

THE SPOON RIVER Poetry Review

Tony Trigilio

A Simple Worker's Notebook

I did not tell you about my plans because you could hardly be expected to understand.

—Lee Harvey Oswald, "Historic Diary"

He's disappeared. His train arrives. He has tokens. He's not just another worker anymore. Newspapers blown, lost mail on platform. Nobody's clothes look much like his own. White shirt, black slacks he wore when he checked into the Hotel Metropole straight from Botkin Hospital. In the train station the cold swirl. Their heads down most of the time, he tries to look more or less like everyone. He wants a piece of this history.

He's a crack in the cement, lifeline tickling his palm. He planned so much he's left himself naked. Sees a blur in the corner of his eye. The huff of the train. The numbers don't add up. As soon as he puts them together he forgets them. Nothing counts, especially not delight, especially not here. He writes: *I amount to nothing in both systems*. He'll turn it upside-down, his precious diary, to read between the lines, shake himself from the caught-between pages. He looks at his watch, frowns on cue like any other commuter. Rush-hour trains never fast enough. He mimics. Rubs palm to forehead. The train is late, he'd like to say, but to speak this way would be like wearing someone else's clothes. His ventilated brow, briefcase, styrofoam coffee—he'll slip past them, invisible, the patsy countless once and for all. Twin headlights round the corner. Here it comes. The train is late.

Three months before he left for Minsk, he soaked his wrist in cold tap running numb against the knife, bled spiderwork into steaming tubwater. He wrote: *I thought, When Rimma comes at 8 to find me dead it will be a great shock*. He's disappeared. He tries to laugh at himself. Some days he's infectious. Or he's a paper clip keeping a page inside a shaken spine. Or just scrap paper marking private lives unread in his diary. He counts on it, clasped to his chest, his secret history, a simple worker's notebook. Trains slow, running on holiday schedule, the platform receding in backdraft.

On the freighter back to America, he wouldn't let Marina on deck because he was ashamed of her clothing. She trusted him. They'll be countless, cold stars, he said. He told her to let him handle everything. They're not petty officials—he had plans. He held a rifle in Ruth's backyard in Dallas. A copy of *The Militant* fanned in front of him like he was some kind of geisha. That night he saw lights in the sky, not constellations. He saw prime numbers and they were historical.

Grace Notes

So we lived/ And chose to live/ These were our times.

—George Oppen

1.

Music is rustled out of dialect. You know the pavement
by accent, soft vowel Cambridge confident enough

to hang around a couple extra beats. North End stings —
take a whiff of the docks, the tang. Mouths scratch in alleys,

condo owners hush their dogs. Music is rustled
out of language, a dialect with an army and navy.

You read it somewhere, tell yourself it's true:
a musician's someone too broke to buy records.

2.

Soundchecks rumble at sundown in Allston;
listen to your voice in a mirror, face-down, peaking.

Half-songs in distortion for tired men gone deaf
twiddling sound boards—they know a few things very well.

When it's done, you leave microphone nests, lean-to
guitar stands. This is our time, you remind yourself,

the bar nuzzled at happy-hour, strained by light.
Wine glasses upside down, bats in their fulsome rattle.

3.

A few blocks down Harvard Ave., wet broccoli swells.
Swallow each bite before you let yourself take another.

Friends ask nothing of the poets among them,
minimalists of the imagination.

Our songs are grace notes for the future, they double back
like whistling snow if we're lucky. We sit down, this meal

lasts till we go on, midnight. Our soundman sniffs
in perfect contempt at the edge of the garden

of the genuine, these times we choose to live.

Three Fresh Shelves, Left Wall of the Garage

First thing you see in this garage.
Forty-five bowls of clear plastic
on each shelf, shaped with paling hands,
palms calloused by the slow wear,
silence. Three shelves, a regiment,
a hundred thirty-five bowls testify:
beyond our genius we build
for what we plan to place on shelves.

