

The Sacred and the Stolen

By Johnny Redway

The river creeps north. A delicate, brief breeze cuts the oppressive July heat. This canyon is sacred. It is also stolen. Can it be, this coexistence? Yes—to the victor go the spoils: a reservoir for motorized water sports and hydroelectricity among the natural grandeur.

The Shoshone and Arapaho reservation lies just on the other side of the reservoir —NO PUBLIC ACCESS. If only they had those words when the white man came. Now all is just a faded mural of Geronimo on the side of a sad and lonely lounge in rural Wyoming. Hardly anybody knows about him, or Sitting Bull, anymore. Their names mean almost nothing.

Poets & Writers magazine flaps open, its pages flipping in the hot wind. Inside I glance and see the words...”especially for people of color.” I struggle with the phrase. An acoustic guitar leans up against the porch banister. A fly lands on the high E guitar string and quickly ascends. A gentle note twangs along with the buzz of the fly’s wings as it rises.

The wind reads the magazine to me, tells me that even though I can’t write sonnets like Terrence Hayes or novels like Tommy Orange, I should keep writing anyway. Maybe I could be a songwriter? it queries:

Baby, what you do to me?
I can hardly stand.
You drive me so damn crazy,
I jus’ wanna be your man.

Baby, when we fuss and fight,
I don’t understand why.
You so damn smart,
you always right—

I can't even try to try

But I love you
so damn much,
even when you
moody as fuck.

This canyon, that mountain, the river, are meditations. I visualize lightning and thunder shaking the land and setting it ablaze, rain soaking into the drought-stricken creek beds, the damn for the reservoir collapsing, the silent absence of vehicle traffic on the tourist-laden highway, the highway itself crumbled, returned to the earth, the vanished roars of passenger jets overhead. Then—

At sunset
I lift you up
from the picnic table
carry you into the cabin
and make love
to your soul.

“It’s slow today,” she said, the heavy foundation and lipstick on her face and lips cracked with her smile. Lonely pool tables and booths sat in the darkness of the roadside bar and liquor store. Most of the light came from a lone television. An infomercial played, selling obsolete compact disc collections of old Country & Western standbys like Patsy Kline, George Jones, and Conway Twitty. Her cheap, long cigarette burned infinitely in a copper ashtray.

“It is only 10 a.m.” I said as I set a six-pack of Coors on the counter.

“We don’t take cards, but we have an ATM machine. It’s a dinosaur, though. You may have to swipe it a few times.”

“What are we doing here,” I asked her.

“What do you mean ‘we,’ pale face,” she said behind a phlegmy cough-laugh.

“You and I. What are *we* doing here?”

“I don’t know,” she said and picked up her cigarette and took a long drag, stared through and beyond me, beyond the wall.

A train trundles over the tracks, through the canyon and across the river, graffiti-tagged and tired. The wheels’ squeaks force thoughts of my son and how he asked me if I believe in the afterlife. I admitted it was something I thought about often, but had struggled with for a long time. And that, ultimately, I could only hope one existed, could only hope to believe in it.

“Can you want to kill a motherfucker while simultaneously love them?” The fly, as it buzzes around my head with the heat and the cold beer, quotes Terrence Hayes from his featured interview in the magazine. The answer, of course, is yes. It’s why I sometimes wish to smash my guitar, the train, that roadside lounge, and this entire stolen world into unspoken and unknowable names and words.

Words that not even

flies, or the sacred winds

can read.