

American Field Notes July – August, 2014

Greg Bem

Whether a saint or not

The woman craves attention

Her loud mouth carved by God

Her audience carved by distance.

The machine of the train and it's clanking as a saint clicking heels.

~

Providence in its mastery.

A marvellous and maddening complex of cracks in the pavement of RIPTA best.

Its blood the mental diseased and unlessened.

This is what we came for.

This instructive string of sickness is how we chose to love living.

Its mazes of expressways:

Nothing but expressions without value, nothing but nothing.

The sun rising high over Long Island

Sings its own damning song

While we sit and grin in frustration of a damning GPS.

~

Laying myself down before Fort Greene

And the pillar has its own mouth today

And the insects are extraneous and ornate.

They love to move their spiky antennae

And keep us posing at arm's length at the bay.

Jumping across the fleeted street.

Begging brunt for the sun to explode much.

A moment and its infant tone

Attached hierarchical to sickened granite.

Shins of Philadelphia shrivelled cockroaches.

~

Sub what under what us my son

Saxophoned by what is father farther.

Eyes and larger and loins lagging.

Purple pluck of grapes bubbles

Lodged in the throat of your yes, yes, yes!

As spiny and spiked the crags go by the names of their mountains

Respective we passing along and within,

Blue guises and crisis is the draped mist crying against windshield,

A twist or turn of the wheel a wrenching of the air,

Wet splashes on the glass mimicking the red and black shit from before, could have been a bug.

~

By way of Buchanan if done right and North and the extraordinary sound.

Four times the tire treads and the endless construction of pavement is a migraine.

My grainy course of being my own contempt.

A cold morning has turned into humid aftermath and a gruesome stomach.

Old they are known for the history of wealth

And the sun beats the roads like wet rags

And the rage of the BBQ is upon us.

The lasting impression of a bar stool spun

Or waking up in a quaking Feverish thriftiness.

~

Flash bang cloaks the glass clink.

Rigid lights of a stupor or a cruel joke.

The silence of being drunk with amiable rampart

Starting us to be alive and pushing us to be still,

Loan creatures of the ribbed roads with wrinkled shadow faces.

Memphis in all its glory a stubble and grunt

Alone in a basking swivel of streets,

Alone as we are alone walking away,

Confederate president or ghostly homeless the same fear,

Our wisdom growing in our refusals.

~

Crossroads at Clarksdale etching a catchphrase.

The held breath released whole while passing

And stammering, looking in four directions,

And holding my gut like I would a child,

Purpose and breath in all directions including those inward.

Those known to us by their trees

Sap around while we talk lazy talk on our phones

Heat sticking things up like the fibres of our clothes

Like the veins in our throats and lips

Asking, "City Park did you do this?"

~

A cowjam, a jam of cows, ahead of us in this route 10,

And a blend of Bayou and boudin balls behind,

The heat and humidity sinks into the car,

We stinkless, once had to scrub out bodies,

While hotel roaches hide in the guts of our restless imaginations.

Sign says SEND ILLEGALS TO THE NOOSE.

And we won't be buying antique cars there,

Not while we know how centric the weird is,

The escape pod ready, the weird at the ready,

We being ready to enter the fantastic throws of this dry center.

~

Dreaming of better joints having been up til 1am at the local pinball arcade,

Adults swarming with beers in hand,

Our backs facing them and our minds facing the games,

Our fingers pounding unexercised and unprepared,

The lament of when we could button mash until dawn back in our youth.

All hail West Texas and all hail the fatigue,

The blue sky caring for and caking the cracks of all this hair-covered arm skin,

Skein for the rest of the hours of light,

As Hill Country fades from memory as just another decal,

Tokens across landscape a series of notches in the earth unto which strangers have settled.

~

What is it, friends or friendship, which awaits us in the middle of the night?

Composing us through the dim red light of a Lantern before the fall,

Black widow hourglass turned over, reset, again,

The tarantula burrowing after a scuttle,

Stick bug crawling like wisdom, wise as it may or may not be through flames of a midnight reincarnation.

The dust storms wreck as savage as they can be, as ruinous, gleeful, greedy,

And our bodies three forced to hold down the corners of a tent,

While we wonder if the Stone Giants will be felled,

Or the scorpions will enter as Trojans passed our defenses,

Sleeping pads as coarse and boundless as the rocks beneath.

~

Ridge gliding across I imagine the time of water in this world,

Though now most is dry, dead, and perhaps alive in its own way,

The weight of existence scattered like the coyote crap wasted in the crag cracks,

And my hand hoists forward the second and last of the warm cans of cider,

My head as vacated as the landscape I've climbed so high, dodged so many fire ants, to observe.

Las Cruces and the never-ending stretch of the neo-pueblo ruffles my beard,

Glistens my eyes with a layer of pink.

