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Silk Road

a literary crossroads

Pacific University
Oregon

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Northeast Corridor Blues

Kim Addonizio

Lost my ticket when I got on the train
Conductor said sorry you got to pay again
If he was a rock I'd be a speck of sand

Passing yards of junked cars, their hoods popped open
Water towers trailer parks local taverns
Gone as soon as you look at them

Traveling down to DC to bury my mother
Put her ashes next to the bones of my father
Tell the priest he won't have to bother

Everyone's a stone but I'm a speck of sand
No matter what I do I've got to pay again
Lost my ticket when I got on the train

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Robert Kostuck

I shot my first coyote when I was twelve years old. I ran up near the wounded animal. It looked at me, hatred in its eyes. They say animals don't have feelings or human thoughts. That coyote was my first ghost. Followed me around for two years. Then I discovered girls and smoking and drinking and fighting. Quit school and drove myself into a rough life; each day was like diving in a cool river with a pistol in your hand. Lived wild for many years. Heeded the call and got an unforgettable view of another life in Korea when I was in the Seventh Cavalry Regiment. We went in at Inchon, September 1950. The men I killed followed me back to Arizona. Bumped my rifle and threw my shots all crooked. Dropped worms and horny lizards in my rabbit stew. Looked at me with antelope eyes, sheep eyes, cougar eyes. Ghost soldiers.

I plundered my inheritance of desert summers and mountain winters. Lived fast and strong, killed many animals and people; gave it up when a man shot me in the back, here in this ghost town in nineteen seventy-four. Mostly now I walk up and down the hill. Sit in the sun and roll cigarettes. Occasional tourists ask if they can take my photograph. I say yes, thinking how surprised they'll be when they print the pictures from their cameras and mobile telephones.

There used to be tens of thousands of people living here. Now it's a touristy ghost town. An artist's colony. Sunday dawn there's always a few ghosts left on the streets. I'm the only one who ever sees them. Cowboys, miners, ranchers, Indians, turned-out soldiers, dance-hall girls. The rowdy night life of a time from before even I

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was born seventy-seven years ago. Been getting up before sunrise all my life. I won't stop now or ever.

Every morning for three months now Priscilla comes with her ugly dog. Young girl not even eighteen and called after a great-grandmother who I say I remember even though I'm not sure if I remember. The resemblance ends at the name. This pale city girl with coal-black hair and a silver ring in her eyebrow. Jangly tattoos up and down her arms, down her back and rear end, too. She told me that; how else would I know? One morning she was just there, walking beside me. Three months ago, right after her first and only crime spree.

"Clarence Kite, you never sleep in? Quince, heel Goddamn it. Sit. *Sit.*"

"He knows me. That dog likes me," I say.

"You're spoiling my protector. You're turning a killer into a pussycat."

I give a bone-shaped biscuit to the dog, an unfiltered cigarette to the girl.

"Spoiling me, too." But she takes it, lets me light it. Quince wipes a wet muzzle against my empty hand.

"I'm like you," she says.

"How's that?"

"Up every day at sunrise. Walk this hick ghost town before all the loonies pop up and park their sorry asses in the sun. How can you stand it? I know something about men—you weren't always like this. I wonder who you once were. I picture a young, good-looking bounty hunter."

"Cowboy, ranch hand, prospector. I was a bounty hunter for only a few years but they were good years. I shot for the pelts or the ears or to feed myself. Lean years when I ate nothing but meat on cook-fires. Fire-roasted elk makes a nice change from beef and chicken. Old habits drop away like calendar pages."

"But for you it must be like living in an old folks home. I'm going crazy here myself."

Priscilla and I park it on a plastic bench halfway down near the hairpin turn. One steep winding road, top to bottom. A couple more

sharp turns as 89-A curls down to Clarkdale and Cottonwood. When it rains the street is a flash flood. Jerome, Arizona slapped against the hillside, run-down houses and broken hotels tilting or already fallen down. Some buildings with KEEP OUT signs: the town council having been threatened with lawsuits twenty-two times in the past decade. Official living population not counting ghosts equals three hundred fifty-three. Add in Priscilla and Quince, add in the transients and hippies squatting in the crumbled hillside mansions and then there's maybe four hundred. The dead outnumber the quick, but time weathers the flat stones until there's only a hint of chiseled dates. Buildings tumble, gravestones tumble. Me and this girl tumble out of our respective beds each morning and meet where the town proper begins, walk from the bottom to the top. Quince shits where he will. Priscilla picks up the turds with plastic grocery bags. It's what they do in cities. I'll never get used to it.

"Take yourself away," I say.

"If I could."

"Call that young man down in Mesa. Tell him to send you the money he owes you or you'll have a lawyer on to him."

"Teddy's over and done with. Old news."

