

Making My Way Back Home

North America, 1987

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I. Ohio

MAKING MY WAY BACK HOME

Appropriate that Bruce Springsteen should be singing "My Hometown" on the car radio turned up full blast as we catch State Route 21 into Massillon & see in the far-off distance flickering lights of the city, the town where one of my great-ancestors, Jacob Mauger, built Ohio's first motorized vehicle in 1856, where Coxe's Army set out on its march to Washington DC to protest unemployment in 1894, where three picketers were shot & killed & their union hall decimated during the Little Steel Strike of 1937, where the Massillon Tigers won the High School Football National Championship four times under Paul Brown, who went on to become the first coach of the Cleveland Browns in 1946, despite his objections to having the team named after him.

I remember the night I left, mom hugging me in the doorway, dad outside, big hulk of a man who I'd never once seen cry suddenly tears in his eyes saying "Don't leave" & now realizing coming back that there's nothing left to come home to as we drive down the Lincoln Highway of hard travelin' Woody Guthrie, through the deserted streets of the rust bowl ghost town where once were hardware stores & dress shops, insurance agencies & doctors offices, grassy park, library & ivy-covered museum, a Civil War cannon on the lawn outside City Hall, the tallest building some 9 stories high topped with a huge American flag, the parking meters & swinging traffic lights, & now seeing on the marquee of the landmark movie theater that they're showing vintage films from the good old '40s & '50s.

"Yeah, those were the days," I think, before Lake Erie died & the Cuyahoga River caught fire, when the land was sprawling with mills & factories, dotted with smokestacks, crisscrossed with truck routes & railroads, to the north all those Ohio cities whose names ring of iron, steel & rubber: Cleveland, Youngstown, Akron, to the south tucked away in the rolling Ohio hills, the farmlands & cornfields & sleepy little towns where on Sunday afternoons we'd go for a drive in the country & gather nuts & have picnics beside streams, spreading our blankets on the fallen autumn leaves.

Now the streets are all empty. Only the bars are open. I get out of the car & walk past gray garbage cans, gutters lined with bits of newspaper & crushed paper cups, grass growing up through cracks in the sidewalk, listening to the heels of my shoes click on the hard concrete, looking up to see the streetlamps flickering like stars about to flame out & fall from the sky.

God how it's nice to be home.

OUT IN THE BACKYARD WITH NEIGHBORS

I'd come all this way to hear Finney tell about how his car 'd broke down. Biff said he oughta buy a new one & Old Duffy recommends a Chevrolet, which is what he's been driving for years. Besides, as he says, "Buy American."

The conversation drifts as it always does to baseball & last night's game, which the Indians lost 23-4. I ask Biff "When's Cleveland gonna win the World Series?" & he says "Probably not in my lifetime." No doubt he's right since they haven't even won the pennant since before I was born.

"Yep things just aren't what they used to be," Finney says out of the blue. "Not since the mill shut down" & we all know what he's talking about & suddenly everyone's quiet. Old Duffy took early retirement last December but Finney still had a few years to go which means that he lost his pension. Now he's custodian at a shopping mall, one of the new service jobs created during the Reagan Administration, whereas once he'd had a good solid factory job at a good sold company making good solid American products in the good solid USA & Biff only 34 years old, wife & three kids, still looking for work & thinking about selling the house he bought just 2 years before which is exactly what he'll have to do if he doesn't find something soon.

Trying to get my mind off all of this I say "Think Cleveland'll have a better team next year?" "Nah," says Finney while Biff spits & Old Duffy just stands there, shaking his head.

OLD PHOTOS I

Getting out the old family album we come across this picture of my mom when she was a teenager all dressed up in her Easter outfit on Easter Sunday. Her hair's combed real nice & she's beautiful. I mean really beautiful. If I were a young boy looking for a girlfriend you can bet that I'd ask the girl in that photo right there out for a date.

But she's my mom after all. She's my mom.

When she hugs me I can feel all that motherly warmth come flowing out of her like milk from the nipple into my mouth. Yet even now her arms feel like chains wrapped around my neck, like I'm just about to be born but am choking on the umbilical cord.

Once when she held me like that I jerked myself free & threw her to the floor where she sat all in a heap, legs buckled as I walked out into the night cold rain pouring down on my face.

OLD PHOTOS II

Here's a picture of my dad as a young kid in Indianapolis standing in a vacant lot, the slums behind him, the buildings on the verge of falling down. I think back to all the stories he used to tell me about growing up in the Depression, about stealing ears of corn from the cornfields, about swiping bread from the corner market, & it's easy to see why he'd want to live in a big split-level house with a fireplace, drive an air-conditioned car & look for ultimate contentment in a job he hated.

