

Traveller's Tale

poems by Robert S. King



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For Ian who will travel far

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ELF: Eclectic Literary Forum: "The New World Dictionary," "River Pulse"

En Passant: "The Last Saint of the Empire"

Grasslands Review: "The Glass Heart"

Habersham Review: "Regret"

Hammers: "Why I Bought a Truck"

The Hollins Critic: "Traveller's Tale"

Hudson Valley Echoes: "Wanting to Write Songs, but Singing Mine"

The Midwest Quarterly: "Treasure Hunt"

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Permafrost: "Sanctuary"

Phase and Cycle: "Daydreaming at Rush Hour"

The Plastic Tower: "The Gravedigger Pacing His Cage"

the purple monkey: "How Trees Travel"

Rain Dog Review: "Road Steam"

Slant: "Birthday Drive"

The Sow's Ear: "Confessions of the Slower Sprinter"

Spoon River Poetry Review: "Earthen Well," "The Light Sedative of Dark"

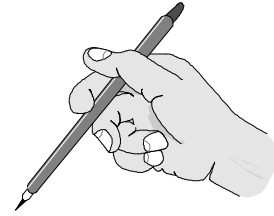
Visions-International: "Against the Graveyard's Greater Wall"

Writers' Forum: "Cottonmouth Catchers in a Night Swamp"

Punctuation

Am I the point I make of myself?
A million question marks have bent double
into final periods, into black holes on dead-end roads.
I sit in the bottom's rock of ages, a pendulum
rockingchair torn between the tenses.
Cobwebs weave my fingers together
and I breathe but little now when I tilt forward,
choke when I fall back.

If I could edit my life as this line I shape,
not to see my age empty beyond the colon:
Listen to my silence. It dots the eye very well
and will see your plans ricocheting on the same road,
and though your pen learns proper punctuation,
you, like my proper noun, in your life sentence,
may have the one fatal subject-verb disagreement,
where *I* and *am* invert.



The Juggler Tells His Children of Dreams

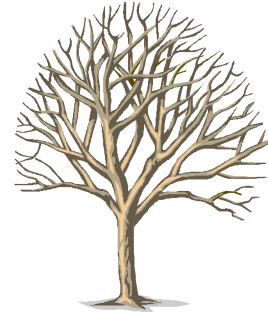
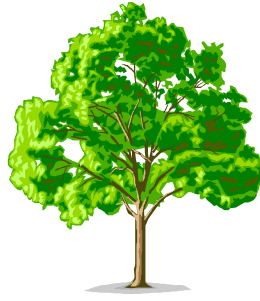
wear no hard wedding bands
when juggling eggs
let the hands be a clock
circling with the softness of patience

what is falling free
will hatch in a nest of wind
soon you will toss up birds



How Trees Travel

old trees guard the road
waiting for feathers
waiting for songs to fill them
so that travellers
are not alone in their own music



it is a truth of trees:
the bigger they are
the closer they have grown to one another
along this road their long travelled root
a great finger pointing the way
for their children the birds
who are now bright leaves
chattering south
who have left
the hollow trunks to fall

Fisherman's Tale

The river squirms,
caught in its own large mouth.
Upstream in the clear headwaters,
the angler with endless lines
casts forward from his boat
tugged by worms that will catch
one pound more than his limit.

Far downstream the killer whale
will pull him in
to his wildest dreams.



Cottonmouth Catchers in a Night Swamp

The trick is to charm its bobbing head with light.
Make the devil stare till he's blind,
and while your flimsy lifeboat crawls toward the other bank,
let your own arm become a snake,
coil back with your right hand open
like a pure mouth capable of swallowing
something bigger than itself.



Let your arm strike as a strangler,
clamp the serpent just below the head,
cram this ancient sinner in a bag.

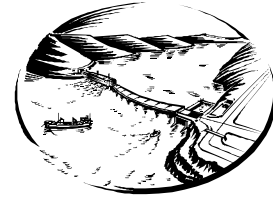
Now row back to sunrise,
milk him for all he's worth,
keep him charmed with living light,
never showing him your shadow,
your black spot,
your bullseye.

