

PHANTOM LIMB

TEN
APPALACHIAN
POEMS

Philip St. Clair

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

These poems, or earlier versions, first appeared in the following journals:

Chaffin Journal: “The Home Place”

Journal of Kentucky Studies: “The Deer’s Hoof,” “Wayne County”

Kentucky Philological Review: “The Forty Days”

Oyez Review: “Black Dog, Red Truck”

Pinyon: “Phantom Limb”

Ploughshares: “Car Story”

Prairie Schooner: “Dark”

Quarterly West: “Commiseration”

“Launching Out” was first published in *Anthology of Appalachian Writers, Volume V* (Shepherdstown, WV: Shepherd University, 2013).

CAR STORY

THE FORTY DAYS

THE HOME PLACE

WAYNE COUNTY

COMISERATION

LAUNCHING OUT

BLACK DOG, RED TRUCK

THE DEER'S HOOF

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DARK

For Christina

CAR STORY

A woman visits the auto showroom down her street, carefully inspects
all the glamorous, unattainable cars,
opens the door of an all-white Lincoln convertible and gets in. A salesman
with sideburns walks over,
says how-do, asks her if she'd like to take it for a spin. "Sure," she says,
and off they go around the block,
the wind gentle in her hair, the sun warm on her face, the ball of her foot
throbbing from all that power. "Thanks," she says
when they return, and before she leaves, she watches him snag the ignition key
on a hook behind his desk.

That night, halfway through *Unsolved Mysteries*, she rises from her couch,
pulls the fire extinguisher from its rack in the kitchen,
walks back to the showroom and lobs it through the big plate-glass window.

She gets the keys to the Lincoln, bounces it
over the low sill in a shower of sparks, heads for the SuperAmerica.

She goes inside, picks up an armload
of cola and corn chips. "I don't have to pay," she says on her way out.
"Jehovah is my father."

The cashier and the manager run after her, and when she tries to drive off,
the car won't go in reverse.

They hold both doors shut to keep her in, so she puts it in park, stares
straight ahead, keeps her hands
tight on the steering wheel, waits for the inevitable while the engine idles.

Four cruisers pull in, lights flashing. Soon
she is handcuffed, gently eased into a back seat. On the way to the station
she looks in the windows of many houses:
generous draperies, cheerful rooms, the blue flicker of unseen televisions,
the parents who sit before them in faceless silhouette.

THE FORTY DAYS

The young man next door is home on leave after his basic training,
and he is shy about his whitewall haircut,
his polished black shoes, the one bright chevron on his olive sleeve.

His buddies come to see him
in their ramshackle cars, their pickup trucks with a splash of rust
over each rear tire.

He borrows his father's Honda and they drive to the Yum-Yum:
he hands out burgers and fries
from the carhop's tray to the guys in back, and as they eat they stare
out of the tinted windows
and watch clouds. "So what'd they make you do?" one asks,
and he tells them all about it.

They want to know about his orders: he tells them where he's going,
what he's been led to expect;
they whoop and crow, pop him on the arm. "My uncle Bill did
a three-month TDY over there,"

one says, "tried everything in this ol' world to get himself back."

When they go fishing,
they visit all the sunken logs, the hidden rocks, the reed-clumps
where bass are lurking,
and when they shoot beer cans with their twenty-twos, he flips
each one end over end.

And after they put him on the bus bound for Fort Dix-McGuire,
they tell each other

how much has happened since he signed up last Thanksgiving
and wonder if they ought to do
what he's gone and done as they drive behind his bus and follow it
all the way out of town.

THE HOME PLACE

Saturday morning, and a fiftyish woman sits in a booth
in a family-style restaurant, staring
out of the window as she smokes mentholated cigarettes
one after another. The walls
are hung with sepia photos and antique tools, conjuring
bygone days, country virtues,
simple living. Over her head is a print of an abandoned barn:
honeysuckle gropes a beam
exposed by broken siding, and in the sunny foreground,
grapevine chokes a wagon wheel.
Her small, sad eyes are ringed with mascara, as if she were
a silent film tragedienne, waiting
for her cue from Mr. Griffith to walk in front of the cameras
and the man with the megaphone
where the light is hot and harsh. She has been talking to herself
in a low, throaty voice,
and no one looks up from their coffee and their newspapers:
perhaps they do not want
to draw her attention; perhaps they have heard it all before
and are not interested.
Whatever it is she says has risen out of her past: sometimes
her face is twisted
as if she were a neglected, compromised child; sometimes
she strokes a paper napkin
as if it were a cornhusk doll. All of a sudden, she lifts her head
and begins to sing:
the men set their jaws and turn away; the women blush,
stare down at the grain in the tabletop.

