

Come Kanab

a little red songbook

by Lance Newman

* a dusi/e-chap
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for Freya

It wallowed in the swells, looming like a man
in fog. Joe smoked one more & tracked its drift.
Inside, slow breakers shuddered it open.
Ribs cut like teeth through lips when low tide left
it, sixty feet from nose to tail or more,
a sorry bag of inch-thick skin, blue-black,
flapping in knee-high waves. It sagged & poured
a slick of shiny grease & specks of fat
from its exploded belly when it drained.
Joe brooded when he would forget its spine.
Plovers harvested lice along its flanks.
A fat tern worried the limp dorsal fin.
Joe levered with a plank. He worked his way
deep till he could jack loose a vertebrae.

Joe rolled through Glamis in the driver's seat
of a dune buggy strapped to a tow bar
behind Stan Johnson's salt-white motor home.
Clouds of monarchs emigrated northeast
& spattered the blue metal flake roll cage
& spoiler with daisy yellow entrails.
Fat grackles patrolled the road & inhaled
corpses like race fans sucking down a keg.
La fucking migra tailed him all the way
through salt-killed fields & asphalt whoopedoes
past the Chocolate Mountains thru fields of blue
primrose & mallow to Palo Verde.
Joe scrambled for the tamarisk, laid low,
& lost that punk in the Colorado.

Joe hopped wire onto the Chocolate Mountains
Naval Gunnery Range. He shaded up
against a crater's wall where tadpoles hardened
in cracks splayed from last week's sorry puddle.
Pilots plow this dry ground deep as rival
farmers, plaster the desert with earthen berms,
& bury orchards of head-high nopal.
They burn up oxygen till the air's as thin
as words & smells like iron or afterbirth.
Joe wondered if in Brawley there's a clause
that says to hug the boys closer the further
they fly. Or do they cheer extra big blasts,
the ones that groan deep as a church organ?
Or do they think it's time they ordered more guns?

Joe passed Independence Day west of Winslow,
just nodding out outside the Circle K,
rolling fat Buglers with Navajo Bob.
Smoke snaked off their tongues when they chuckled.
All day they watched the pumps spin & read war
headlines from the Arizona Republic.
At quitting time, people stopped for lowfat
milk, diapers, cigarettes, & hotdog buns.
At nine thirty, the fire chief set off
a little display over in the depot lot.
At ten, half the little town pulled up laughing
for Dixie cups of free ice, pints, more smokes.
The rest parked at Sonic, free to eat
a burger & fries on a Ford's bench seat.

Joe rattled his cart along the shoulder,
hunting cans, thinking ham hock, mustard greens.
A whiptail scrambled for the shade between
his legs & snatched a sun-stunned grasshopper.
If a sheriff stopped to offer supper
& a bus ticket he wouldn't argue.
A stake-bed lugging an arroyo crew
rolled by slow & the boss called out, Climb up.
They fired winter-killed brush, hefted out embers
& silt, worked south along the ditch--hot, sore,
cussing cottonwood roots, clay, & bald tires.
Laid out in a culvert, Joe's hands remembered
the shovel. He thought how work for money
could buy you time to sleep like you were free.

Joe counted paces on the ditch-bank road,
one per fresh straight furrow. Three hundred ten,
like ledgers tracking water, sun, & seed,
like rows of growth stacked on a bottom line.
Three hundred twenty three. A fat catfish
had hardened, bowed to swim & crusted in silt.
Its creek had quit. Its river'd gone brackish
with salts & fertilizers growers spilled.
Three hundred forty three. No end in sight.
They count on us not knowing when you touch
your tongue to dirt you soak up what you need.
Joe hopped the ditch and rifled through the weeds
for mustard greens and ate that cat for lunch,
a rib for a toothpick, his belly tight.

On the hot frontage road in Permian Basin, Joe synched his steps to the derricks past equipment yards, labs, Grayson's Premix, & clusters of shacks for roughnecks & hands. A dust devil juggled a styrofoam cup in the gravel lot at Pena's Pumps. Acres of clean fifty-five gallon drums stood like corn in sun so hot his boots groaned pulling loose from asphalt. Here earth's surface is for stacks. Beauty is a lens of crude straining upward two miles under bare ground. When foremen add sections of bit, they bless the steel. They imagine it penetrates the anticline to free a thick black lake.

Joe blew into Galveston, commenced to sweat.
Malt liquor cans & last week's classifieds
littered wide streets emptied by sun so hot
people hunched naked, running the fan, pride
gone as April. A storm they almost named
spilled in off the Gulf. Wind whined in the palms,
sluiced the roads, & dumped trash cans at ATMs.
Joe settled down in the Greyhound Station.
He smoked, waited for rain to lean in loud
as jets, then fall straight as downtown's angles.
It packed dirt & scrubbed the gutters with floods.
He rolled his shoulders on the stoop, ambled
out when the storm rolled north. Cabs sprayed white
fins of water over the spotless street.