But you cannot ask why until you really
see them—forty-five bowls of clear plastic
on each shelf. Nails, corks, screws,
oil, pencils, vaseline in each.
In case you cannot take them all
at one view, each is streaked with silver labels,
masking tape thick with magic marker signs
painted across, all capitals denoting
the object inside. His granddaughter
finds her crayons here, batteries there,
knows where to look for pencils,
lines of each letter soldered together
as if to front an architect's schematic.
He shows them off to his son, the poet,
a testament to stanzas, how they hold
their lines together like his corks,
saved in bowls marked *corks*,
plug errant jugs of coolant for the car.
From splattered years of linotype
he learned hieroglyphs do not aspire
to script, so his standards rise like birds
each morning.

Closer look, uniform bowls
seem unnatural—roundness withers
atop each rim like aging shingles

curled on the sun, the sharp plastic opaque
from dry fingertips, patient wear.
He holds each shape together
at the top with clumsy rings of leather
that once sheathed paper-cut sawblades.
From warped plastic—and this need
for leather—you see these never began
as dutiful bowls. Someone taught him
the shape of this desire, the need
to tell his granddaughter just where
she must park her bike for room for cars,
where to put her things, or where to find them.
She mixed double-A batteries in bowls
for triple-A. Her translation
stalks each stroke, his capital letters.

These are two-liter soda bottles
made into bowls by lamplight in his garage.
His hand glides a few long strokes of blade,
fixes a straight line for the top
of his plastic bowl. He stretches
the black plastic base away from the soda bottle
until he forces it flat, and the hard bottom
of the bottle drips a circular base, as if a vessel.
A garage is a shrine to our experience,
a house for making verse, where you hide food
for granddaughters who take it
as an embrace.

Closer, you see a paper plate of shrimp
for voodoo, a *minyán* in the mud,
or a Buddha made from twigs and dung.
Come in a few more steps, you see them
alphabetically, tracked by what they hold:
corks, drills, keys, lids, plastic caps, vaseline,
more than you can see from just one
quick sweep across the wall. We owe him
a closer look, the objects as he saw them,

the point he felt his breath tickle
his upper lip: corks spill like rocks
from their leather top; rusted drill bits
endure a bowl marked *drills*;
keys and lids and caps await assignment;
a new jar of vaseline inside the bowl
labeled *vaseline*.

Thinking While Held Down

—after Jenny Holzer

She wrote her last check at 10:30 to Mellon Bank, their two-hundred dollar car loan. Then she flickered. Bird's wings, her head, not like lift or glide but the wings themselves. Her living room split into blood hemispheres, one side stunned in rip-current, the other overwhelmed. It must have become predatory, her living room, the carpet weave, the VCR, the ceiling light fixtures they special-ordered in 1962 shaped like diamonds. She would've told her husband this, thinking it while held down, a mother with no real power.

Nurses comb her so she doesn't shrink any deeper into her shoes. At home we find a stack of clothes and rags in the hamper, her insurance policies at the bottom waiting all these years for us like a pulsar sits patiently for a deep space camera to find its steady blinking comfort. Today I taught my father to pay his first bills since 1956. We touched my mother's mathematics, her rage for balance. We pretended it made her laugh, a shy sliver moon peeking through a breeze of stars, it was so dark. We tracked her checkbook ledger, matched it with receipts. My father stopped when we found the check for Mellon Bank. He knew it was 10:30 because *Matlock* was half-over, fixed himself a sandwich and half-shot of Amaretto every day when it started.

He took a bite, he thinks, when she moaned, it whisked out of her like nothing he heard in 43 years of marriage. He remembers, past the table in the kitchen, checkbook and stacks of bills, until he sees her now, sitting, the couch and her carpet weave, VCR, her mouth moving up and down. Her stroke, those two bitter diamond ceiling fixtures now turned out of their skins in nonsense, her Lascaux tomb no one will find for 17,000 years.

Visiting Hour

1.

Their shoes too big, they shift in them.
Sometimes you think they're balanced
on their arches, their feet bottoms gone fleshy
like the dull sky through the window
above the thermostat.

They shift in shoes worn from pacing,
deliver themselves body and bone,
sun shafts cast in dust.

2.

