

***From SITTING ON MOVING STEEL – Poems by Michael Ventura
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Dedication: For Ginger Varney

...now Ginger, what do you think,
when we go to the drive-in,
should we look at the movie or do it?
park kind of near the screen
or drive straight through it?

NEAR PECOS, NEW MEXICO

Where have I crossed this river before?
A hundred odd miles southeast, in Santa Rosa, where old 66
Used to run. It always thrills me, the name, “Pecos River,” on the sign. Last night,
twilight, in that quiet
Town, tense as quiet is
In our small towns, the tension of something
That has not happened. Will not happen. But remains.

Lady, is that our tension?

Something has not happened, yet is more
Than present, is the reason
For what is. So many places settled because of what everyone
Felt was about
To happen. A feeling that gets you
From there to here, and then? The smell of water
In a dry land, the shadow of a bridge
On the parched river, paws etched in caked mud
At its banks. While the people of Santa Rosa
Are watching others suffer.
For you cannot believe,
At twilight in Santa Rosa,
That you are in a peaceful place,
Not when so many curtains glow
With the evening
News. Unless you stand right by the river
You cannot hear the river, only the Interstate’s
Rumble a quarter mile on.
Tense, that

Sound. The change. Now. Then. Twilight
Overflowed the river, rose, seeped across the road, thickened
At the lit
Windows, and the river of everything
Went dark in Santa Rosa.

... Lady, at your cabin
A hundred miles upstream, the Pecos
Is everywhere, a loud little thing, rippling
Through our talking, a river glistening
In our ears. You have touched my heart as softly
As the scent of water.

And the name of this river
Is deeper than its waters.

And the river flows through its name
As through the land.

And the river says:
You do not know, and you know.
The not-knowing and the knowing are both inside you.
You are waiting for one to prove the stronger.
Waiting is not enough.

... There was a man down the Pecos, down past the false peace
Of Santa Rosa, through some seven, eight hundred miles
Of West Texas, down just before it passes into the Rio
Grande
At the Mexican
Border,
Passing not far from what is now a small museum and what was once
the court
And saloon of Judge Roy Bean. He called it *The Jersey Lilly*,
After an actress, Lilly
Langtry, whom he had never seen.
In the photo his sign says "Law West of the Pecos."
He was 56 when he first came to that place, he'd been a bartender,
A smuggler, a this-and-that, never a judge; it was just that
This Roy Bean
Was all there was for hundreds of miles, and he judged himself
A judge, so the Texas Rangers just kept bringing him prisoners to be judged,
till finally the state appointed Bean
Justice of the Peace, so's to make it a little
Legal. He wears a sombrero, in the photo, has a white beard, a revolver, and holds
court on his porch, while four Rangers
Sit their horses and a man awaits Bean's judgment.
Nobody was kidding.
If Bean said, "Hang him," the man got hanged. And this went on

For twenty years. Which is to say: Men put a sort of faith
In Bean, and, by their judgment, he was up to it. While he,
He put his faith in Lilly Langtry,
The beauty of her day, a woman of serious
Eyes. I think of him,
Sitting on his porch, in the hour before dawn, all the drunks at last gone home,
 watching the descent of the moon, and filling
 with love (a troublesome word)
In any context, no more or less so in this one) for someone he had never seen,
 Would never see. Named what he hoped
Would be a town after her. It is hardly a town.
But it's only because of Judge Roy Bean that anyone knows the name,
Now, of Lilly Langtry – and she, an actress,
Would have wanted that surely. For her part: Her presence
On a poster
Was enough to help him live.
 But these days
This exchange
 Would not be called
Love.
 These days
We'd be hard put
 To call it
Anything.
 And we'd call it
Anything
 But love.

...When I see my life
In the light of these people,
I want to drive five hundred miles,
Thinking.

I will do that. I will drive a thousand miles soon.
Waiting is not enough, the river is right.
Here at 8000 feet where it's quick and cold and nothing
Like at Santa Rosa or Langtry, we do not know
And we know.

Something is about to happen.