"He owes you that money. That story you've told me, what—half dozen times now? Kids with guns, a fudged robbery? SWAT team shooting up your getaway car? I don't know if I believe that story. Sounds like some Bonnie and Clyde bullcrap."

"Fuck Teddy. He's locked up at Adobe Mountain School."

"School? I thought he was sentenced to prison. Because that old man had a heart attack during the robbery."

"It's a prison for minors, out in the desert. South of New River. I never went there. Teddy was mean but I feel sorry for him now. Because he didn't squeal on me and Crystal. He's probably getting raped and beaten every day. The last thing on his mind is owing me money. We wrote letters back and forth for awhile. Now, nothing."

We press out our cigarettes on the bench. I put the unfiltered butts in a leather pouch.

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“You really smoke those butts?” she says. “Roll new cigarettes with the old tobacco?”

“Waste not, want not,” I say. “You pick up dog poop, I save tobacco. I believe I’m ahead of you on that one.”

At the top of the town a tall Navajo woman chants a morning prayer and sprinkles corn pollen into the day. Straight black hair hangs to her knees. Later I will see her pass with her hair in a single long braid. It’s the same thing every day. We all have our daily patterns. Each morning I nod a hello. Can’t understand a word she says.

Turn, return. The smell of fresh coffee, biscuits, and bacon drifts up the street. The road levels out before the final descent and Kate’s got the door propped open at Lloyd’s Café. Priscilla ties Quince outside, sets a plastic dish with water. The dog plunks down in the doorway. We eat here three times a day. The girl pays her own way. Where she gets the money I have no idea. Maybe from that robbery. We’re the only customers.

“Let me give that poor guy some ham. What do you say?” Kate pours coffee, drops platefuls of scrambled eggs and sausage in front of us. Wrists all stiff from arthritis.

“You all are spoiling my dog. He was trained to kill.”

“Only thing that dog can kill is fleas. Here Quince. Doggie want a ham steak?”

She sets the paper plate on the sidewalk. Quince eats the ham. He eats the paper plate.

“You’ll be picking that up tomorrow,” I say.

“Sure enough,” says Priscilla.

A big refrigerator truck pulls up outside. Quince’s tail sweeps the worn cement. A young man unloads boxes of rock hard hamburger patties, frozen steaks, vacuum-packed chicken parts.

“We’ll be eating that tonight,” I say. “With mashed potatoes and gravy.”

“Sure enough,” says Priscilla.

“You done at five?” I say to Kate.

“I’m just getting started at five,” she says. “What’ve you got in mind?”

“Nothing fancy.”

“That suits me to a tee. Come over at five-thirty. I’ll make you a nice dinner and a really special desert.”

“Poor Teddy,” says Priscilla. She pokes her eggs. “I know he’s getting a hundred times over what he gave. I keep seeing him in that courtroom, looking like a little kid. I kind of miss him.”

“You find a good man,” says Kate, “you hang on. Bad one, you let him go.”

Afternoon follows morning, Tuesday follows Monday, spring follows winter.

Priscilla and Quince and me.

“He shit that ham steak on the kitchen floor last night,” she says. “What a mess.”

Quince nuzzles my hand for a biscuit.

“You don’t mind?” I say. “This is mostly sawdust anyway.”

“I got a call this morning from Crystal. Teddy was on a highway work detail picking up trash. He and another guy made a run for it. They both got shot. One kid was killed. It was on television last night. Made the national news. Didn’t you see it? ‘Escaped convict,’ some shit like that. Like Teddy’s this psycho who needs to be caught before he kills again.”

“I don’t own a television set,” I say. “What did your girlfriend say?”

“She’s driving him up here today. I tell you all this knowing you won’t turn him in. And maybe some advice.”

“Make him pay for what he did to you.”

“My great-grandma’s house has an attic—”

“First place they’ll look is your old mansion. County, state; maybe even Federal agents. The law keeps track of people like you and me. I know a place. One of those old mining shacks farther up the hill. Not the Hotel San Carlos but it’ll do.”

“You’d do that for me?”

“Sheriff’s Deputy out of Camp Verde, a tough nut. Nineteen-seventies I don’t remember the exact date. He was one mean son-of-a-bitch. Followed me around for two years and made my life

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miserable. Bobby Lee Adams. This is my chance to get back at him.”

“Clarence. What did you do to deserve that?”

“The man caught me screwing his girl in an automobile. She never said anything; how was I to know. Anyway—”

The sun-baked Buick coughs up the street. Crystal is tattooed like Priscilla. Greasy yellow hair. Pulls over and leaves the motor going. Dull growl, gray smoke. Crystal breathing fast, chest heaving. We’re alone on the street but she whispers.