Back then it was totally immaterial to suburban-born me that I had arrived just in time to enjoy the world's highest standard of living, a card-carrying member of the first American generation to grow up on color TV & shag carpets. The very first thing I wanted to do just as soon as I could do it was to throw it all away, to break out of the suffocating opulence to run wild in the open air, to pursue the bluejean bhikkhu life, to be a genuine wandering tennis-shoed mendicant & find immortality as a regular married-to-poverty backpacking bum like all the beat saints of old. I didn't want anything to do with prison-gray suits, white-shirt straightjackets, or choking striped ties.

Dad turns the pages of his life with the photos in the book & starts telling his old war stories again & how he regretted not the possibility that he could have been killed but the reality that he had killed so many others. I ask him if he had it to do all over again would he fight? "No, I don't think I would," he answers, which surprises me, WW2 being the good war & all, not to mention all the arguments we'd had when my turn came around about whether a conscientious objector could still love his country right or wrong.

But now in a voice as mellow as the 12-year-old Scotch he's balancing on his knee, he tells me about the day he was discharged from the army, how he could have gone anywhere in the world he wanted, but the only place he wanted to go was home.

I remember a night a long time ago. I was walking down a deserted country road feeling lost & homesick & not knowing which way to go. It was a rainy night & I just wanted to go home, have a nice cup of hot tea like mom used to make & go to sleep in my own bed with my own soft pillow but no such luck, the rain was falling down.

Now I'm sitting here with my dad looking at old photos all cozy by the fireplace, knowing that home isn't really home any more once you've gone.

ROTTEN APPLES

I used to hate that goddam apple tree because every fall my sister & I'd have to go out & pick up all those rotten apples & put them into five-gallon cans for dad to haul down to the dump.

The apples were too sour to eat but we sometimes ate them anyway & ended up with bellyaches. Once mom tried making applesauce with them but even a ton of sug-

ar couldn't've made those apples sweet.

Used to be there was a swing hanging from a limb of the tree. Dad 'd put it up when my sister & I were real little & he used to push us on it. When he got tired he'd say he was letting the cat die down, meaning he wasn't going to push us any more. We were on our own, though sometimes it felt like we just couldn't do it on our own. We wanted him to keep pushing us. But he'd go into the house & open himself a beer & somehow we figured out how to make that swing keep going by ourselves.

When I got older I built a treehouse in that apple tree, all by myself, only 10 years old, & dad came out & checked to make sure it was strong enough. It was. Then when I was about 16 just getting ready for all kinds of grown-up things like dancing & drinking & driving cars real fast, dad told me I had to tear the treehouse down. I didn't want to do it but he made me do it so I did it, with big teenage tears in my eyes. This was the place where I used to come when I wanted to be alone, when I didn't want anyone to bother me, when I just wanted to sit & figure out the world & my place in it.

Now the tree's gone too. They cut it down last year & all that's left of my childhood it seems is this old moldy stump & the memory of rotten apples.

THE VACANT CHAIR

There's a chair no one sits in because it used to be grampa's. He died just 3 weeks before I made it home. He was 97 years old. I never got to see him before he went, only the place where he was buried in the old Massillon cemetery with a hard granite tombstone over his head.

He'd left his homeland, too, just like me. Told me that the ones who didn't like to roam stayed home, meaning the folks back in the old country who still live on the land they've lived on for generations, although technically now the state owns the land not the ones who work it. Centuries into the future if there be any people or land at all, the roots of our family tree will still be buried deep in that soil & maybe the tree will be sprouting new buds. It's even possible that by then the state will have withered away.

I went back to the old country once to visit the relatives. I saw their mud-plaster homes & grape arbors. I drank their good peasant wine & ate their hearty peasant food.

One of my cousins had married a soldier. He goosestepped over for the introductions, standing there at attention, all straight-up & icy-formal in his uniform, hat & medals, proud scowl on his thin lips & blinkless eyes. I smiled at him in my blue jeans & tennis shoes & said "Howdy!"

The goodbyes were harder, hugging my aunts & shaking hands with my uncles, feeling just how calloused & proletarian their palms were & how bourgeois mine were

in comparison.

So this is what grampa left. He'd told me about fighting in the Balkans, deserting the army before WW1, stowawayng across the oceans, smuggling himself across the Peace Bridge from Canada into the US, walking the open road, hoboing from town to jobless town until he finally ended up here, a cold granite tombstone above his head, me looking on with places of my own to go to before my own chair is empty.

ST. PAUL'S CHURCH

The church was empty. I could hear my footsteps echoing against the vaulted gothic arches overhead as I walked down the aisle through the nave. The stone walls were damp & cold. The air was musty.

I sat down in a pew but couldn't seem to pray like I used to, so I just sat there looking up at the blue of the stained glass windows, pondering infinity, wondering if heaven was blue & where we would all end up.

The organist comes in to practice for the next day's service, starts playing "All Creatures of Our God & King," not a tree or a bird in sight. Back outside flowers genuflect to the warm sunlight.