WAYNE COUNTY

Away from town, in the middle of a well-kept lawn,
a broad red star
and a green letter T rise to the treetops on a six-foot disk
mounted on a pole:
it's the emblem from a service station built in the Fifties,
and like the tallest headstone
in a tiny family cemetery, it's been carefully preserved:
no flaked-off paint,
no blisters of rust, no bullet holes from the boys who cruise
in pickup trucks.
I've pulled off to the side of the road to take a better look.
There's a concrete oval
right next to it, and three short lengths of capped-off pipe
jut out: a vestige
of the glass-topped pumps for Sky Chief, Fire Chief, Ethyl,
hauled off long ago
when the cheap self-service places started to come in
after they widened Route 27.
Not far off is a bungalow, and I see a curtain move.
Whoever lives there now
might have owned the place back then, when Uncle Miltie
was Mister Tuesday Night
for Texaco, televised live from coast to coast, dressed up
like Carmen Miranda
or Little Lord Fauntleroy, bringing his Borscht Belt shtick
to the cornfields
and the piney woods, sharing his quips and gags to the guys
in their gray uniforms
who joked with the regular customers, who checked the tires
and topped off the oil,
who pumped the custom-blended gas from the storage tanks
buried in their native limestone ~
company-engineered and guaranteed not to warp, leak or seep
for a thousand years.

COMMISERATION

What must it be like for the other guy? That's a question I'm
not in the habit of asking myself
as I sit at a deserted bar, elbows on the polished walnut molding,
forearms at an angle over a beer,
but all of a sudden the door flies open and there he stands
with all that daylight behind him,
back from wherever it was that he moved to, his two little kids ~
the ones she abandoned ~
clinging to the crease in his trousers. "That's one sad bastard,"
I say to myself as I wave him over,
offer him my right hand, deliberately look into his eyes,
ask him how he's been.
"Just passing through to see who's here," he says, glancing
over his shoulder at the booth
farthest removed from the jukebox while his kids dip into
the maraschino cherries,
swipe fistfuls of red plastic swords. "I guess you've had
some trouble yourself," he says,
but before I can reply he's taken my hand in both of his
and given me a meaningful stare:
he's a pack member and a lodge brother; he's the Prince of Wales,
the Duke of Windsor.
Then he scoops up both kids and strides back into the light outside
like a solar flare that's made an arc
and fallen back, leaving nothing but the aura of his aftershave:
most likely a gift, most likely from her.

LAUNCHING OUT

A grandfather stands in shallow water at the swimming-place
in the state park. He seems young for someone in his sixties,
or old for someone in his fifties: from my vantage point thirty feet away,
clutching at a buoyed-up rope that's there to keep me
out of the deeps of the lake, I'm unable to tell. He has faded tattoos
on each upper arm: a pretty girl in a sailor's cap, a heart
with a dagger slanting through it. There are three young children
bobbing around him: the littlest one, a girl with braids, wears
tiny water wings. One by one, he picks them up and tosses them
into the air: before they hit the water they screw their faces
into goofy expressions; they pretzel themselves into weird positions;
they scream like terrified teens in slasher movies.

I watch with the faint, forced smile of a man who's never fathered,
who wants solidarity with the human race: I want to show
all the vast, generous, child-rearing world that I really belong.

I look toward the beach to see if any of the women there
are watching him, just in case he gets a little too rough, just in case
he gets a little too weary, but I see no one looking his way:
perhaps she went to the concession stand for an ice-cream bar;
perhaps she had to work and never came at all. Now
the kids are clamoring around him, all asking the same question

I can't quite hear. He laughs, and says "Okay - but I've only
got one left." Suddenly he bends down and snatches up the little girl:
she shrieks with delight. He seats her firmly on one hand,
lifts her shoulder-high, hefts her like a shot-put. "Here we go," he says,
and he leans into the throw with all his weight.

BLACK DOG, RED TRUCK

Out for an afternoon drive in August: my wife and I talk about the virtues of home-grown produce, about helping the house-in-front-of-the-hollow farmers here in Appalachian Kentucky, who sell their meager harvest as the Great Recession lumbers toward hibernation. We visit an outdoor market under a tent next to a Toyota dealership: the tomatoes and bell peppers and cukes seem undersized, and there isn't as much sweet corn as there was last year.

"Everybody's got to get up off of their wallets," one of the farmers said, and I think about Ginger Rogers, grainy and gray in 1933, singing in a chorus line, nothing on but silver dollars: *Let's spend it lend it send it rollin' around*. We buy ourselves two pounds of new potatoes and a pair of acorn squash and drive back on the highway, and right in front of us is a pickup truck, showroom clean, painted rich maroon, and riding in its bed is a full-grown black lab, so healthy that its coat is a mirror for the fading sunlight as it dashes from side to side, tasting of the air, and when the driver turns to disappear down a side road I quickly forget the make and model of his truck, or whether or not the dog wore a chain or a leather collar, but I remember his temporary tag: the stripe of many-colored plastic, the row of thick black numbers, the summers when the circus came to town.