River Pulse

smoothed by wear
in any panned stream is a load of stones

call them eggs that never hatched

call one a heart too hard to break
that keeps the river flowing

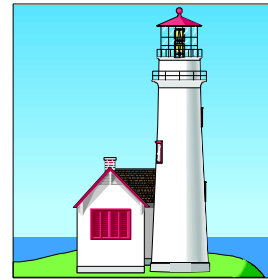


Lighthouse

deep in its own mouth
the night river carves two shores

fog horns and cattle wail for a clearer coast
and home reaches out its ancient arm
a tunnel a deep well of water and light

a tomb a cradle
a passage to either side



The Meaning of Dogs

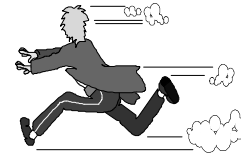
The trail of a young dog is old,
comes back to me as my son
rolling in wagging stalks of grass and tail,
a trick new as the judgeless tongue
wetting him with laughter.



I want to grow
only from remembered grass,
want to part its secrets
with gentle wind, want
my son to sing without
my howl of history.
I do not want this leash
that jerks me back in line,
makes me hold my tongue
on pet words I should not choke on,
and how by this master of silence
boy and dog grow
together meaner.

Confessions of the Slower Sprinter

Always my feet are a split second behind my heart,
almost winners. My chest is nearly
thick enough to reach the tape
and snap it louder than the gun.
Imagine me wearing the magic number,
running toward the award of a woman
who would change her name for me.



For the first time I see more than your back,
its number one stuck out like a finger,
or an old lecture, or a sign that says
stop do not pass. Now I hear
for the first time your soles sucking
behind me, taking deeper and slower
breaths through their rubber lips,
twisting your muscle into silence.

Then my lungs gather a second wind of pride;
the wind behind me spins you around.
My chest swells towards the tape
to measure itself in the volume of cheers.
The first failure of your feet does not slow me down.
I run past smeared applause and the blindness of cameras,
towards rehearsed modesty and trophetic gleamings.
I run to make speeches with my head bowed
in your shadow, to praise you and take your cup, saying,
*“He who is weighted with trophies
does not run as fast.”*
I drink ice water from a trophy already engraved
with your name, a prize now full of my lips,
as I freeze the thought that, when you passed me,
you slipped on my sweat.

Withdrawal

At last I found a tiny hole just my size,
began rubbing a finger around, around
its edges, loved its dark,
felt it opening up
into the buoyance of silence.

I heard my animals strangling behind me,
felt myself afloat in a sea of black feathers,
going through the absence, becoming another,
felt light though I could not see it,
felt hope though I could not see its road,
felt myself sucked in a drain going backward,
past the gravities into the orbit of myself,
where an old torch of truth dies on my shoulders
and I hum, I drum instead the false hood of darkness.

Suddenly a voice windy as hair flows around me,
my own echo storming to me that I have brought
the smell of flesh into the temple.

Suddenly, I am lightning disturbing my peace.
Suddenly, I am a stranger to my own thunder.



The Glass Heart

there is a man so much for love
that he keeps it in a safe
for there have been pink stones at his window
there have been hard slaps at his door
and through the woods she sings so high
in the pitch-dark night



Why I Bought a Truck

Because it holds something,
carries the weight,
the insulation and blocks of a renovated house
that does not cast your shadow.
Shifts.
It parks in your spot.

Because it does not mire
in slinging mud,
gets a grip.
Works.
It still gets dirty.

Because it is driven,
not driven away,
not breaking down with a lonely load.
Tough.
It delivers.



Treasure Hunt

When the moon hatches
and a million egrets drift down as snow,
when shell bits glow for a moment at our feet,
we'll ask the black and white sky,
is the earth an egg we blossom from
or one we've sat on too long?



And those who've never flown, the trees,
will seem to answer in the chatter of leaves
flying off on wind's will as flocks of kites,
and something, be it death or attitude,
will blow us off our feet,
drag us along just off the earth,
thick with night and its heartbeats,
the broken egg of us a wing above
the glowing ivories of our bones

Earthen Well

Even the stars seem burned out, greenly ill.
Desert roads fall into a filling well
where streams choke on brontosaurus bones
brittle as dust, as history.

Beyond tunnel vision, the eye of a needle opens:
Serpent jaws crack the bad egg of me.
In a new solution I'm light liquid now,
my weight on new scales barely shifting the tides,
even as I harden into fossil stone,
the heart ground down into meal.

Above my extinction the surface eye clearing
where mockingbirds flutter in the spring bath,
whistling a greening song to wiggling road:
a lure from the whole we're in.
For them, too, the cobra's jaws grind,
hiss them a song of bone and feather.

Somehow higher than we, the pecking orders
fall from hunger, we from greed.
Our common mother Earth gangrened, a sick Medusa,
her coiled roads, rivers, lightning,
nerves on end
are ready to strike, digest, reclaim,
restitch her cloudy body gown:
the bloody rags, the vital organs.