LAST DAY HOME

I can still remember how proud dad was the first day we moved into this house, how he'd hammered up the white picket fence & we'd painted it together, how the flowerbeds were always full of flowers, the lawn green with grass.

It's still afternoon & dad's drunk, he's already started his second bottle. I gotta leave tomorrow, so this is my last day home at the house that I was raised in. Mom's standing there with us doing the dishes, dad looks over at me with bleary eyes & asks "Are you happy?" "Yeah I guess so" I say & he says "I always figured that you'd finish school, land a job in the main office at the mill, sit there all day on a swivel chair with a never-empty water cooler, not having to sweat it out like your granddad & I did, 74 years between us in the furnaces—what'd'ja give it all up for anyway?" "Aw you wouldn't understand" I reply & he says "You're right I probably wouldn't."

So we sit there together at the kitchen table talking about old times, myself drunk of the memories of the place where I grew up, looking out the smudged window at the sunset, the flowerbeds filling up with weeds, the grass turning brown & the white picket fence needing painting.

II. Heading South

DRIVING THROUGH WEST VA.

We hit the West Va. Turnpike & I get to thinking about G. who used to live here & had his own cabin in the mountains of West Va., which he'd built himself with his own two hands, hired-hand farmer, a man of the land.

It was kinda hard to believe that G. 'd finally settle down, wanderer that he'd been, always on a spiritual quest, making a pilgrimage all the way to Alaska to live by himself hunting caribou in a hut on the Alaskan Peninsula, 100 miles from the nearest town. He sometimes liked to be alone but other times he'd be up & down the land, hitchhiking here & there, you'd never know when he was going to pop in on you but he was always welcome.

Then there was his big trip to China in search of his soul, where he actually climbed precarious Chinese mountains & talked to old sages, direct descendents of Lao Tzu, & learned ancient wisdom so wise & so ancient it cannot be spoken, but if this is the wisdom he found then why did he go out one morning & shoot himself there in front of that cabin in the mountains of West Va.?

VISITING N.

N. has this house way out in the hills, to get to it you have to cross this rickety wooden bridge. You really have to want to see her before you'd ever dream of crossing it.

We didn't tell N. we were coming but there she is sitting on the front porch like she's been waiting for us & she takes up the path behind the house to the cabin she invites us to stay in, no electricity, only a kerosene lamp, fireplace, wooden table & chairs, & a pallet on the floor.

We grab soap & towels & go skinny-dipping in the cool muddy water of a nearby stream & N. warns us about the mountain goats which won't hurt you but'll chew up your clothes if you don't watch them. It's evening & the goats'll be around soon, so N. washes as our clothes while we splash around, soap down & shampoo.

Back at the house N. gets a cozy fire going & there's an old guitar with only five out-of-tune strings by the fireplace she's never learned how to play so I start tuning it & she asks me if I know how to play her favorite song, which I do, so I pick it out for her on the five strings, singing the raspy voice lyrics, as she gets this faraway look in her eyes.

N. is a haiku poet & stretched canvas painter but now everything's changed. Used to be she wrote about jumping frogs & raindrops & painted windows as "just win-

dows,” contemplating “purely formal aesthetic relationships” as she said, then the windows became vaginas & symbolic moons as the vision turned inside-out & reentered the world we actually breathe in.

Suddenly N. says “I’ve had it up to here!” slashing her throat with her finger. She’s angry & everyone can see that she’s angry, poet turned politician, activist sitting passively in her cabin in the mountains, ½ serene Buddha already in Nirvana, ½ Bodhisattva fixing to cross back over the river, across that rickety bridge, to re-enter the marketplace with wine gourd & mingle unnoticed with the merchants & dirty her Zen saint hands on the things people dirty their ordinary hands on every day.

“No more cicadas & rock gardens for me!” she proclaims, as if Zen & haiku had anything expressly to do with cicadas & rock gardens. I say “But N., what more could you want than what you’ve got right here, to be sitting in front of a warm fireplace drinking wine out of old peanut butter jars?” She says “Yeah, you’re right” & I am & she knows it.

What else is there to do once you’ve found your own little mountain retreat, your own safe garden of Eden, except to look out & growl at the ruins outside & keep on having crazy quixotic visions of how the whole world might be?

MOONSHINE IN SEPTEMBER

hitching south down Highway 19
 picked up by pattering pickup
 man said he was Bluff City bound

I swung up in back with the boys
 took my slug when
 the jug made the rounds

o the moon shone bright that September

careening along those mountain roads
 wind whistling through the windows
 gears grinding, tires whining
 mid the hoot howling songs that was sung

A WAY THROUGH THE VALLEY

this is the same path
we used to walk together

mist is climbing up the mountains
clouds are hanging low

we would sit beside the crashing creek
listening to the storm
getting wet in the rain

I can still hear the thunder inside me
still see the lightning
flashing

NIGHT IN THE APPALACHIANS

We put up our tent right smack in the middle of the Appalachian Trail about a quarter of a mile in from the road right beside a silver singing stream & build a roaring campfire which we huddle around in blankets watching light from the fire flicker against the trees.