I have not crossed this river before.
BABY

This '69 Chevy Malibu, sweet of line, lime-green,
Is the only car

I have ever owned. She's gone
Four hundred
Thousand
Miles, and I will do
Everything I can, I will not hold back
Anything
To keep her going. I need her. I love her. People
Joke me about this, but gingerly, gently, they're careful
Not to go too far. Because they know: I may be crazy
But I'm not kidding. I love her. So they joke about how
Having a relationship with me means having a relationship
With my car – because if I meet someone I like *very* much
I will take them to my car, and will say, of my car,
“This is one of my dearest friends.” Some think
I'm just trying to be charming, or eccentric;
These are people
I've been mistaken about. I rarely see them again.
Some criticize me for not being ecologically
Sound.
Twelve miles to the gallon, and adding lead
To unleaded fuel, is not ecologically sound.
I respect this point of view. I point out that my Chevy
And I
Have no air conditioners, so as to save
The ozone; I ask
About their various
Air conditioners; I ask about the relationship between
Beauty
And ecology, and whether something as beautiful
As a '69 Chevy Malibu
Can be resented
By the Goddesses
And Gods of the planet. They think I'm being evasive.
I'm not, I'm truly not, I really do believe that my '69 Chevy,
With her superbly graceful line, her strong spirit, her sweet
And tolerant
Nature, is welcomed where we pass
Among the spirits of the earth. But let's say
All that's malarkey, let's say
We're sinners, my Chevy and I, driving in sin.
Then we will claim that last refuge of honor:
We have the courage of our sin. The beauty we feel
In each other's company
Is better than being
Right
Or good – and that,

Lady,
Is love.

In case you were wondering.

THE CHURCH OF THE LONG DISTANCE CALL

We are coming from, we are going to, we are the speed
At which we go.
This is a forever road. And each house on these Plains
Is like a Bible
With its pages
Tearing in the wind.

A Tornado Watch across the Texas Panhandle.
There are words in these Bibles that glow when it storms,
Psalms that cannot wait,
They sing themselves,
And dread the Sunday agony of being clutched
By people who are forever
Afraid. Here holding a Bible is like holding a frantic bird,
It strains against your grip,
It doesn't want to save anybody, it wants to fly away,
Into the storm,
Back where it came from –
Just let it go, this black bird
With its bloody feathers, just
Let it go and watch: it bursts from your hands
Fluttering wild, and flies a sharp
Swift arc, so
High, till you're no longer watching the bird, you are watching
The hugeness
Where it's gone.

...But there are also Bibles
That are turtles. You have to take a turtle-Bible
Far out on the Plains
And place it
Beside a stone.
Leave it. Soon enough, a horse will stand there.
Red ants will circle it, a hawk
Will hover. Worms will seek the coolness
Under; and a scorpion, perhaps. A lizard

Will climb the rock
Beside. Another horse
May join the first. Horses love to stand still together.
And if you take your time,
Then finally when you return for your Bible
The creatures will tell the Bible you are coming,
They will know full well if you are ready,
And, if you are, the Bible's small
Beaked head
Will emerge,
From its shell,
And come to you
Willingly.

...Dusk, and a tender tentative gray light
Sucks your engines sounds into the air – seems so
Quiet in the car, in the world, in the Other
World, land and sky the same unending
Shade, and the Chevy's running so smooth, it's as though you hold
The wheel
Out of tenderness, just to hold it, it doesn't seem really
Necessary. And you cannot mark the moment
When night *is* night, but you are a dark thing
Moving in something darker,
Passing a Peterbilt,
An 18-wheeled Bible
Buffeted in
Its wind-wake.
Now those brights
Glare in your mirror –

We are coming from,
We are going to,
We are the speed
At which we go,
Riding the Forever Road,
Sitting on moving steel,
Lights come toward you
From far off,
They pass and come again –

Lights come toward you –

HIGHWAY SONG

Be careful, where you're going.

The right way, the sun's in your eyes.

The wrong way, it doesn't matter what you see.

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