

BORNE ALONG

Timothy Irish Watt

Now let me remember all the open-eyed days of my life on the road, all my wonder before the prairie, its grain, our stars, this living, a praising and a lamentation, a lull, left-off, sung up from the wince, off-sprung to be believed. I was radiant, rested well, drove, as velocity and meditation, a gleam-cosmic faction corraled, this I, me, one among many, into the enormity of America, open-eyed, a lover, leaning, a boy in a big man's body, crossing the Alleghenies and all Ohio, and into Indiana for the night. I slept in my van in a service area on the verge of Illinois. There was the moon. I rested well, wrapped in a blanket with my bag for my pillow and my picture of Amity in a frame for my company, and my Riverside Shakespeare and my Holy Bible, with all their annotations made in devotion, in conceit, in vainglory and curiosity; wrapped in a Hudson Bay blanket I slept, and the trucks roared past on I-94 at three A.M., slamming farther into America. And the van shook and it did not matter. Because sleeping is a sound, a dexterous peace, dream-textured and hallow-mined. To wake to sun to morning again, wonder-wrought near Joliet. I drank my coffee at a picnic table near upon where a poodle pissed on his tree. And I spoke, singingly, to the day; and the day spoke, singingly, to me. And the Mississippi, mythic, arterial, near absolute and current-cranked to glide ribbon-smooth, it was only a few hours off and me, a figure in the future, stood on its banks in the future and I said to myself, Amity is now not far-off, my love, my friend, my witness is near. And I drove to that future and never once left the present tense, our mode of ongoing, our familiar and unfathomed here. I mean, Illinois in the sun! Rock Island and Moline and all their many miles of track above the river — broad, brown, and sliding flat — whose memory they kept and were kept by. For if you are an American, do you come to the Mississippi, or does the Mississippi come to you? I crossed it laughing in so much sunlight that my own worst deeds appeared to me as diamonds in the poplars.

I entered Iowa, at Davenport, and I was too awake to be mistaken for anything but a human being, rhapsodic, overblown, unknown, and always, always in need of affection. I thought: I will

be a witness to the wisdom that is the world in which I fall and fly and am born along, radiant and ridiculous and sublime by proxy if not by fate, destined to be arriving in the afternoon to the small city in which my own lover and I will stand waiting for her friends, and her friends become my friends and they are near-enough in time, even now, to be sanctuary. I stayed two nights with Amity, my long-found love, in her apartment on East Burlington Street, and then on a Tuesday morning we held each other in the street, and the sky above was cloudless and blue and endlessly opening above the Great Plains from Iowa City to Council Bluffs and from Council Bluffs, across the Missouri River to Omaha and Plattsmouth and Weeping Water. I took my lunch in Lincoln, and in Lincoln dreamed of Lewis and Clark and the clamoring Eden they crossed, of rivers clogged with cutthroat and salmon and buffalo roaming in herds so thick you could not see the plains they roamed upon. And I-80 crossed and recrossed the Platte River at Kearney and Elm Creek and Lexington and Gothenburg in pouring rain so heavy you could see the river rise. I saw the river at North Platte rise, and stopped — such was my freedom: I stopped for the night in a clean warm Red Roof Inn. I bought my beer and my pizza and settled in to the sound of the rain in Nebraska at night. I called Amity on the phone. I told her of all I had seen. And love? What is love, but this: held ardency, let go. Nearness and Nebraska and so much rain. She and I, we were attributes of intimacy, the physically whispering consensus of a world: The Great Plains speak singingly to the Rockies. And the Rockies speak singingly to the high desert and the low desert. And the high desert and the low desert sing a single note held to the coast and the coast brings all the singing — our topographic longing dawn-discerned — all our singing to the sea; all our fanned-out and disarticulate majesty, in genuflection, brought. And we are washed, or roughed-up, and sometimes destroyed and often held as if aloft to float left of our jobs if not of our sorrows. In North Platte, at night, the river rushed and I heard it, and hearing it heard, heaves-long, the arterial magnificence of a heart, in all its planetary booming. Thus, safe; thus, sound: ay, yes; yes, ay; nearly unnamed, land-known and still for the night in North Platte, awake. I filled my bathroom sink with ice to chill my beers. I called Casey — who I would be house-sitting for in Colorado — to tell her I would be there tomorrow and was told in reply that I need not come so soon, for her departure had been delayed a week, to

