

*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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