The biggest colony of Mexican
Freetail Bats in the world. No shit. Joe eyed
that frothy basalt field. It looked dead. Dead.
Then sundown let go bats in floods like fire ants.
Agency padlocks sagged from gate to post:
Steelcase, Liberty, Master, American.
Where did they come from? Who are these goddamn
people, fencing the desert, playing kind host?
They want to see us beg to cross the land.
They want their wilderness kept mansion clean--
a quiet place to scuff their boots, wear jeans.
They'd just as soon divide this world in two:
half stocked with lichen, orchids, bats, flesh,
the other with machines, workers, & trash.

Joe, bored & hot, patrols Trinity Site,
rambles down the eastside perimeter
road. It cuts sand & greasewood straight as light
a mile out from the fenceline. He measures
the madness blowing through rusty chainlink.
He stops & squats & stares. What the hell's that?
Four legs, large ungulate, with warpaint streaked
black from snout-ridge to brow. It hung its flat
face forward like a retiree peering
through bifocals. Yard-long horns, one brushy.
Loose mutant? No. A fugitive oryx,
gone from some president's Texas game ranch,
undocumented, heart pumping red blood,
geigering saltbush for water & shade.

Tijeras grade was steep enough Joe rolled
past stands of jagged beetle-kill to town.
He charged the taxis on Indian School
& blew like Moroni calling us home.
He caught giant air on the frontage road.
Enchiladas with red & green chile
just called that Lincoln Continental boat.
He yelled, "Cinnamon rolls & hot coffee!"
105 degrees on 4th Street.

A Big Gulp of Pepper & a Slim Jim
for gleaning drifts of flood wrack in concrete
arroyos. Blue jeans, a bottle of gin,
some cans. Soon, muddy as the water was,
he lurched against a cottonwood & dozed.

A thunderhead climbs the valley on Coal,
soaks the burrito stands, & gets corralled
by Sandia Peak at noon. A young poplar
drifts yellow leaves on wet grass in the park.
A fat house sparrow cleans grills where pickups
line the curb. Joe peeks out from his blue tarp,
watches office workers eat asada
& slake their tongues with icy horchata.
They never walk even a sorry inch
onto the park. They never take a bench.
A gang of crows lands on a camper top.
They'll pick apart the trash for useful scraps
after the cars all start & drag their loads
to offices hung with shots of vacant woods.

Joe stirred the crusted fire pit where bad kids
from Cortez park at night, drink, & get laid.
A semi downshifted climbing the grade,
loaded high with fryers caged on skids.
A mule deer floated out of the blackbrush.
She collided with the bright chrome bumper,
folded in half, spun back to the shoulder.
She shuddered & wheezed, craning her long neck.
Joe crushed her thin skull with his crowbar.
She was fat for March. He unzipped his coat
& watched long flat light catch in ice motes
kicked up by breeze, bright as the morning star.
He hauled her, warm, to a big piñon's shade,
laid cedar in the coals & stropped his blade.

Joe woke up on the Utah line, swaddled
in his bedroll inside a tractor tire
so big four maxed out a Freuhauf flatbed.
He hollered out a song instead of fire.
He skipped down at the Spanish Fork brake check
& hunted quarters in the shoulder's swale.
A sign was stashed where anyone would look,
inside a Wilderness AT radial:
Will Work, God Bless, sketched on greasy cardboard
in genteel cursive. He worked the off ramp
to gather scratch for tickets out. Hard for
folks to know to stop at the light or slam
down to first & peel out for Helper & Price.
Joe wasn't much to look at in the ice.

Joe hustled around Point of the Mountain,
& stopped dead. A monolith, grey, seven
stories tall, shrouded in razor wire fence.
Guards flanked the gate of the one route in.
No scars or dross in the saltbush, like a space
station had settled to earth in the night.
Closer in, the tower showed tall windows, bright
slits where inmates crowded for light, for a taste
of red dust, like how silos in Nebraska
spill over the sides with hard winter wheat
they let rot cause it won't make a profit.
They must count on heat to rot men faster,
stacked high in the desert where no one sees
how they molder until they're told to leave.

Joe rambled down the Pony Express road
south of Tooele past the munitions
dump. Quiet. Mighty quiet out there. Shhh.
Some ticking sounded from the brush like code.
He scrambled on hands & knees, hunted up
a black, black carrion beetle lodged in
a sheep hide stretched taut on bones, chewing
old sinew & tendon to fresh white dust.
They're burning nerve gas & expired anthrax
out to South Depot today. Just one ridge
holds the furnace & Orem apart. Strange
how those sirens could stop us in our tracks.
That beetle kept chewing a ligament
like a beefy sheriff, made no comment.

