

My Father's Soul Departing

*Little soul, charismatic vagabond,
Honored guest, comrade of the body.
Now you shall depart into those regions
Fogbound, anesthetized, and barren.
Here your laughter served you well.
There, everlasting, your mouth's stitched shut.*

Hadrian, "Animula"

Assume, dear vagabond, you are permitted

One last survey. Your twenty-one grams of sentience,
Little soul—the weight exactly

Of a ruby-throated hummer—shall hover

The foliated stamens of your
Earthly measure. How you dart & pivot,

Honored guest, your thirst unquenchable.

Here is Milbank, South Dakota,
The saffron dustbowl where your father,

Dear comrade, raises his belt to crisscross your back:

The five & twenty lesions. Here the state hospital,
Your mother ballooning with insulin

To induce the coma meant to cure the demons

Marauding the precincts of her abject brain.
Now you shall depart: a milk run in Duluth,

A quart bottle bursting on a frozen stoop, then

A troop ship bound for Tunis, & into those regions
Of desert where you wander your forty days.

You rifle the pockets of a dead Wehrmacht corporal:
Luger & a snakebite kit. & now you lean
From a baggage car door, hefting a postal sack

As the train slows for a station—Breckenridge
Or Sleepy Eye—slows but will not stop
For twenty-seven years. The railroad men's

Hotels along the tracks, pulls of bourbon
From a dented flask. The white Dakota plains—
Fogbound, anesthetized & barren.

Montage of seven Chevy Biscaynes, the songbook
Of Ernest Tubb. A shingled ranch, deriving from
The GI Bill. GARDEN SIX TWO FOUR

SEVEN SEVEN, the receiver lifted from its cradle
As you weep to a stranger who's purloined
Your pension. Pulls of bourbon

From a highball glass, from a coffee cup, the thrall
& ratchet of ECT, your dress rehearsal
For oblivion. What I remember: your laughter

Did not serve you well. Honored guest, comrade
Of the body, your farewell is complete.
Blesse'd the descent which beckons.

There, everlasting, your mouth's stitched shut.

Extinction Event:

A CACHE OF PHOTOS OF THE LAST IVORY-BILLED WOODPECKER

after J. T. Tanner & Rice Miller

The feet, gladiator tridents, creeping up the sleeve of J.J. Kugh,
 who stands implacably still.
Adolescent, fearless, feathers a-bristle, he can afford to be clownish,
 ascending the summit of Kugh's
tattered deerstalker. & there he perches, a guffawing Mohawk-ed Buddha,
 bill elongate and a-gleam,

a dazzling cigarette boat from the pleasure fleet of William Randolph Hearst,
 his only feature suggesting elegance.
Feathers mottled, the red crest lost to Tanner's black & white Brownie,
 eyes cartoonishly bulging. Now up Kugh's
left shoulder, now to the back, slow crawl up the chest, where he pauses
 to peck the buttons of Kugh's macintosh.

Four thousand miles eastward, Neville Chamberlain sips tea with the Fuhrer,
 their treaty & a fountain pen
between them, Earl Grey spilling over to the saucer as it trembles in
 the P.M.'s hands. But here,
the auguries of apocalypse are small in scale. Tanner sets the Brownie
 & his light meter on a stump

& fumbles as he bands the bird's right leg, just above the starburst claw
 & thus the feathered thing
is also christened. He is *Sonny Boy*. His name is *Sonny Boy*.
 & Sonny Boy lifts off
to be sighted once again by Tanner two years later, a treetop above
 a Louisiana swamp. The auguries

of apocalypse. For instance, the Delta & Chicago Blues, their steady
chug & boogie toward extinction.

On a stool on the stage of a club in Edmonton, Alberta, 1964,
sits the aging Rice Miller,
a hulking human bomb, 6'4". Stage name: Sonny Boy Williamson,
harp raised to his lips, fingers quicksilver:

*Ain't got but one way out, babe, an' I jus' can't find the door, sweat
& slaver nimbusing the hieratic head.*

He sports a derby, purchased in London on his tour with the Yardbirds
& he loves his woman *so hard*

the lights don't burn bright no more. Later that night, it is bourbon
with Levon Helm & his Hawks,

before Dylan, before their transformation to The Band. I would like
to say they are making music, but instead

Sonny Boy pours another, spitting blood into a second cup—
scarcely a year to live.

Who will know him in a century? In two? Whose pulse will quicken,
hair on the nape of the neck

raised in awe & supplication as he growls of his beloved
bringing eyesight to the blind?

O it's nine below zero an' she done put me down for another man.

The caterwauling harp,
the amplified metallic slink. It paws the ground, baying at the moon.
It flies alone, it has no offspring.

It calls to its mate, who is carcass & hollow picked bone.

 Glorious this last transmission,
the flight in mad careening circles, alighting above the muck & ooze
 onto a lightning-blasted live oak,
clawing up the mottled bark. & now the fervid spondees
 of his cry, of his *here-I-am*.

Sonny Boy, Sonny Boy, Sonny Boy, Sonny Boy.