind...

I used to sleep in the hallway
with the light on. Or in my sister's
pink bedroom, next to the drawer
with marijuana and Playgirls, between
the David Bowie poster and the
six inch harlequin doll from JC Penney.
Or I cowered down on the couch
trying to keep out the hollow gong
of the fake antique clock or the
cicada stuck to the outdoor screen
or the crick crick cricking black bug
beneath the carpet choking
out the sound of rusted Chevy Novas
and eight-track converters full blare...

Mom worked at a rolling skating rink
and put newspapers of JFK and the moon
landing in plastic bags. Michael grew up
and played in M.A.S.H. and Dracula. He
told me there was a hole in my armpit.

When he threw yoga parties, I hunched
down, waiting for wedding mints
to coat my tongue and my hole to go
away. I even kept re-opening the slots
in my advent calendar, thinking there
was magic in there...

Do you see that paralyzed patch
in late summer, when the heat rolled
over us in a suffocating plastic oily
tarp? It could be so thankless, so
hemmed in by bugs, so alien.
Past the cinder blocks, the road was
a swath of loose itchy gravel.
But in spring, flecks of life came back,
a turgid greenness flooded the lot.
The horizon was knotted by dumb, thick
maples, a shadow curlicued around
the whitewashed bench, the steel
fender of the Ford was a dream sequence
of doo-wop and unfiltered cigarettes...
You linger in these traces, seek shelter.

Water wells. Pipe lines filled with worms
and larvae. Chipped arrowheads from
long gone Indians. A cow skull the color
of baking soda. Gingerbread cookies
in the clay jar made in the shape of
corn. Bikinis hiding thick
pubic hair, fish caught with clumps of
wet Wheaties.

When I was 12, I wrote a poem on the
back of a receipt. Wait, no it was a story
in which I desperately wanted to impress
Judy Garland. I called it "Safehouse." I wanted
to put her in there so badly. For years, I
littered my corkscrew wall with pictures from
Easter Parade, *A Star is Born*, and *Meet me in
St. Louis*. I was going to lure her to the trailer
park, I swear.

Capricorn rises like a winged insult. Like a circus
rigged by a mathematician.

I was born in El Paso on an army base. Dad
cleaned toilets. Taught typing and English
to lieutenants who couldn't read or write.

Threw a man over his head. Was legally blind,
yet snagged a sharpshooter medal.
I was born in Missouri near the cleft of tectonic
plates and the re-birth of country music. Mom
worked at a rolling skating rink. Drew her eyebrows
on every morning. Learned to drive when she was
32 yrs old. I was born on Pennsylvania Ave. next to the
world's largest bait shop. Grandpa gave me nothing
but the smell of whiskey at 10:00 p.m., a convenience
store with a rack of comics, and tools that my uncle
stole.

I was rushing towards the flat crushed orange twilight,
tongue rising like a balloon on five year old energy,
bits of hail nibbled at the ground. There was lightning
100 feet away. It dug a small crater by
scooping away the clay in a pregnant instant. I had
two gerbils that died that month. That twilight
never left me, like a sweet gum
tree invades the dreams of birds.

I dreamed along to Monkees records, staring into
gold stringy shades that cornered my window.
Watched my neighbor run into a yield sign with
his dirt bike, his face turning to lumpy cheese.
I listened to the moon landing on a scratchy
45 record, made Charlie McCartney, my doll
and cohort, get tied up in my ego. Masturbated
before Boy Scout meetings. I could feel my history
leak over *Reader's Digest* magazines, feel its way
towards broken VCRs.

In the Boll Weevil Night

I tried to love with the nudge of a
blues singer E flat
in the boll weevil night
but my mouth was lazy
full of webs
the Apollinaire poem ate my tongue.

I tried to listen to the whir of helicopters
metal cicadas over dusty tenements
the blaring white of newspapers and public toilets
the sharp smell of grocery stores on fire
but the wind scraped my nipples and
I disappeared on the train
where you folded your arms.
That was in Toledo, where are you now?

I tried to color between the lines it took
a million years when I was twelve Three Mile Island
was a dream you were skinny under road marks
and elastic briefs your lips
were as sweet as mud and steel.

I tried to cradle the stars over Mitchell,
South Dakota, the black flawless washbowl sky,
muddy coffee and cigarettes,
toast gashed with jelly and your pink pink eyes.
(white globes, like a bull's scrotum
on a plate) You said the waitress worked double shifts
at the Five and Dime, you said there was an
inter-modality between the corners of her mouth
and the burning of Dresden,
is it true, is that what you wanted?

I tried to be re-born but Dad cleaned toilets
in El Paso Mom worked at a roller skating rink.
Missouri's sun was a plastic yellow as
the trailer shook with a slate-gray tornado.
We hid in the tub as crumpled farm machinery
fell like bits of rusted snow, do you remember
heartbreak alley and collapsing light waves
the razor that licked your fingers
but bit the halo and our naked nerves?
Mom cried twisting her dry frizzy perm, the
dull gold caps back where her tongue was purple
lit up like florescent bulbs, are you

happy I could call and we could figure it out.

I tried to hold the place where sunlight
stretched and fell across the unwashed
floor, where black shudders pricked these
clammy hands, where the children of the
knife slipped into amber apartments and
you gave me chicken pox.
You were 24 fixing breakfast smelling of
Nyquil I was nineteen pumping gas
at the Navajo gas station, what did we do before
disappointment was born, did we hurt each other
like this?

I tried to make you understand
leaves fluttered like blue sounds in
the Chinese restaurant, our language
heavy as a mortgage and the flooded
one lane highway, come home
to potato salad, psychiatry, and mismatched
socks. Where would we be then, we
could practice not knowing.