Strip Tease

After the last war drum of headache,
the final volcano of ulcer,
after the silver lining of my cloudy veins
clogs too heavy in the regulated heart,
after the nuclear power bill I couldn't pay
becomes a dirty sea of darkness,
and all the overdue notices deny my credit,
my shirt flies off my back, in the dirt
signs a bad check,
and the sunken tub of my body
floats in a night of nothing,
strangely buoyant now.



Moving to the City

Coming here,
broken farmers must believe
that the clouds plant their seeds in concrete
and skyscrapers grow:
tall stalks of corn,
long rows of one-way traffic,
horn honks replacing the songs of birds,
seeds spilling from their pockets fast as money.

Some return to a poor mule,
looking across a stubborn back
where the skyline is a monument:
tombstones.



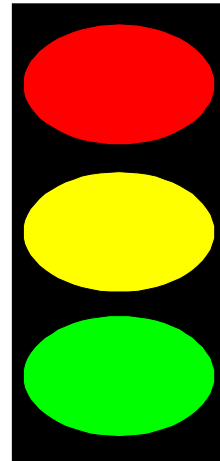
Birthday Drive

With a yellowed map,
I'm lost and doing thirty
on cemetery roads that twitch like nerves.
And a dark poet is running beside me,
his face a mashed wad on my window,
waiting for me to shift lower, stop
and ask directions,
or waiting for the rubber ditches
to hold my fender down,
or waiting for me to do ninety
when he'll vault ahead, yawn
to swallow my headlights,
knowing in the dead end
my brakes will fail.



Daydreaming at Rush Hour

I fancy the red light is that rose
I've been told to stop and smell.
In the wind the bulb sways back and forth,
leaving a bloody streak on the sky,
a kind of rainbow after storms of wrecks.
Blue streaks keep passing me by:
smears on a street dead at both ends.
But in slow motion the red light of the rose wilts.
Something green blooms.
I press down on the pedal and spring.

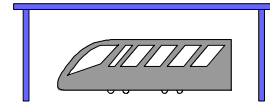


Under Gray Depot Skies

if momentum is a locomotive
we lowers have no ticket
have only travelled a television
a mind station
to wait under smokestacks of cigarettes
by suitcases full of ash and wrinkled ties
to make up our faces
and say we don't belong here
in this cold
say we were born again at the fast-track cross

backbones worn shiny
we ride instead our pews
only our lips move
soft-spoken steam in the terminal roar

a long line of locked windows sweat
our fuel their motion
a high-speed film
where upper berths click by



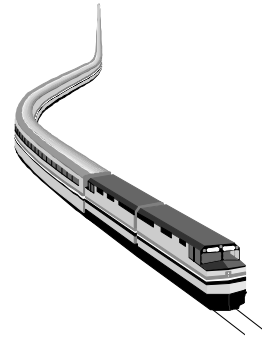
Wanting to Write Songs, but Singing Mine

when the bad songs of another
are too loud in your room
and yet you linger in their tune

when the trains you never caught
shudder under your bed
and the windows are off key with the wind

then will you feel that silent mockingbird
swelling in your throat
then will you shake the sheet and rise
to the deaf mute you've combed in the mirror

to hear the wind whistle in your hair
and fill your lungs with song



The Light Sedative of Dark

The measured clap clap of my teaspoon on the table
awaiting my dose and the do-not-drive warnings
to easy-chair me into re-runs and the dim hum
of test patterns, multiple choice game shows
with each answer wrong, innovative boredom,
black and white documentaries on the private lines of aging,
indecipherable waves on cables and satellites
whirring on their wrinkling orbits.



So I give myself to the gray light of sleep,
my dream on its back like a crocodile luxurious to
the tummy-rubbing therapeutic masseuse.

I remember before we are born we say goodbye,
hold our noses and dive into this cold medicine called breath.
The sun turns us darker all our lives.
We look for rhyme and find but one,
womb and tomb,
the only rift between them a waiting room.

The Gravedigger Pacing His Cage

Because I have buried your fathers
you think the shovelman
looks death in the eye,
therefore is part of the murder.

I tell you I seldom see the eyes of the dead.
They are latched tight by the time
the corpses roll up to my feet.
Their lids are slammed by the anger
of failing to live forever.
Or they have simply grown weary of
opening and opening empty doors.

I tell you I am only here to close the lids,
to let their last breaths fall gently from our arms
like leaves in a cage full of dying wind.