which I replied, well, I will see you in a week then! Then we hung up and I called Amity and asked her if she wanted to go on a date tomorrow night, say around six? Six for a drink, seven for dinner, nine for the night as the night needed to be? Say. Say, I, and I would be the unwashed dashing man of no bitterness, angelic, animal, a paint-peeler, an aspirant to the many-splendored is of now. With who? Amity asked, in that mock-mischievous coyness I loved, as one loves whatever restores one's fondness for humanity, in the specific, and generally as the huge unwieldy living what. And the next day I drove the twelve hours back to Iowa City, in a blue-sky-above-brown-fields world, clear and crisp, with the rivers rushing and the heart booming, in its exertions. I was not in pain as I had been; I was not depressed as I had been; I was not working a job I did not like, or living in an apartment I did not like, and I had not lost the woman I loved, or lost my love for her. I was wide-open, free and reborn and notably alive and illuminated. I thought, a knight? If knighted by the seed and star of my ambition, in love, and for love, then a knight, so sired; a goofy catalyst of oomph, a fabulist, materially, a yea-sayer kind.

I drove on.

And the Missouri came from god in Council Bluffs. And they felt it in Harlan and Odebolt too — the Missouri, the Big Sioux, the sorrow of tribes. The moon rose. The coyote crossed the highway. I traveled on. Who knew my nights could be so gentle? It was the road was a silk ribbon stretched and all that was and is refracted came together as a bead of water to study the private lives of trees, on the branches of which hung lanterns. Who put them there? The deer in the dark leapt. The wind rose. And the lanterns on the branch ends bounced and shook. We thought they would fall, my God. But the wind whispered to a stop, dream-textured, hallow-mined. I held my fortune lightly and arrived. The moon was lovely.

That night we laid in bed, moonlit and pleased, in her apartment on East Burlington. And the Universe, far-hauled and hieroglyphic, undiscernable and tremendously near, held the Earth and the Earth responded to us in kind; so days of our lovely friendship followed, mild hours in the afternoon, evenings each, a star's to bring, and our mornings made again of light. Doves behind veils I saw; my

love, anew, awakening; a leaf fell. And starlings perched on the sill, and the singing was ours. Nebraska! Here I come again!

The sky was very blue.

It was eight hundred and twenty miles from Iowa City to Denver, and I was going to drive it in a day so I could see and stay with my friend, Dan Phelan, before heading out to Edwards the following morning. I made it to Julesburg on the Nebraska/Colorado border, in the northeast corner of Colorado itself, at the fork of I-80, which heads due west to Cheyenne, and I-76, which as if descends southwest into Denver. And just past Julesburg, the pick-up truck in front of me struck a deer. The truck swerved and recovered and pulled to a stop on the shoulder. I pulled over also. The car behind me pulled over. The deer, a young buck, dragged its destroyed body off the shoulder, where it had been flung on impact, down into the gully and into the scrub grass before the ranch fence and it was silent and dark-eyed and dying; it thrashed its head and strained and fell still and then strained again. And you glimpsed this in the headlights and I felt we were all at the very top of the world with snow on the way. I shut off my van and stepped out and was met by the sound of idling cars and of traffic roaring past and in the quiet between traffic roaring past, of the sound of an animal dying in high grass, a dull sporadic and slow extinguishing, with its hoofs — those that were such geniuses of leaping — twitching in the dirt, and the young rack thrashing the grass. Trucks roared past. We heard only trucks roaring past.

The man who had pulled over behind me was a rancher and he came up beside me, carrying his shotgun. They've hit a deer, I said. Yes, he said, and he kept walking.

Ahead, the woman who had struck the deer sat in silhouette in her truck with her hands on the wheel, and when traffic passed she seemed to flinch, and was illuminated. The rancher surveyed her vehicle — perhaps what was most unsettling was how little damage it had sustained — the grill was a bit buckled, the bumper mashed in, the front right panel pushed in. You, alright? Mam, the rancher asked. He stood at her passenger window. The woman nodded. The truck's not bad off, he said. She nodded again. I stood behind him. I

listened to the deer in the scrub grass dying. I want you to shut the window, now, the rancher said. In a couple of minutes, I'm going to pull my truck in front of yours and we'll get you to the next exit. How's that sound? Okay, the woman said. She nodded again. I can do that. She closed the window and glanced back and I held up my hand as gently and steadily as I could until the rancher walked back to me. You can go on, now, he said. She's going to be alright.

Is she scared? I asked.

No, he said.

He crossed the shoulder, climbed down into the gully and up onto the bank to the deer in the grass. The deer lifted its head and thrashed. I climbed down the gully and came up the other side also.

Don't get close, the rancher said. If he gets you, he'll tear into you.

He pulled two shells from his jeans pocket and loaded the shotgun. It was a drop-load, side-by-side. He snapped it shut. I walked around the deer to stand behind him and the stars shined and winter was in the air. He stepped forward. He knelt. The deer lifted its head again with its dark eye full of its own dying. You're just going home, the rancher said. He stood then and raised his gun and I plugged my ears and he shot the deer in the head and the deer went home.