

The Graves Grow Bigger Between Generations

Gonna' have a grave stone bigger than Carnegie, he used to say. Became a mantra almost, everyday sitting with his lunch bucket amid the oily stench of Liberty Refining Tower Number Three with a bunch of roughneck roustabouts, oil paper skittering around them in the wind each day in a clearing along the banks of the Allegheny.

That's what I'm gonna do, he'd say, and the other men would get so they'd just nod, toss a chip of bark away, wait for the whistle to blow, talk about the time a young girl went swimming nude right there where they took their break one day. How they never said anything until she was neck deep to the stream, and then called out so she ended up standing there and crying while they challenged her until the whistle blew.

Like clockwork every day, marking out his misery over a ham sandwich and a quick cup of cold coffee, wiping his mouth on his sleeve in the stink of industry watching the water roil by; he'd say any of us got more feelings about each other than he ever did, him an' his high silk suits and fancy train cars rolling black across the silver steel rails of Pennsylvania lookin' like a coffin to me already, far as I can see.

Gonna' have something bigger to mark me when I go than anything he can afford with all his meager money, he was still saying after he went on and switched to Bates Engineering. Same talk each day, but now he was moving on to something bigger and he strode the scaffolding they built across the river each day with his lunch bucket and breathed the concrete dust filling the air as they built the dam that would change us in one sweeping huge arch of man-made

stone, would drown surrounding country homes, hold back floods, generate electricity to power factories and light up homes, bring television dramas to small blonde girls each evening, tame the river and give the people something new to do.

Suma'bitch has a heart of stone, he'd say. But he was drinking by that time of life, the way men do when stone begins to fill their veins, and he wasn't as steady on his feet across the scaffolding holding back the waters and the darkness, so that when they poured the concrete and he fell in, dropping from 179 feet into the concrete near where the water held still he made one hell of an impact on society and on each of the people who were with him on that day and each person who drives through Warren or stops to cast a line; and something within him does by God touch each blonde young girl snuggling under her electric thermal blanket on winter nights and brings the news to her each morning with the coffee and with the interminable ads that go on and on.

Gonna' have it: a bigger grave stone, he said. And he got it all, two miles wide and big enough to hold a town, a people, a civilization in the woods even after the refineries failed, with a drainage area of almost 2200 square miles, and costing 108 million dollars take that Mr. Carnegie! And here I am, thinking that about his words, passing through along the red brick roads where Grandma used to live, her house backed against the river, across from the library near the center of this empty town, the Carnegie, covered with vines but still holding like a fortress, and with a map room and dried purple flowers lighting up one corner of a desk like every other Carnegie built across the small towns of America standing near every abandoned downtown band shell in America.

Pitiful man. I'm going to have something even grander for myself than even those of Rockefeller or Gates. His son stayed on drier land helping to pave the roads beyond the

dam, sometimes pausing to look up at it or taking lunch in the park at the end of that long road around the mountains, and he'd look up, thinking well yes, it's pretty big. And you don't need a name engraved on anything to prove what it was worth. And he got run down by a cement hauler on a hot day. One of how many highway workers and dam workers disappearing into their work each year and leaving the little girls lonely and crying in the sunlight because they loved them. The Graves grow ever bigger between generations, I think as I roll on out of that time-forgotten town, my wheels passing space where who knows how many small blonde girls died suddenly in their automobiles sometimes being marked by small white crosses and purple flowers but mostly left without anything to mark them but the men who died. A wall of cement and tarmac not two miles across, but 2800 miles from east to west and 1200 miles from north to south and spread thin as the fabric of our lives and twined in invisible threads of single lane highways through every town.

I swear I'm going to remember this, and forget the graves, and forget the markers and forget the names, but I'm going to remember the smell of furniture polish on old oak banisters, and the dust of books, and the coolness of old stone buildings in sleepy towns on summer days. I'm going to remember the too bright eyes of the small blonde girls with their forced bright smiles in silent public rooms and archives and I'm going to keep on rolling along across America unmarked taking the hand of each one and sweeping her off her feet, making love with each one at the least expected time and filling my heart with her smile and with her memory because there is nothing larger than this that I can imagine: the depth of shadowed rooms, a silent ray of light, purple flowers and a woman's touch. The graves get ever bigger from one generation unto the next.

Tea Leaves In A Chamber Pot

This evening all across our nation
men are taking the bones from their arms
and rubbing them against each other for heat.
They are dropping the eyes of the dead
into their pockets, rattling them like change.
It is said that they see something coming.
Men are binding the night with their legs,
laying their penises across it like safety matches,
sitting in loose circles wondering
if they dare to strike the light will it flare
or will the shadows themselves swallow men
like a conflagration from the bowels of time.