I get out my harmonica & a bottle of Jack Daniels, playing ad lib American tunes, humming in the background, the rustling of the leaves, & when the fire dies down & you are fast asleep in my arms I look up through a clearing in the trees & see one bright star.

DAWN AT DENNIS COVE

Got up early to see dawn from the mountains, climbed old Potato Top in time to watch the sun come up over the horizon & spill its light into the valley, then made the descent to the falls where 10 years before I'd given up my faith, buried my cross & accepted nature as my personal savior, right there surrounded by those rock-cragged cathedral mountains, the vaulting arches of oak trees, the spires of the pines.

There's a ritual I perform every time I come here: I take off my clothes & stand alone naked as a person can be, stripped of all outward & inward possessions, & I baptize myself in the river, diving into the water over my head so icy cold it takes my breath away, then I shower beneath the falls to wash away my sins.

When I come out I sit on the banks, on the tiny mosaic pebbles, looking at the water splash down over the rocks, not knowing, not caring where it's going or where it ends up. I see my own face in the water & watch as it slowly ripples downstream out of sight.

RANTING & RAVING IN DC

I guess I don't have much to say to Washington but then Washington doesn't have much to say to me, which is only a figure of speech of course since Washington actually has a lot to say to everyone.

Yet who has read all those laws & rules & regulations about what we can & can't do in the land of the free, not even the people who wrote them let alone the people who are expected to follow them even though they've never heard of them before, but ignorance of the law is no excuse as they say, which is why most people still think that they're free even though they sure as hell aren't.

I don't complain about the government much since it doesn't owe me a damn thing even though it legally obligates me each year on penalty of fines & imprisonment to fill out all these officious, convoluted, inscrutable income tax forms which no one can understand, not even English professors with PhDs, despite the instructions being written in English, to figure out how much I owe it even though I expect absolutely nothing in return: no welfare check, no interstate highway, no government buildings, no big spending programs, no social security, no cops & no military.

What I want is to go buy my own mountain, put up my shack, raise my own taters, grow my own corn, shoot my own game, live my own life & die my own death. Tell me where O where America can I find me a mountaintop to sit on with a copy of Max Stirner on my lap & a loaded double barrel shotgun in my hands, one shot for the thief who comes to take & the other for the do-gooder coming to give?

STANDING ON THE ELLIPSE

An eagle flying over the White House doesn't care about what's going on inside because it's too busy flying around just being free, even though I'm pretty sure there are no eagles in Washington, DC except perhaps in zoos, nor does the little boy whose father points excitedly & says "Lookie there, son, it's the White House!" but the boy's too busy chasing pigeons on the lawn trying to catch them in his outstretched arms.

AT THE VIETNAM VETERANS MEMORIAL

all the people walking past
 & me walking with them
 searching the cold granite walls
 for our own names

KEY WEST DUVAL ST. ON A SATURDAY NIGHT

Key West Duval St. on a Saturday night, dead tired feet shuffling, just back from beers at Sloppy Joe's where Hemingway sat & drank & told big fish stories & talked about his 20-toed cats, walking by & suddenly we hear music coming out of an open window, street-level with some people hanging around.

Peering in there's this huge lump of a guitar player, ham fingers dancing over the strings, an honest-to-God miracle, & his voice is as husky as corn still growing in the field, playing finger-tearing rendition of a song I never heard before since it was probably one he'd made up himself.

This guy & this girl get up to dance, the girl's dancing her top off, jiggling up & down with the music, the guy can't keep up with her, then the song segues into a long plaintive blues & the girl doesn't know how to dance to it so she just stands there for a moment, breasts hanging down with the music, then someone shouts "Don't let me down!" & just as she starts to get her body moving to the wailing lonesome cadences of the blues, the song shifts again into a down-home up & down the strings bluegrass tune & the girl's breasts are flying again as her partner sits down exhausted.

The crowds start cheering even before the guitar stops, at which point the girl takes a bow & then when the bedlam dies down the guy next to me shouts out "How about one for us street urchins?" meaning those of us standing outside, too poor or too cheap to walk into the bar & buy a drink so that we can sit down on the wooden stools at the wooden tables (all the seats are taken anyway) & to this proposition guitar man says "Sure!" & starts pounding out the chords of "Johnny B. Goode" & pretty soon everyone's out there dancing on the sidewalk, accosting passersby for partners, the light from the glitzy streetlamps making it look just like an expensive NY disco.

