

A Reason in the World

Once Mama goes
I'll use up the chicory and sorghum, swap
the Mason jar of Kennedy half dollars for green
rectangles, get in the pickup and just drive:
Steep gravel roads for fast interstates.
Joe-pye weed for squared lawns and scalloped bushes.
Coon dogs belling in the gap for traffic pulse
and streamers of light like music I can sing.
I'll drive until I find a reason
to stop or a reason to turn around and come back.

Wet tires sizzle, heatless. My rhythm sometimes
ruckles and fades like stations the radio
loses on the way. The next state's too-early frost
is a ditto of ours, limp crops leaning like lines
of ragbag refugees from some new war. Me, separate
as the lone gas pump in front of old general stores,
not wanting to explain my hurry, not knowing
the lyrics to "Where you headed, stranger?"

Away from you, I might shout. Away
from what I know and don't know. Away from
familiar nothing to maybe only different nothing
that replays like magnetic tape.
What I'm after is live songs, trumpets, guitars
enough to fuel my tank to Chicago. To sleep
under sheet music, inhale hot jazz for lunch
and wind me in a gospel-slapping choir robe.

Practice runs I call these Saturday to-and-fros.
Short rolls on the treble staff, quick
upwardly mobile riffs on a limited scale
and down again. Mama's not gone yet.

But I've taken the whole trip
on so many midnight turntables, her words
on my back like a hand-me-down coat
that weighs too much and warms too little.

Today I found a thirty-year-old road map
in Mama's Bible, the highways traced and dated
with quarter note rests all the way to New York
in red. And by a different, dimmer route,
all the way back in blue. Mama never told me that.