

Claude Wilkinson

After James Dickey's "Cherrylog Road"

Here I'll use second person since
you were my Doris Holbrook of sorts,
not just because of your like first names —
though we were perhaps not so young
and not nearly so surreptitiously reckless —
but because it's you who for some reason
come to mind when thinking of the time
when I mostly longed to be "wreckage."

Back then, what place didn't seem
as secluded and clandestine as any car
graveyard with each new day thrumming
its own sweaty encomium of need?

Here I should probably make up
something about remembering one
particular evening and the special brightness
of a July moon and how an unexpected comet
sprayed across our ebon sky at the most
opportune moment, maybe allude to some
voyeuristic theme of crickets singing, and offer
a discreet metaphor of acerose air and the
starry penumbra of sweet gums mingling.

I'd be guessing, based on nothing really,
if I said you enjoyed listening to the surge
of the ocean or that your favorite color
was indigo. Here I could lie about almost
loving the mellifluousness of your voice,
lie about your voice being mellifluous.

I might be able to get away with comparing
ours to a few mythical romances, while nothing
so over-the-top as the strength of our infatuation
prodding us to poison, or one of us jumping
off the county's highest bridge into a rushing
body below when what was between us died.

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Here, like in Dickey's poem where he's far more enamored with the stories of rotting hulks of automobiles than with his nearly anonymous farm girl of the summer who doesn't speak or do anything other than what he wills and then leaves, like in that poem to which I return every so often, alas, you also are being left forever by my rusting memory speeding toward oblivion up a never-ending highway of the past.

Carcass of a Vole

On a bus in Dublin, and fresh
from the Natural History Museum,
where I'd seen a silent zoo
of wolf and hippo, and even
presumptive skeletons of two
giant prehistoric stags,
I was mostly remembering
the intact, paper-sack cheeks
on a centuries-old hamster.

As I sat awaiting signs of my stop
for the Botanic Garden,
an elderly Irishman who
had lived in Saint Louis, asked
if I knew where I was going.

For a while, we chatted
of his family, his retirement,
and life back in the states.
When I asked about
the improbably huge deer,
he joked, "We've still got
a couple of them around."

After the gardens,
it had been suggested
that I visit the nearby cemetery
where more than a million
are buried. And after the gardens,
it was an irony of acreage
too onerous to contemplate —

those things that happen to who
you are during your hyphen
between birth and death,
the thought that in spite
of a maybe decades-long
investment in life, you never
really rose beyond dirt.

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When I occasionally look
at some much younger picture
of myself during a time that
most everything seemed before me,
the siege of creases
mapping my face weighs like
this muffled sparkle of autumn
in which, along with pooling
magenta leaves, is the small,
saber-toothed form who here succumbed
or was brought dead to my stoop.

Usually, I blame such gifts
on feral cats offering sacrifice
for sleeping atop my hood
and hunting the yard unbothered.
But why I let it lie there day after day,
studying it of evenings
as the tiny snout skinned
into grimace or grin —

I who couldn't pass
my mother's grave in winter
for years without thinking
she might be cold —
without understanding, left
it there nonetheless.

Perhaps there is no perhaps.
Though there were words,
I'm almost certain,
chiseled into a headstone
in Glasnevin — something put right
that must've felt like a cross lifted,
if only I could recall.

And yet in the perfect
opening for grace,
there's nothing but a timbre
of shadows, nothing
but waning light.

De la Cité de Dieu

after a detail from a late 15th-century French manuscript translated from the Latin

by Raoul de Presles

Though Eve's breasts
are less influential
than I would've imagined
and each figure is a bit
potbellied for perfection,
the pair seem comfortably naked.
Behind them is elaborate
masonry of a garden wall
crowned with a touch
of arabesque latticework.
Adam, as a bearded effete,
stands almost in ballet's
fourth position as if he
were subtly objecting
while spouse, on the sinister side,
modestly covers her crotch.
And in Aesculapian fashion,
spiraled around a sapling,
presumed the tree
of forbidden knowledge,
that serpent with coif and face
of a Renaissance angel
hissing his sweet persuasion.
Still yet without the Isaiahs
and Solomons of wisdom,
quetzals and lemurs
must have been screaming
in the moment remaining
of harmony before
the long kerfuffle begins,
the casting blame and talks
of annulment, before pangs
of labor and rebel offspring,
as all creation contemplates
this gloss of glory hoisted in
a woman's small, stylized hand.

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Roadkill

In the equitable light of Thoreau,
as he mentioned more than once
how the slain make provisions
for the living to gather
at the welcome table, I try
to fathom their excessive abundance
instead of just their mangled mass
and venetian blood splattered
like a Pollock painting, the whorl
of intestines pushed outside;
snakes mashed beyond recognition
into rattlehead copper moccasins;
the barn owl whose sole, ghostly wing
beckons with gusts from each passing car,
directing everyone's travel. I remember
Walden's order of untenable compassion
and think of freshets clogged with frogs,
which would be similar to the curse
on ancient Egypt, if not for accident.
But it's still a kind of eclipse to witness
the starching mink, a once quick vixen's glazed eyes,
or a kestrel's stricken plummet,
still that same unnatural dark
that followed when Macbeth
murdered Duncan, whose horses
then went wild and began eating
each other to signal something
awry, as it seems to me,
do these many broken bodies
dissolving into puddles of jewel-blue flies.