While I'm standing there trying to disexcite myself someone I don't even know suddenly walks up & kisses me & I feel the warm wet kiss linger for a moment on my lips then I swing my new partner from my jitterbug arms, feverish, not even thinking about the hot summer night.

MIAMI BEACH DREAM

it's night & I'm walking along the beach
looking up at the stars & the far-off lights
the water's lapping up onto the shore
a warm breeze is blowing through my hair
it's a night for romantic dreams
to see myself walking arm in arm with you
making love on the sand in the moonlight

A SEMINOLE TAKES US ON AN AIRBOAT RIDE THROUGH THE EVERGLADES

Long hair, jeans, & no shirt, strong enough to wrestle alligators, when he tells us ancient stories he moves his hands in ancient ways & listening to him speak I can see the buildings of the city crashing down, roads turning to mud, swamp flowers blooming in the rain.

III. New York, New York

NIGHTFLYING INTO LA GUARDIA

the airplane's falling
 from heaven to hell
 down from the cold night sky
 into the hot orange lights

CORNERSTANDING ON 5TH AVE.

Traffic light red & this big grotesque-looking Cadillac pulls up, windows rolled down, loud thumping rhythms as the driver sits there waiting for the light to change nodding his head up & down with the music.

Light turns green, the engine roars & the car pulls away while the heavenly strains gradually melt back into the general noise of the city where they came from, people shouting, cars honking, sirens wailing.

TIMES SQUARE SHUFFLE

to the music of steel drums
 sidewalk street dancers
 somersault on the concrete in

chicken-jerking
 swallow-swooping
 bear-strutting
 horse-stomping

movements for passersby to see
 with a can out in front for quarters
 as if the money alone
 could've made them happy

CENTRAL PARK BLUES

Central Park bench sleeper says “Man, you don’t know what it’s like having to live out here with all these crazies” & he’s right, I don’t, but I do know what it’s like to sleep under stars with the trees overhead & the moon shining down with a bottle of wine in the chilling night air so I give him all the change I have & he says “Thanks brother” slapping me on the back without looking up.

OUTSIDE THE METROPOLITAN

First time I’d seen those paintings I’d oohed & I’d aahed & felt sophisticated when I could distinguish a Manet from a Monet ½ a gallery away but now my own visions have changed & somehow I can’t see myself any more walking through the landscapes of Vincent Van Gogh. Even the Whitney is ancient history to me now.

Now here outside the Metropolitan, umbrella in hand, I see there on the sidewalk this beautiful Renaissance-like drawing in multi-colored chalk of a woman & man reaching out their fingers to touch each other like God & Adam. If the person who ’d drawn this had only lived a few centuries earlier s/he would’ve been asked to do chalk drawings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel not on the sidewalk with people going up & down walking all over it, the colors & the vision getting washed out in the rain.

GREENWICH VILLAGE SAUNTER

soldier still in combat
 his buddy’s dragging him along
 hand around his waist
 whispering something in his ear
 then kissing him on the forehead
 touching the war-weary shoulder

LIVE AT THE VILLAGE VANGUARD

We’ve got seats right up front, the waitress brings us bourbon on the rock, then a trumpet player strolls out onto the platform, sits down at his stand & starts doing riffs on his horn. Others drift in & soon there’s a cacophony of muted sounds, the musician all making up their own little ditties till the leader of the band finally walks out on

stage to generous applause.

The music commences, horns & audience warming up together, sax fingers gliding up & down the keys, trombone players with cheeks all puffed out, drummer a sweaty young kid rapping the skins. Everyone cheers when the bandleader goes into his strut, waving his hand at his ear, singing guttural Louis Armstrong vocals.

Now this kind of jazz is a bit before my time & for a moment it all seems like some relic from a long-lost past that I was never part of, a dying art form, an American anachronism, but when the musicians go into their finale & the whole groovin' band throws away their scores, standing up for the improvs & charting 22 solos in perfectly unplanned harmony, I know it's me who's behind the times. Then the short hour's up & we're all obliged to empty our seats in time for the next performance.

ODYSSEY THROUGH HARLEM

skateboarding on the soles of my shoes
 down 125th St. past the Apollo Theater
 between brick & concrete buildings
 wondering why this is only place
 I have ever felt at home

TALKING WITH STUDENTS AT COLUMBIA U.

Here at the university of Allen Ginsberg & Jack Kerouac I ask these girls what's important in life & one of them says "guys" & I say "what kind of guys?" & she says "guys with big cars clothes money cocaine" & I tell her that when I was a student we were only interested in finding ourselves & saving the world & she says, "Yeah, my mom & dad are like that."

I remember back to the prophecy about how the times 'd be a'changing & now it seems they have. Mr. Jones, we knew something was happening but we didn't know what it was, the Found Generation, so busy fighting to be free from this / free from that that we never had time to figure out what we were gonna do with all that freedom once we found it.