Old friends, we are all changing colors
and falling off.



Regret

We are always dreaming our way back,
looking behind us to see the road
rolling up like a sleeping bag,
how the trees bend over it
as if they were trying to cover up where we've been.
Suddenly we feel our pulse rise like a flame,
the dust a red fire behind us.

The past burns slowly.
Its face is red.
Its gown is ash.
Cinders float from our backs and seem like travellers,
not those slowly falling down.



Road Steam

Along the steaming road
the stones are beginning to pop.
The sky is a dripping wax.
Tall tree stumps smoke like chimneys.
My feet stick to the main road
just as slugs stick to tombstones.
Rubbing off on me, slime comes forth as moral.

But this morning, the roadworkers keep pointing,
saying this is the highway to heaven.

From which way a black cloud of flies approaches like rain.

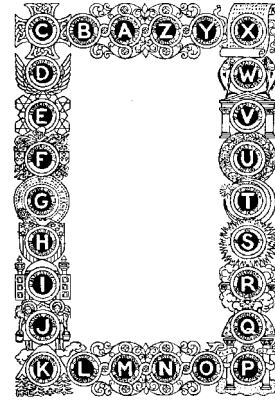


The New World Dictionary

Every word I've said has taken root,
grows the definitions of me—wildflower or wildfire—
smokes from truth's fiercest battle
from whose barrel the best of me blooms,
or remains a scent, a possibility, a whisper
as leaf-rustle in a flock of thrashers
who know how they change color
before the fall.

Every word I've said has been uprooted,
a forget-me-not given rain but no light,
given to the wind of God's conscience,
around the small world
blowing things together, apart.

The same word wages war as powers peace:
desire, the stem of fire and flower.



Reign

the full moon pops on the sharp mountaintop
its inner acid rains

a mudslide of family trees, empty trunks, green mold
erases the climbing roads

our footprints are orphans
tracking us in the rumble

the highest ground we could take
was to plant a flag
that will bury us now



The Last Saint of the Empire

Stranger, I am cupping in my hands
the land's last water for you.
You will not drink alone.
The sun too is steaming in this meager pool.

Drink before the water boils away.

What you have won is mostly smoke:
Above us, old mystics, old clouds,
reddened from the dust of battle:
the wind twists them like sponges,
wringing out across the valley
a dry and crimson rain:
Even the gentle, holy winds rub
together like flint:
below them the frocks flame:
the shadows of monks are dark ash
piling up in prayer.

My invader, my wounded heir,
you are drinking my boiling blood.
You must swallow what you conquer.
You must dress for the weather you bring.

It is a hot day:
Smell the feathers of the angels burning.



Against the Graveyard's Greater Wall

Against it the wind piles up and dies.
It is star high, worm deep.
Hawks explode against it;
roots bleed against its sharp edges.
Leaves clatter halfway up a ladder,
then flutter down
into the dead eye of the storm.

All roads merge against it
and wrinkle up into dead ends,
all miles ever travelled,
all the old footprints
twisted into the same old story.

Only an inner rain almost turns it clear,
this great wall,
this mirror.



Sanctuary

Beside the road
someone has left a lantern.
Small footprints circle it
and then off.

The house through the woods is full of light.
If one wants to warm his hands
he must learn a stranger's story,
of someone who waited here for a word,
then gave up the road to absence.

One could follow through a field of wheat,
parted where the lantern and the light
from her window meet,
could watch his own dust finally settle down
in her bright and private room.

But not he who loves a road,
however dark.



Traveller's Tale

suppose I begin in the middle

skip the first leg
the journey's limp limbs
the lower branches across the trail

and rock here on the comfort porch
where forty roads cross my heart

where mosquitoes are my conscience
but I do not move I wave to fireflies
to travellers with stars in their eyes
who each mile change their names

I stay the same:
someone with no last name
must hand a map to passers in the night

someone must stay and stoke the stars
bright unknown
one mind in one place

waving and waving the others on
like news that never comes back

suppose I end in the middle



About the Author

Robert S. King (e-mail: rsking@whistle.org) has published hundreds of poems in a wide range of magazines over the last twenty years. This is his third chapbook and he has also completed two full-length books now seeking a publisher. Additionally, he is currently Editor-in-Chief of *Gaia: A Journal of Literary & Environmental Arts* (<http://www.whistle.org/gaiapage.htm>) and of its parent corporation, Whistle Press, Inc. (<http://www.whistle.org>). He lives in very rural Georgia with his gifted son, Ian.