Stink of mashed potatoes rises
from your tissues, they tolerate your bed,
its zoo fence rails for leaning on you.
You sweat sheets, a chain-linked rosary,
stiff-collared angels. Their priest cups
your hands in his professional palms.

3.

Words gather their sleepless mounds,
it's their language now,
gibberish smudges your face.
After dinner, alone. God's hawk wings
span your bed but don't stay long
enough. The shadow leaves
its fur in splotches on your eyes,
skin November cool with dew,
body vulnerable as butter. It's quiet again.
The room is hatching, listen,
a steady wind throbs against the window.

Boris and the Wand

Yannick does his homework like Hemingway wrote
short stories, standing at a dresser high as his
chest. A quake in the corner of his eye.
He won't look, it's just the dog running in circles,
about as exciting as a candy necklace.
Isaac settles once and for all in a mound
of his stinky fur, a hairy lump of old clothes.
He'd like to give the dog a bath
or shut him in the shower like Mom waters plants.
It's all too noisy for that, someone's at the door now,
Isaac scratching, barking, he sees shooting stars
when he hears the front door knock.
He gets that rickety feeling, Yannick thinks,
what his own stomach does
when his mother's train comes back from the city.
There's a different world out there, of course.
A man named Boris is at the door, looking past
Yannick's mother at him, Electrolux vacuum poised,
ready to lunge past the step-up if she'd
just move out of the way.

Only Boris could make him put down the pencil.
He steps from the dresser. Don't make a move,
it's a vacuum. A chrome wand, a high roller.
Grape juice on the carpet easy to spot,
nothing but a footnote in the book of nature.
Boris says it doesn't just make homes cleaner,
it's about making lives better.
Yannick's mother used to date a magician,
she knows these tricks. His father was a salesman
and could pull a half-dozen roses and bottle of wine
from an old shoe, an irregular for sale
at half-price. The customer wakes up with you
on his tongue like a melody, you won't go away.
The tremor is the telescopic wand, the Lux 6000

which virtually eliminates bending over, Boris says,
when cleaning base boards and other floor level tasks.
His mother knows door-to-door vacuum sales
are rare these days as milkmen, but for Yannick
this feels like science-fiction films of “first contact.”
Boris and the wand, the alien in tinfoil suit
who, oddly, looks like us—either because we all
are the same deep down, which he’ll never believe,
or, more likely, the special-effects budget was cut.
Boris says the crevice tool is perfect for narrow,
hard-to-reach areas like bookshelves, between couch cushions
and car interiors. Yannick sits down.

He’d trade a mortgaged house, whatever that is,
pay whatever it takes for the lockable telescopic extension.
Why save for a down payment when your family
can buy this vacuum from Boris instead?
Someone has to treat him seriously,
his mother knows this, too, would guess
he’d take Boris at his luminous word, his Electrolux logos.
He keeps files on her biggest fears,
never knows when he’ll need them.
He’s the son who plants tomato seeds
but gets white eggplant instead,
praises the celery root grown accidentally next to basil.
His mother says the seeds must have been mixed
by mistake, so she imagines.
He’ll cut the stalks
like a vandal at the quarter-moon,
the fresh war moon, for her at sunrise.
Promise he’ll take charge of cleaning the floors
in this rented apartment if only she’ll believe Boris,
that Electrolux has made life convenient for 80 years.
That once in a life, and only at random,
light sweeps from the outside world,
cleans out the sky for rapture.

Back to the Farm, 12/7

War was on when Frank and Rose
came back from a nickel movie.

He touched her hand, she gripped
back so hard he lost his breath.

Rows of green peppers in mud
coughed back to the wind.

They kissed at the fencepost, where
he carved "1928" as a little kid.

His brothers would tend to planting.
They talked of marriage, but maybe

it was just a lot of polished words,
amplified G.I. sepiatones and rows

of metal bunks in spitwax floors
in their letters, V-mail from England.

Frank called her "loving wife," Rose played
back, "dear husband." He shined his shoes

the color of eggplant, his uniform drab.
Beans just poked from the dirt,

tasty enough for rabbits to eat. He posed
for her with his rifle, sent his parents

a portrait in schoolboy eyes, crooked tie,
waiting to grow into his uniform.