"So you eventually want to get married?" I ask her & she says "Only if there's a money-back guarantee"—every woman has her price I suppose & I'm not sure exactly what kind of new perversion she's talking about when she gives me the ol' college cheer "All the way with an MBA!" No sociology courses for this girl.

I promise to visit her in a few years in her Manhattan penthouse with white wine & pet cat & all of NY at her feet.

BRONX GRAFFITI

used to be the graffiti was at least legible
 now the writing on the wall
 looks like it was written by an invisible hand
 in a language no one understands

KING KONG CLIMBS THE EMPIRE STATE BUILDING

I climb up the Empire State Building to the 102nd Fl. like some primeval primate, one primitive hand clinging to the tower, the other brushing away gunfiring Curtiss Falcons & shielding my eyes from the howling moonlight as I look down & see all those little yellow taxicabs boring their way like termites through the anthill of the city.

STATEN ISLAND FERRY

From Battery Park I go to the Whitehall Terminal to catch the ferry to Staten Island which passes right by the Statue of Liberty with Emma Lazarus's poem written on it, the one about the huddled masses yearning to breathe free, & I feel kinda proud knowing that my ancestors had been among those huddled masses who built America's railroads & worked in America's factories, although I remember that my great-aunt hadn't gotten through immigration at Ellis Island because she was cross-eyed so they turned her back as not being fit enough to melt into the great melting pot of America.

Since I am among those who left I sometimes wonder why they still come may-flowering across the oceans? A man is hawking T-shirts inscribed with "Keep the Torch Lit" & standing there at the railing of the ferry looking out across the harbor at the torch-beaming lady in the fading distance a woman says to me, "Ain't she beautiful?" & I have to agree, vowing right then & there not to give up the struggle.

IV. Miscellanies

MEANDERINGS THROUGH TORONTO

lost found
all around
I'm downtown

street
elites
something to eat

towers
flowers
shuffling away the hours

can't stop dreaming
scheming

no ambitions
hoary visions

a rose
no clothes

billow of crowds
clouds like pillows

something funny
out of money

ask for a quarter
give 'em water

people here
drinking beer

city tramps
walking the ramps

bankers camping
postmen stamping

Sylvester Stallone
& ice cream cones

cars pass
bump my ass

a smoke
I'm broke

under the sky
wet & dry

thundering
wonder

rain
pain
what's lost is gained

no umbrella
for this fella

grass grows
no one knows

trees die
no one cries
wonder why

look at me
am I free

grocery man
& wine in cans

girls
in swirls

who don't look up
a coffee cup

outdoor fruit
ties & suits

glide the concrete
looking sweet

sitting kidding
brokers bidding

someone waves
are we saved

gothic spires
god I'm tired

ghost in the belfry
toast & pastry

street signs
whine
my life & times

sirens
Byron
a store with irons

trolley cars
& men in bars

subway stations
the mosaic nations

children shout
pout
have no doubts

a Catholic sister
shoes & blisters

Chinese kanji
on dirty laundry

crumbling houses
open blouses

ringing bells
cameras to sell
hell

the gate is dusty
my face is rusty

peeling the bark
off Noah's ark

parking meters
electric beaters

a quiet park
I'll make my mark

modern art
& broken parts

pageants, glory
one more story

wind chimes tinkle
Frederick Engels

hardhat crews
news-

papers
capers
blues & scrapers

laughing women
babies grinning
spin in

circles
the color purple

maple syrup
policeman's stirrup

blondes
in Hondas

mailbox
locks
no one talks

Buster Keaton
the garden of Eaton

awesome omen
my fly is open

MAY DAY

May Day! May Day! The world's on fire, coming undone, sinking, going down... banners, marches, loudspeaker-screaming screams of Henny Penny: "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!" & sure enough the atmosphere is collapsing, hailing down on red flags, on blue & white collars.

The flowers are blooming patriotically—the roses just as red, the violets just as blue—saluting no one under the hot white sun.

THE TRIAL OF HENRY FORD

Chassis-fitting, bolt-tightening, assembly-line hustling Joe agree t' be judge provided no foreman, management, executive, or shareholder 'd serve on the jury.

"I give it my darndest, 'swear!" the workman on the stand did testify, but in the old John Henry race-to-the-finish / best-man-win / winner-take-all flurry of moving parts the machine won & the man went ahead & apologized for being what he was: an inefficient mass of organic matter, needing food & drink & sex, with the capacity for noble truths but the inability to find them.

With the bosses watching on, thick-lipped, smoking cigars emitting blue smoke,

wearing prison-gray suits & barbed wire watch chains, the beer-drinking, baseball-watching workers started throwing wrenches, sitting down on the factory floor, staging wildcat strikes (“We don’t need no union!” they said), thinking that minor adjustments, a slight improvement in working conditions, a small raise in pay would solve the entire problem, all these potential artists, thinkers, pent-up inventors condemned to the Sisyphean monotony of ball bearings & rolling wheels up the line, temporary fill-ins till the robots all got wired.

