

Seven Sections of *Safe Distance*

Low Country (cave diving, eastern Yucatán)

The mountain of the gods turned upside down
casting carbon, creating its own effigies
we walk the secret sky beneath the coral canopy
the treasurehouse of precious stones, unspoiled earth,
the quiet and the dark
pond-mirror of the world we know
except this world wants nothing of our own.

—from *Evacuation Route*, 2/11-20/2012

Could it be

I bend the grass on some strip of park on the Ben Franklin boulevard
and existence shifts, kicks up a wind
that blows scraps past my feet from forty years before
half-covers of comicbooks
ripped away to sell for cheaper
in the boxes of shadow cast beneath the elevated track
the pulp of our hoping hearts
soul-LP ads in drab, hypnotizing psychedelic swirls
space-scenes in dots exploded
to reveal the grain of hidden worlds
streets away, Philly International stands tucked between pricier heights
the spirit subjects of Bell & Creed's old song-catching lunches
crossing the street in endless rotation to get it just right
memorized crowds offset on the empty glittering winters
to the music of the snow-white steam streaming
from the frozen manholes along Market Street
I think Bowie may have passed us kids,
a polite, impossible pinstriped human rose,
to our fascination and the clucking disapproval of the moms
I'm pretty sure he was gone by that year but his myth may have moved in
Ain't nothin' that's the real thing, baby
Ain't nothin' but

4/2/2014

Best Revenge

In time-capsule town centers and tourist traps
cowboys riding pickups
and Indians in tees and jeans
pass each other on placid streets
walking by the memorials and public plaques
where the West explains itself.

The settlers stole the past
and seized the present
but left the future out in reach
believing it all theirs.

“My lands are where my dead lie buried,” Crazy Horse said
and his real monuments
are those who walk the Earth.

(from *The Ultimate Trip*, 7/12-29/2008)

'Round the Bend

Like a swing around the dark side of America
the mountain pass takes you to Pittsburgh after sundown
flashing signs and twinkling windows
shining like steel sparks in foundry gloom
a valley of granite and girder
to spar with the mountains
The machines have gone silent
but the rhythm stayed in people's heads
in brash talk and fevered artistry
the unfading echo
of places grown comfortable with the edge.

—from *The Ultimate Trip*, 7/12-29/2008

Plainfield, Winter

You take this town in at the level of a dream,
because it's so alien to anything else that's left.

Steep shadows of ancient tenements
that clasp their darkness to them
against the future rushing past.

The stout grandeur of old churches,
post-office palaces, cathedral banks,
cut from giant, sturdy stones,
markers of a past not built to last but bound to linger.

In my youth, the high facades of empty old department stores
hung over the town like spiteful ghostly discouragements,
now the main street rings with piped-out salsa in the snow,
a carnival of neon the crest of migrant merchants
who've come from far away to echo this place back into life.

1/14/09

World Trade Center Station, 2016

What we live to see,
they died to build
I rise into the future,
white as ghosts
or heaven's clouds
the swooping beams, arcs of flight
that never come back down
A ribcage, a cathedral,
a grounded boat, a glowing cave
that swallows the shadows that fell on that day
We come to rest, we don't remember
if the whale is what kept Jonah safe

10/22/16

Fountain, Bologna

I'm writing this next to a cyclist
rubbing something dark and thick from his hands
laid under the mouth of an angel from 1563
On the street we stayed on
someone tried to bomb a temple about twenty years ago
so the army staid forever
and we left a frightened country
and woke up to an eternal honor guard
Monday morning I'm on my own
and all along the breakfast walk
shops open that I didn't know were there
in the weekend shadows
the courtyards of another century
open out into the street
and the life-red blocks and sandy towers
paint themselves toward the sky another day
I pass a shuffling man old enough
to have quickened his step ahead of black-coated thugs
or to have marched proudly in the Apennines
now, who knows?
This morning, down the stairs,
I knelt in the stream where
the sun comes through
some stained-glass landing flowers from a hundred years ago
and washed my hands
in clear blue light.

from *Rebooted (to Italy, and never really coming back)*
4/22/2013

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