“Pris. Tell me what to do. Teddy’s in the trunk. We almost didn’t make it. There was an accident at Cordes Junction and ambulances and fire engines and cops everywhere directing traffic.”

The Buick rolls backward. I reach in and yank on the hand brake. The engine stops. I open the door and the girl slides to the side.

Priscilla and Quince get in the back.

One mile above Jerome I turn off the highway on a washed out mining road. Open the trunk. Teddy has those gray-green prison tattoos on his thin neck and shaved head. Jittery and jumpy. Quince barks at the boy. Priscilla deserves better.

“They said you got shot,” I say.

“They were wrong,” says Teddy. “And why are we going down a dead end? I want to get out of the state. Who the fuck are you?”

“They expect you to run. This is better.”

“Listen, gramps—”

“You’re going to have to trust me.”

Teddy reluctant in the back seat with Priscilla and Quince.

Early afternoon clouds billow above the Verde Valley.

Sometimes it brings rain. Where the road widens I stop.

“Now we walk.”

The old road narrows to a path. Ghosts keep pace with us: half-hidden in the trees and brush on either side. Only Quince and I can see them. Rabbits, beavers, raccoons. Antelope, white-tail deer; ringtails, mountain sheep. The one buffalo I killed in New Mexico. Rattlesnakes, a swarm of bees, a sad bear. Quince tucks

tail, swerves around and between my legs.

“Why’ve you got that pit bull with you?” says Teddy. “Bastard bit me two times before.”

“Quince is a Rottweiler, baby. And he’s ever so gentle now. Everyone spoils him.”

“Should’ve shot the damn animal.”

The shack I remember is a pile of boards. I kick gray planks and a wood rat scurries out.

“This is crazy,” says Teddy. “I want to know what is going on.” He pulls out a handgun.

“You’re here,” I say. “You’re here and you need to stay put and out of sight.” I take sleeping bag, tent, wicker baskets from the back seat. Water bottles and a carton of cigarettes. Priscilla smiles and Quince runs in a big happy circle.

“When things cool down,” says Teddy, “I will kill you.”

On the way back to town I ask Crystal if she has any family.

“West Virginia. I ran away from home when I was eleven. Never been back. Who cares?” She watches trees shudder past. “I don’t remember seeing you put that stuff in the car. The tent and baskets and stuff.”

“You were standing right there watching when I loaded the equipment in the back of your car,” I say. “You’ve had a hard day. Easy to miss something obvious.”

Mid-afternoon when we get back to town. I park next to an unmarked cruiser. Bobby Lee Adams leans against his car, picks his teeth with a pocketknife. Rubs the silver badge with his shirt cuff. Glances at my girls, stares at the clouds.

“Looks like rain,” he says. “Everybody will get wet.”

“I thought you were departed,” I say.

“Like you, I’m still here.”

“What was that girl’s name? Carla? Karen?”

“Katherine Gilbert.”

“That’s right. Katherine. Long red hair—”

“This isn’t about the past. It’s about things that’re happening right now. Like where you have been today.”

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“Picnic,” I say. “Beautiful spring day like this—”

He shifts his belt, adjusts the holster. “I’m still stationed out of Camp Verde. I don’t live in the barracks anymore though. Saved up and bought a little house. Stop in and visit sometime.”

He drives off slowly in his automobile.

“He knows, doesn’t he?” says Priscilla.

“He heard something on the police band and somehow he knew where to go,” I say. “Isn’t that right, Quince? You hungry, boy? Me too.”

The rain catches us. We shake off some drops and I treat the girls to an early dinner at Lloyd’s. Kate lets Quince come inside. She eyes the tattoos on Crystal’s arms and shoulders. We’re the only customers.

Days go by. The weather stays the same. Spring keeps knocking, fresh and green, splendid and bright.

“I gave Crystal something to knock her out,” says Priscilla. “What a wreck.”

Another morning and two North Korean soldiers follow Priscilla and Quince and I up and down the road. They call out to me but it’s a language I do not understand. The soldiers wave Daewoo K11s in our direction. I’m tempted to ask where they got modern assault rifles; I wonder if they speak any English.

Priscilla and I stop at our regular bench for a smoke. From the café a strong foreign odor drifts up the hill. The soldiers go in Lloyd’s, exit moments later without the weapons and carrying dozens of white take-away containers.

“I’m worried about Teddy,” she says. “All alone up there in the trees.”

“Better than a life in a juvenile correction facility. Let’s just,” I say, “sit here for awhile.”

Cars and trucks hum and whine: undecided gearboxes on this steep twisty road. Three ladies ask if they can photograph us. We put Quince on the bench between us but he jumps back down. Priscilla and I smoke a pack of unfiltered cigarettes. I crumble the ends into a plastic bag. Cumulus clouds rise above the Verde