When all the arguments had been heard, Henry Ford pled guilty. The workers were no longer needed. “I’ll let you all go” he said.

But now where’ll you go & what’ll you do—you newly liberated Jackson Pollocks, John Deweys, & Thomas Alva Edisons?

OUTRAGE AT INDUSTRIAL PAINTERS

Symphony halls for 1000-piece orchestras, every seat taken / standing room only, Yankee Stadium flooded with beer, 13-player teams throwing baseballs at the fans.

The Great Wall of China encircles the globe. Christo has covered the entire earth with canvas. Andy Warhol is painting our lives on the surface.

Café philosophers: have you yet figured out why the sea isn’t orange & the sky isn’t green?

Smokestacks, endless flat warehouses, spiraling towers long & slender—mother-earth smoking cigarettes, sky-father exhaling the wind.

Turbulence & jet-lag from culture-hopping, museums overcrowded, legs over-working, corridors & corridors to get lost in / found in.

AFTER THE REVOLUTION

In the Balkan Mnts. near where my grampa was born there’s a village called Kazachevo & in Kazachevo there’s a lumber mill with just one saw which was built by grampa’s brother & his son, Ivan. I have a photo of Uncle Ivan standing beside the mill & remember how proud he looked when he turned on the saw & the pulley pulled & the blade spun around & his eyes said, “Look! this is what me & my papa made with our own four hands!” & together they sawed wood for 20-some odd years till after the revolution the state took the mill over claiming that they now owned the means of production & the comrades came in to run it, workers in arms yet they couldn’t put out even ½ the lumber that Uncle Ivan & his father could all by themselves. After his father ’d died Uncle Ivan stayed on in his old room above the mill but he wasn’t allowed to flip the switch that would turn on the saw that would cut the

trees that would make the lumber without permission from the government which spoke in the name of workers even though Uncle Ivan sometimes did when no one was looking to fill out his days of boredom & remember back to when there was work to be done & he'd done it.

Someplace in Pennsylvania there's a lumber mill that's been around since the revolution where in later days the unionized workers who never owned the means of production used to make \$-something.50 an hour sawing wood & were happy to put in their 8-hour shifts, collect their paychecks, stop off at local taverns on their way home from work, spend their weekends watching basketball on TV until the mill shut down & the men got laid off with permission from the government which makes no presumption to speak in the name of the workers only in the name of the people & one of these people who happened to be relative of mine ended up in the city burrowing through subway tunnels, sleeping on steam grates & passing the bottle to pass away his days of boredom remembering back to when there was work to be done & he'd done it.

No one should be denied their right to happiness, to work if they want to or be a bum if they please but after the revolution with no one's permission I'm gonna start my own lumber mill on my very own land & plant my own trees & cut my own wood. I'm gonna own the means of production. There won't be any more government to speak in the name anybody, we'll each speak for ourselves, & there sure as hell won't be time for no boredom with all the work be done if we do it.

AMERICA A View Looking Back

“Live as free people but do not use your freedom as a cover for evil.”

—I Peter 2:16

American exceptionalism can only be believed in by those who have never lived abroad & seen what else is out there, whose belief in their own superiority insures their inferiority by preventing them from learning from others, who can't admit their own faults & so can't make changes for the better, who are stuck in a rut of complacency, lost in a maze of trivia, drowning in depths of shallowness, covered by heaps & heaps not of meaninglessness (in all its profundity) but irrelevancies pure & simple, who, in short, refuse to acknowledge the un-known unknowns we don't know we don't know.

Our fiction is now a miniseries, our drama a sitcom, our art spray paint on the sides of bridges and derelict buildings, our music the spasms of masquerading pierrots who haven't yet found their souls & have all but given up looking. Our prophets pro-

claim an individualism they don't understand, a mean democracy that divides the country into the 1% & a leveling-off equality for everyone else, stripping us of every higher aspiration & insisting that we be content with Sunday afternoons filled with football games & beer. Our poets have given up all hope, looking for sacred utterances scrawled on restroom walls & newspaper-strewn alleys in the same breath both cursing & taking a hip sort of pride in being tough enough to survive the wastelands of our cities. Our kids are so streetwise every hand reaching out has a knife in it. We head for the other side of the street whenever a stranger approaches, equally fearful of ganglords who quietly hand down the edict "Pop him" & police who gun down the innocent so that everyone can know where in the whole wide world life is cheapest.