These people are like all people,

And yet the surrounding mountains are not like all mountains,

Strips of road leading in and out like ribbon wrapped around a present.

~

Remembering the signs from last night DUST STARTS MAY EXIST and ZERO VISIBILITY POSSIBLE.

When you're in your war machine the dust is as fickle as a breath.

When you're in your tent, the dust is an invasion paranormal, supernatural, in its essence.

This desert and its realms of forces pushing in and out.

This desert and its tourniquet of fear.

Saddling that which does not change: missile ranges of the USA,

The pale Kingdom of our country spreads out like a fine carpet.

Earless bleached lizards darting, their costumes their lives.

Human wanderers perplexed and puzzled at the dawn of earth,

As wide and white as the knuckles of my most godless, timely moments.

^

On the verge of altitude sickness tucked into the cosy current of this bed,

The memories of another sickness at another altitude,

Sick and feeble while riding the back of the serpent of America,

Crossing on Route 550 the border of New Mexico and Colorado,

Incredible oscillating wind noise as rain turned Mountain View to paper silhouettes.

There's nothing steamy within Steamworks,

Durango Mountain village undeniably uncertain yet upon us,

Rough with us through the slick coat of rain glimmering slanted across the streets and their Hills,

A breath or ten worth of gift shops not breathing back,

For it is late and we are tired, our eyes in the reflections lidless as we are listless and tired and only slightly useful.

~

Banditry maybe in this haven of cold wagers and colder airborne waters shivering us, mimicking us,

Tourist Throngs sniffing leather through streets of damp dust,

As though dead cattle let odors loose knowing the thickness of this elevation,

And gut twirling through spectacle and cowboy iconography,

My gut lets forth sighs and crumpled desires for an impossible emergence of showgirls.

Looking back on the moment we looked forward and backward and sideways across an arching desert,

Eyes out for any sport of lightning capable of charring our damned bodies,

Devil's Playground more ground than play and the hiss of demons raged low and long in those clouds,

As our paths became a numbing void and the rain pushed us through our own cinder visions.

~

What of this heat we have heard of and how to keep its thorough feelings alive,

Canyons as long as wide old as cannons or seers releasing the sun each day,

Prickling feelings being those that sit with the strange, alien grasses,

And the occasional bunch and bundle of cacti ready to become an obstacle.

Finally there is a layer of sweat smeared in patterns, language of work and effort as we move along a landscape of brown, red, and light green.

Legs discarded by the miles we trekked,

I am too distracted and burn my hand lifting my shoes from the fire,

Which, left there too long to dry, melted quite thoroughly.

"Fuck!" I shout, liquid plastics and fabrics attached to my hand,

My soul doing a dance before the flames, my mind thinking abruptly about the lack of sex in the platonic cave.

~

Freedom is the town of Gunnison sleeping lazily in its Utah Valley,

Many Shadows of many vast mountains providing adequate layers of an unshackling Suffocation,

And the Adjacent penitentiary is larger than the town's commercial downtown district,

And the local Ford dealership is called Freedom Ford,

And my eyes frost over from the liberation of my car's blasting a/c as I imagine blowing Gunnison a kiss goodbye.

I must have left a poem in those deep valleys and Canyons,

Utah racing like a heart and we are gasping for breath,

Sudden height becoming all apparent,

Including the near-ten-k elevation and its effects,

Including the breathless act of creating art in the mountains.

~

Jackson Hole at the end of a fiery green space,

A landscape of contracting and contrasting colors,

Valley of stars whimpering in daylight for the Daily shit to just hurry up,

Pharmaceutical abuse signs posted in Afton,

My manic awareness and fatigue beyond this drive with a sinking feeling of my youth remembered bubbling up.

Rainstorm over Big Sky, Montana,

The rows and rows of black trees like a queue if lost souls,

And Yellowstone sucked the life out of us,

And future islands are nurturing us back to health,

My mind cancerous in its longing for an unknown other.

~

In Butte we come to rest our minds,

Footsteps fondling the crevices,

And everything here appears as a corner,

As a space to hide away, or slave if we were here a bit longer,

So instead we lay down our mental arms and breathe in cat smells and ponder the empty buildings.

If it was not forward, or backward, it would be Bozeman,

Quintessential and sensual all the same,

Amenities masked by a fleeting stop on a road map towards and behind the favorite American spaces.

One must not doubt the library, closed, providing us still with free Wi-Fi from the patio,

And that unknown potential we glimpsed before parting ways with the town after five minutes.

~

Butte storefronts include Soho, an Asian restaurant, packed with broadbacks long after closing time.

The silver saloon, a hole in the wall empty enough to make you consider your alcoholism before stepping inside.

Pork chop John's, closed, both locations, despite a very open website.

El Taco, fine purveyor of the fine tacolotta, which will be your cheapest and deadliest dinner.

These and more planted throughout town like statues we always dreamed about touching, defacing, or pushing over.