THE DEER'S HOOF

One afternoon my wife came back alone from walking the dog:
he'd seen a rabbit, slipped his collar,
dashed up the ridge, and when she called for him, he wouldn't come ~
too eager to follow a scent through the brush.

When she'd given him up and headed toward home, he ran back
to the trail, stopped ten feet in front of her,
rump up, head down, paws out, wanting to play: full of himself,
showing off before he ran away again.

My wife was worried: last week, in another township, a little girl
was pulled from her bike by dogs
running in a pack, so the men loaded shotguns, got into their trucks,
drove up and down each gravel road.

"They forget what they're taught when they run with the others,"
she said. "It's really not their fault."

When our dog staggered home at dusk, coat streaked with mud
and full of burrs, we opened the gate
to let him in ~ he stretched out by the chestnut oak, sides heaving,
eyes half-closed. Next morning

she found a deer's hoof in a pool of bile, a coil of stool full of hair:
she scooped them up with shovel and hoe
and flung them over the chain-link fence into a stand of weeds.

Full of remorse for what he'd done,
he crept out from his den beneath the porch, crawled up to her,
began to lick her hand,

but when he heard the bay of a hound as it chased after game
on a far-off ridge,
he ran to the fence to stare wide-eyed toward the curve of trees,
nose high in the air.

PHANTOM LIMB

When the boy wrecked his motorcycle and crushed his leg,
none of the doctors could say if they'd
be able to save it or not. His grandma brought her Bible
to the hospital and talked to anyone who'd listen --
she'd ask the folks in the waiting room if they'd been saved
and tell the young men about the pretty girls
in her church just to get them to come. The father got
red in the face and turned away but couldn't do
anything about her. The doctors came out and told the family
his leg would have to come off and right away
grandma began screaming. She wouldn't let it be tossed
in the dumpster; they'd have to send it off
to the undertaker to get embalmed; she needed her babydoll
back together again for Resurrection Day,
when all the graves will open and all the dead will rise.
So the father had to buy another cemetery plot
and a child's white casket big enough for a grownup's leg.
The boy found out what everybody says is true:
if you lose an arm or a leg it'll pain you even though
it isn't really there. A couple of years later
the boy got a little careless working at the body shop
his brother owned and he knocked the tip off
one of his fingers. He stuck it in an old glove, tacked it up
on the wall right under a space heater:
he didn't want to put it in the ground and feel his hand
get cold at night and he said he didn't care what
his grandma thought. "Let her bury her own damn finger.
Let her hang around and wait for Jesus."

DARK

Dark is so shy. As the sun is going down, it reveals itself
like a bashful child,
wanting acceptance from gas stations, fast-food restaurants,
convenience stores,
but harsh quartz lamps on tall steel poles chase it away.
It keeps on hanging around
like a persistent kitten that waits for a chance to slip in
when a screen door opens.
It is afraid of red plastic signs that loom near the interstate
like flags of blood;
it is afraid of lights on strings that hang over used car lots
and throw a glare
on the Chevys and Fords lined up in rows like riot police.
It likes yellow porch lights,
radium dials, disco neon ~ things that glow from within.
It likes the spirits of the dead
who take up the mantle of smoke as penance, who drift
all over the earth,
ridding themselves of affection for the places they liked
a little too much, wandering
here and there with both arms tucked behind their backs,
looking for old friends
who might remember them as they once were long ago,
searching for someone
who will accept them for what they've now become.
The quest for God
begins in the dark: look at the stars that travel there,
secure in their orbits, light years apart.

I am not, as William Carlos Williams might put it, a “pure product of Appalachia.” I was three years shy of fifty when I came to Eastern Kentucky in 1991 to teach at Ashland Community College, so when I reflected on the ten Appalachian-based poems that make up this chapbook it came as no surprise that the region’s great themes – mountains, music, folkways – were never brought to prominence. Despite the fact that six poems out of the ten were based on first-person experiences and observations, it seemed that my engagement with Appalachia was restricted to the background and never brought center-stage. Two of the poems – “Car Story” and “Phantom Limb” – began as true stories related to me at secondhand; “The Forty Days” was written in response to a momentary glimpse of a young man in Army uniform, which triggered memories of my own experiences in the military. “Dark” began as an attempt to capture the effect of a large illuminated sign seen at dusk as I was traveling eastbound on Route 60 toward Ashland.

Yesterday, the January 2017 issue of *Poetry* arrived in my mailbox. In the comment section was an excerpt from the prose of Paul Celan: “True poetry is antibiographical. The poet’s homeland is his poem and changes from one poem to the next. The distances are the old, eternal ones: infinite like the cosmos, in which each poem attempts to assert itself as a – miniscule – star.” Despite any misgivings I might have, I hope that these poems reflect my regard and respect for each of the ten ‘homelands’ in this collection. I hope they become stars.



BullHead Books
2017
Ashland Kentucky

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