We have given up sensitivity for its affectation, feeling for an insatiable thrill that rises up like a jaded phoenix from our precious cynicisms then flies away into the cold peaceful tranquil & utterly uncaring night. We see the world through a haze of smoke, with clouded eyes, unable to comprehend the wild visions of the cosmos without being stoned or high or totally blissed out on the opiates of our spiritually impoverished religions. Our consciousness is to be stretched out unconscious, to go placidly through the universe with our eyes ½ closed. Our holy grail is a paper cup, our sacrament a used condom. Our profundity is to avoid at all costs any appearance of being profound & in the midst of our iron practicalities there is no more room for the dreamer.

Our professors dissect the world into infinite compartments to be memorized & mastered while PhD candidates struggle through theses & dissertations with erudite titles & scholars write articles unintelligible to all but other scholars. Our philosophy is now the handmaiden of science, which all bow down & worship, with its priests dispensing miracle, mystery, & authority to the fideistic masses, human relationships consummated & disputes resolved through its marvelous technology which has shackled the majesty of our mountains & the vastness of our fruited plains & now will shackle even our once-indomitable spirits as we lay down our hammers & die, our lives completely unnecessary & totally redundant.

Brown-nosing yuppies in suits & ties, just like their fathers, smile at their bosses' faces then curse them behind their back in crowded bars, their only wish besides climbing the corporate stairway to heaven being to vacation on Malibu beaches in the sun & white sand, long tall glasses of aphrodisiacs on ice, cosmetic-lipped cover girls on the sunchairs beside them & windsurfers somewhere out in the horizontal distance, whereas we the clock-punching hired hands greet our bosses "Good morning" & our friends with friendly profanities, conversing with each other in grunts as machine talks to machine while in office buildings lighting up the night we stare blankly at 2-dimensional stacks of facts, keeping track of everything necessary to hold the world together then tunneling home where we lock ourselves up in small dark rooms to pass our time in solitary confinement afraid to go out, not even opening the window for air, but staying inside our self-imposed prisons, retinas burned from staring vacantly at TV picture tubes & computer screens that are never turned off, the hardware of our bodies growing soft & flabby, the software of our minds growing hard, traveling the

open highways of virtual landscapes, a simulacrum of a reality we no longer touch, encapsulating ourselves in cool tombs where we drink our lives out of whisky bottles.

There's no escape of course & so natural that we sell our souls for our jobs, cowering at being thrown out into the streets without warning if we miss a single day of work even calling in sick to join the ½ million other homeless wanderers out there, while still dreaming of sitting at the top of a Babylonian skytower sipping champagne & ruling the world with a divinely-inspired checkbook & a ballpoint magic wand, not getting any closer to streetlevel than to cruise along in long black limousines passing the envious street kids who know they'll never grow up to such luxury yet still reaching out for it & returning empty-handed, ready to kill, all in the land o' plenty while the world's masses starve & rulers cut deals & politicians brag on in their flag-worshipping temples thanking God that we're not like those "other places" where the poor are much poorer than our own while everyone looks to the big-handed fist of big brother to open up & shower down blessings on everyone as law-abiding Robin Hoods divide the spoils among themselves, robbed from the poor & given to the rich—is it for this that 10,000 nuclear warheads are needed to convince the world that right is right?

America—shine your beacon on a hill; the goodness of a tree will be judged by its fruit. I praise your freedom & weep at what you've done with it. Your highest aspirations are as noble & as pure as the snow-capped Rocky Mountains but your pride, so boastful yet so unconvincing, is the hypocrisy of the Pharisee who went to the temple to pray & could only see the outer garments of a self-righteousness mistaken for loyalty devotion & patriotism, too smug to beat his breast or bow his head in humility like the publican who said only "God have mercy on me a sinner" & then tried to change his ways. Even so, America, I will dream your dreams & reach for ideals that can never be attained for your strength has always rested less in what you actually are than in what you have striven to become.

Annotations

While the poems in this collection were inspired by a trip to North America in the summer of 1987 and the place names are authentic, the characters and incidents depicted have been fictionalized and are not (auto)biographical, i.e., not based on real people or events.

OUT IN THE BACKYARD WITH NEIGHBORS: The Cleveland Indians baseball team changed its name to the Cleveland Guardians in 2021.

RANTING & RAVING IN DC: Max Stirner (1806–1856) was an individualist anarchist best-known for his book, *The Ego and Its Own* [*Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*], trans. Steven T. Byington, ed. Davie Leopold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995 [1844]).

AMERICA: A VIEW LOOKING BACK: The epigraph is a free translation by the author. The text of the poem was substantially revised in later years. At press conference on February 12, 2002, United States Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said, “As we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don’t know we don’t know.” Quoted in David A. Graham, “Rumsfeld’s Knowns and Unknowns: The Intellectual History of a Quip,” *The Atlantic* (March 27, 2014). <<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/03/rumsfelds-knowns-and-unknowns-the-intellectual-history-of-a-quip/359719/>>. Despite the criticisms Rumsfeld received for this remark at the time, it holds up philosophically.