Joe seeded the ground with crusts & hunched
down by a sandstone slab like hide & seek.
I'll catch that bird if I wait here a week.
Raven whirled in from yonder & said, Drunk.
He drifted down to the tilted milk crate,
eyeballed the drop stick & shrugged at the bait.
He tugged the line, sprung the trap, & lit
on the crate like Beans & rice again, hey?
Joe laughed, What do you know about hungry?
He nipped off a green sprig of three-toothed sage
& scrubbed his fuzzy teeth. Scrape scrip, whip wage.
It took all our brains to make up money.
Joe hopped out & rolled his shoulders & croaked.
That bright black bird took to the air like smoke.

Out walking the old uranium road,
Joe stopped for a shining thing in the sand-
chalcedony with stripes of white limestone.
That rock looked as cold & tame as a vote.
Stream gravels, sorted perfectly by size,
paved the Moenkopi bench behind town-
Mesozoic creeks meandering down
from shale & siltstone hills, a tile work frieze
glittering in soil as red as fresh rust.
The old timers followed these fossil creek
beds to breccia pipes packed with yellowcake.
Crumbly ore loaded their bronchioles with dust.
When their markers rot, weekend prospectors
will trowel their graves for clods of hot ore.

Joe ran up on that famous bison herd
coming around Henry Mountain one day--
calves nuzzling for teat in an aspen bay,
one old bull set to charge, big as a Ford.
Dry ground--the Waterpocket Fold, the Swell--
pinned them on the laccolith's scrubby flank
like squawfish in a swale spring runoff dammed
with driftwood, litter, duff, & silt. My hell,
Earth gets much warmer, the desert'll rise up
& starve them on the summit, leave a cairn
of raw pelts to mark when the bosses learned
they like car profits better than the hunt.
The old bull pissed, chuffed at straggling calves,
& turned his herd toward saltbush & big sage.

Fire jumped 89A by Jacob Lake.
Now fly ash drifted in skinny windrows
down the yellow center line & hummocks
of slash smoldered like the dead after bombs.
The blaze got hot enough to yellow pine
needles, blacken bark, but not to burst trunks
or boil sap. Three weeks shoveling on the line,
now Joe knew drought starved these trees to punk.
Power plants & clearcuts burned these woods
to dirt. Spring lightning just picked up the pace.
Now chipper crews were grinding snags & white
soot leveled skidder tracks where they'd erased
the creeks. Their game was salvage commercial
timber & pray the rain holds off till fall.

Joe whistled at a golden mongrel standing
on the shoulder. It growled & eyed his hands.
It kept tugging at a piece of roadkill--
raccoon, bird, or maybe a shattered squirrel.
He rushed that skinny dog & barked, You're dead!
It hunched forward, dropped its block of a head,
focused on his knobby knee. Joe swung wide,
scanning the shoulder for scraps, singing loud.
I'll keep the pieces they throw away,
washed by rain & dried by sun. I'll make
a solid meal to feed muscle & blood.
That mongrel worried a bone, weighed Joe's words.
They leave me their leavings, their slag & burrs.
I'll weld up a plow & plant us a world.

Joe sipped his water jug & criss-crossed his boots--nowhere to be in the cold world. The Grand Staircase's shadow mounted gnarled fissures & ridges in the Echo Cliffs. A shopping cart inched along Badger Creek bridge, way down at the end of the long curve, full of folded clothes. Sun showed a reddish scurf of dirt on the man pushing, on his orange watch cap, three tee-shirts, irrigation boots, & grey long johns showing through dungarees with the knees out. He pushed like he could see home, like come Kanab he'd learn the truth. He stopped & sat in the shade of his cart. Joe passed his water & scuffed at the dirt.

These poems track Joe Hill's ghost as he wanders the modern West. Joe came to the U.S. from Sweden in 1902. He was a longshore worker, farm laborer, & organizer for the one big union, the Industrial Workers of the World. A series of his songs appeared in the IWW Songbook in 1911. In 1914, Joe was convicted of the murder of a Salt Lake City grocer. He maintained his innocence and his case became an international cause celebre, inspiring protests across the US and Europe.

On November 18, 1915, he sent a telegram from prison to IWW secretary Big Bill Haywood: "Don't waste any time in mourning—organize!" He was executed by firing squad four days later. Joe's ashes were sent to workers in countries around the world & in every U.S. state except Utah. They were scattered on May Day 1916.

Two decades later, Joe was immortalized by Alfred Hayes in the song, "I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night," performed most famously by Paul Robeson, the great singer & civil rights activist. Joe's songs, including "The Preacher & the Slave," "Casey Jones—A Union Scab," & "The Rebel Girl" are still sung.

Most of these poems were said into a microcassette recorder while commuting from Atlanta to Carrollton, Georgia in a 1970 Chevy C10 with a stock straight six 250 and no air conditioner. Some of them appeared in *Beloit Poetry Journal* and *Pemmican*.

--Lance Newman, 3by3by3.blogspot.com