I tried to replace your breath
nipples eyelids grain processing plant
under a lavender sky where you slid
your hand until I was cut from my
mother, soup cans, underwear, closed fists,
tang of hamburgers, varicose veins,
Chevy Novas and sanitary ice-cream.
I peed holding my carrot magic penis
rust sister dripping in shards of light
Mom dug her nails into our soft heads muscle
peeling away from arthritic hands is this where
it ends did it end there?

I tried to tell you in Kaskaskia, the debris
ringed the island with plucked bones, your
skin was like bread, unfinished syllables,
a brick church where the river nibbled at it.
The road was coated with hawk leftovers and urine
your mouth was tongue zoos and mortar fire
don't think I've forgotten, please,
I'm forgetting you.

I tried to love with the stillness of a tea cup
but my heart's amuck. The cool haze of a mid-March
afternoon -- pills stuck in my hand, silos blink

over thin streets, lottery tickets, and rotted lettuce.
Burlap in a warm shed where we itched, disappearing
into each other, we heard music, what was it saying, can
you remember, can you tell me, were you there?

FROM ACROSS THE PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO PARKING LOT

in a morning gray as toothpaste-
as the sun looked nothing more
than a specimen in a pharmacy
jar, I peered out my paint-chipped
1930's windows sometimes held
up by rocks

only to see three workmen decked
up in yellow orange caution suits
and protective eye gear that made
them oval faced and lunar as 8
millimeter film footage of Neil
Armstrong on the wrong face of the
moon.

they grabbed tiny chainsaws
clipped to the end of thin bare
poles and chopped down the limbs
of the weedy matter-of-fact trees
that skirt Alabama St. like toenails
longish and yellow in sandals...

weedy trees, yes, but lusty as live oaks
in Louisiana across flat Creole
backwater, now just limbs fallen akimbo
in loose piles, rough beige splices
where they once scratched
car roofs and dropped desiccated
leaves on bus stop 7 a.m.s

the workers circled, climbed a grimy
part garbage truck part Sherman tank
behemoth, the trees looked anorexic,
shuddered of all life, the diesel
smell curdled mid-air and the sound
of cranking mulched fibrous stew segued
with the sound of pissed off dogs
and new quicksilver pothole Mazdas

trees older than my damn
blistering windows, older than
slouchy me, tossed into the truck's
belly to be unceremoniously shat
into the city dump or pressed around
dying trees in the Third Ward

before basketball nights where
mud-splattered blue port-a-potties
buzz with mosquitoes and whiffs
of rank vinegar.

this is what becomes of the
transcendentalist city- the lone
eye of easygoing nature,
survivor woods, mowed down,
harnessed, split and gutted
by men whose salaries belittle
teachers, yet whose arms reek of
Whitman...

The Sculptors

I read fifty personal accounts of archeological discoveries and all were busted wringers on a washing machine compared to you.

I trembled with soul into the a.m.
but you were east of Odessa, taking Excedrin,
whorled, like a univalve shell, into yourself.

I took the Italian glasses off my oblong head
to see you better.

Remembered the flat regularity of Illinois
geraniums, motorcycles.

At 29 I get the recyclables together-
strawberry containers, cardboard from
toilet rolls, bulk mail from ATT.

Weigh the ins and outs of writing a novel
or feeling split in two like
Afghanistan's gigantic Buddhas

Am I plant that might grow anywhere,
or rare like you?

Sometimes when I think too much,
my legs feel like copper, and that
can't be good.

I'm sorry

I'm an indentured poet under a brick-orange moon

A vaquero
de letres.

Do you want Isis instead?

Maybe I should begin this again,
mention Light,
palm trees, or dinosaurs.

But I can't

You're in Los Angeles.

So I'll skip the sugar water
and red dye #2
take a hovercraft
and meet you in the supermercados,
in the fake slopes of Hollywood, in
the museums full of conceptual hummingbirds.

True as steel, crazy with permission,

we'll find the Obdurate Jewel.

Wait, you're in south Dallas
in the closed ritual Geronimo night,
lab-powered quandary of time
and wild fire veins.

The whole menu of the
Great Manufacturer...

In March does the Zodiac
Show you the way?

Baby please

We're old as ferns

but don't be crushed by the
intersection of the moon-

Ram/bull, ramble, rumble

Without you
my palms turn to rough coins.

I'm no longer the host of my own body.

Your sweetness misses no one part.

THE 25th HOUR

On the 25th hour,
after eating green beans,
mushrooms, and a fatty pink
steak for dinner, we went to
Blanco's and celebrated
the fact that we hadn't yelled
or hit each other for a day.

Dale Watson was there, singing
honky-tonk, killer Pasadena,
coastal East Texas truck driving songs.
Songs full of gray pompadours,
blurry tattoos, and crocodile
years of entanglement. The
waitress admired your wrist
full of silver. She was basketball
girl tall, hair butched blond.

We pulled up our Wranglers,
grabbed beers off the checkered
red and white tablecloth,
sung low into each other's neck,
and pretended that we still
liked each other. 17 years ago
we wandered stupid and naked
from place to place. Tonight
we salvaged our radio-born bodies,
exiled the world, and drifted
in the low copper voice
of a man that made Johnny Cash
seem innocent in comparison.

Only scars reminded us
of our capacity to love.
The 25th hour seemed
so human, so real. Even when
the singer closed up shop
and sent us back into
where the night goes.

Some of my poems have been published as a small broadside by Lilliput Press and in the avant-garde journal *Caveat Lector* and many other underground poetry zines, like *Extra Cheese*. I also publish the former print mag turned on-line web site *Left of the Dial* magazine, and “*Trailer Park Fragment, Part I*” was recently published on-line by the journal *Stirring* last spring, while five of my poems were published in the print journal *Detriot Dispatch* last fall. Currently, I teach English and Writing at Western Oregon University.