Two shoulder arrows for Private, an army
police whistle hanging from a uniform pocket.

Tip of steel-cover Bible nudged from
other pocket, to keep away bullets they say.

Picture for Rose his Sunday starch whites,
M-I pointing off the frame, eyes cocked

as if peeping at a rabbit, frozen,
twitching at the start of a bean.

Soldier, 1942

It's the first time he's knotted a tie.
In this standard flag-and-smile
boot camp headshot, Japan can be
just a wrinkle in the sky.
His girlfriend's father reads Italian newspapers
to the old men back in the neighborhood
who supported Mussolini
until we said he's the enemy.
Now they don't need newspapers.
Back on the farm
his younger brother and father build
the family's first flush toilet without him.
Back of the photo, he writes:
"Hey, ma & dad, this is supposed to be me."
Me, too, black-and-white patina, splinters,
I study his image as it crumbles
in my hands, like damp wood flaking from
the backyard tool shed we tore down
when I was 12.

Well, he tore it down.

I carried planks away, nicked by their splinters.
They concealed themselves in the wood,
hiding until you gripped your hardest
then cut you. Age left its scratches
in the hasty stock background, gray scrim,
of this photograph. I'm tempted
to drop it, spare myself.
But the splinters chew my fingers convincingly,
his humble bluster, ready to take down Japan,
our ontology: this is supposed to be me.
My resistance, my disbelief in beginnings,
their power to name you, could be so much
heresy, or just something that burns
and goes away when sons believe in history.
I can almost see the roiled anatomy of Yalta

foretold in the sediment of this photograph,
in my father's eyes flush-brown
with maps and legends like he's asking the camera
what he'll see when he's shipped away.
He's enlisted, ready to fight.
He pretends war is curious, he'll keep secrets.
He'll take down a whole country, he'll partition
the world, just tell him where to go.

Choosing a Stone

Flat-stone perfect skipping-stone,
a book I find on the library shelf
on my way to the book I wanted
to find, the lane-change I make
without checking my rear-view mirror,
the moment I sign my credit-card receipt
and, only then, realize I bought
a burgundy ribbed sweater
because a television model wore it
on a commercial. The thing-itself,
the flat skipping stone I think I find
by accident. But it's waiting for us,
lost in plain sight—sea shells, bottle caps,
amid useless chips and stones,
their geometry fractured.

I find it in the same way I cannot coax
the cat from a dark corner of the attic.
Don't say *here, kitty*. No silly whistling,
as if she can be fooled into thinking
I've become an absent-minded robin.
She comes to me like the first time
I noticed my shadow at night,
a smudge on pavement cast by street lamp.
I sit still on the floor, the center of the attic.
Light a candle, place it beside me.
Sit still, flat as a rock.

The Body Is Fragile

A gull flicks down on a wave,
flies back against cutting wind into fog.

He clipped a speck between his claws,
an impossible fish, an inkspot pulled from the sea,

a new story, our memories cresting,
fresh mouths playing with our food.

Follow me back to a time when I didn't know
the body is fragile. Try to make it fresh,

like it's our first time over and over again.
I try to remember it for you,

the straight look of nothing special
about to happen, if you could remember

what the Cuyahoga looked like before it burned.
A whole city shuddered, scorched by its own river.

I recall, for you, my last breath before
the whoosh of baseball bat—that flash I remember,

too young to know why I couldn't exhale.
At tables around us, no one notices me

telling this story from so long ago,
when another kid smacked me with a bat

from behind, a gust of air that sent me
reeling. You taste a little garlic and anise

in the last knocky frames of free fall.
Sure, like your pasta plate right now,

this is how the brain abandons, strips you
for the two-bit thuggery and bare bulb

of the senses. That blow flared me, numb,
the field I fell rippled in front of me,

danced in blown branches. Everything went black,
but that's cliché and you say we can do better.

Old lovers, let's make it come alive—the napkins
on our laps, a wine bottle, the other tables snooping

for the bat crack—real groundswell and tide,
my young knees soft as tennis balls.