We are the people of yellow endless fields he called vast,

Central Montana North of Helena where the buildings stay closed on Sundays,

Landscape surrounding us, 90 mph, mob in a death machine,

The sky as big as the horizon, lowered into the peripheral through the cool,

Air a bit chilled and nothing much in front of us, beside us, behind us, except us.

~

Skeletal revisitation before the rock Gods,

Their fists churning and attracted to us,

Our immediate reactions to the pouring fountains of glacial water parched,

Our endured reactions to the splashes of mountain sunlight as caked as construction gravel,

Before we continue on like a mythic forest fire spreading viral through our consciousness.

Lone and long gone we are gotten by the breeze that fills skinny, living trees extending through to sky.

Bear boxes mean protection of goods, materials our only collection of creation,

While the chipmunks and squirrels dart defiantly, we chirp delinquently,

Muttering tales and turns and our trips are longer in our stead of stasis,

Liquid lanterns strung above our tent years of vision beyond our temporary churn of coals.

~

When that bison burger gets served hot with the sweet potato fries,

And that slice of huckleberry pie gets delivered in plastic wrap, forever to go,

Can't help but relive the fourteen mile trek, high line back and forth,

A blazing world staring so strong from so many angles,

Ready to bite at your flesh, make dry the top layers of your toes.

Morning gore ain't nothing to fuck with,

This time on going to the sun, my own hands cradling the wheel,

Following some truck aiming at good intentions,

But that little squirrel just can't get its crisscross timing right,

Has its head crushed by tire and gibs go shooting across the road and the body is violently spasming as we drive past in shock.

~

We hunted crawfish with our camera mounted on a stick,

All of the lake glistening before us, while a family of overweight old folks from Idaho idled neatly in their campsites,

And the mosquitos moseyed around waiting for our blood,

Our own senses muted by the calm and warm Lake water,

The temperature drafting, freezing over far from any summer slumber.

The sign reads STOP AQUATIC HITCHHIKERS,

And I wonder what it'd be like to get a lift from a boat mouth foaming with dreams of home,

Somewhere into the sunset of this river, Lake, or whatever body of water Idaho has provided.

We pass the boat with the pain of Rocks on our backs from last night's tent sleep,

The final camp in a series of gesticulations and nomadery.

~

Backwards in time we travel to Soap Lake to encounter history, healing mud,

And in this visit an ugly 99 degrees serving as scimitar of heat,

The same signs I once saw with the women, I now see alone, boys off in their own stasis,

Signs caking over, while nearby a building is in heaps of ashes,

And thank God it's not Don's or the family diner or the lodge,

And we missed the turn for the old Lava Lamp Coming Soon sign and oh well, fuck it.

Memories of recent visions of black Rocks scattered I'm a yellow field,

Beacons of some ethereal reckoning between and beyond Euphrata and Soap Lake,

And now a sky to the north filled with the smoke of Cascadian wild fires,

And the Gorge sits wide open like this country's chugging, pulmonary artery.

Rock face sculpted like magnified cells, ripples of the future, and the past.

~

Bring back the Browns a blanket you left wrapped up your own personal present from years ago,

Discovery as juvenile as adult despite the mishaps and malignment,

They are waiting like the predictions within a tapestry of ghosts,

Rubble and ruin pressed forward and getting caught in the cracks of the road, and all its automobiles,

And all brave automobiles travel through bravely despite the risks of the knowledge of the core.

The hills have been waiting,

The needle poised to strike,

And there is a rush to the waves,

Our body compressed by pebbles,

The daylight extending on and on before the final departure.

~

Five brave raccoons being all that it takes,

Taking me for a spin back to the side of my car,

Taking me back to my voice where I learn again to shout,

For no one ever walks this street but me,

And I am brave enough to brace myself and let out a rippling roar at the invaders and their creepy hands.

Greg Bem, born in Maine and educated at Roger Williams University in Rhode Island, spent three years in Philadelphia. He was a member of the New Philadelphia Poets, helped organized events with the Poetic Arts Performance Project (PAPP), volunteered for City Year, and worked in Reading Terminal Market, among other things. He then drove to Seattle, where he entered into the iSchool at the University of Washington. He spent three years in the Emerald City, based in the southend neighbourhood of Columbia City, working for marketing companies, volunteering at libraries, and helped start several performance series, one of which, the Breadline, was regularly praised by The Stranger. He then moved to Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where he worked for Open Development Cambodia (ODC), the Foreign Correspondents Club, and the Cambodian Library Association by way of Pannasastra University. While in Cambodia, he also ran writing and poetry workshops, and volunteered extensively with the Nou Hach Literary Association, and every month hosted the Open Stage Poetry open mic at Java Café. His latest online books include Nine Nights in Cambodia, and MOMENT, Benzoned, and Vaster Landscapes: Ratanakiri Poems.

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