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Hillbilly Music

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by

Von Wise

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Shenandoah

Just because
you've never been

to a place
except in song

doesn't mean
it can't feel

like home.

I. Sunup

Cast of Characters

Seth.....	Seventh son of the Susquehanna, born and raised in central PA. Where are you going, boy?
Q.....	Older brother, first in the kiln, foreman of Seth's Work Crew.
Father.....	Hallowed be thy name, your kids will come and will be done with work at six or seven, gives up his day for daily bread.
Mother.....	Carries discipline of God and Law, bringer of life and witness to death, separated from Father with a river in between.
The Carter Family.....	Country Music's first family, circled round the dawn of the 20 th century.
Work Crew (chorus).....	Older men dressed in dirt and pine needles, harnessed and hanging from the balcony of branches.
Leadbelly.....	Carves statues out of songs. It doesn't matter where you've been, only where you're headed.
Bob.....	Scrap-hunter, junkman with gold plated valves.

Mississippi John Hurt.....	Songster, guitar-picker, could sing a river to sleep. We may not look or sound alike, but we all just want to make it to the sea.
Stink-Eye Sam.....	Lost his left eye in a barfight with a dogfish shark, known to eat discarded boat props.
Dewey Buckets.....	Seth's first alter, rose to fame after brief detainment, born beneath a waterfall, last seen in upstate New York.
Bucket.....	Dewey's only daughter, a method for consuming marijuana involving a water-filled bucket, an empty water bottle, and the all-pervasive force of gravity.
Best Western.....	Occasional residence of Seth, Q, and the Work Crew.
Rammahead Spitta.....	Second alter, acts on impulse, chases fights, maintains a love-hate relationship with Trouble.
The Woods.....	Secrets in a jar, know how to make new out of the old, the original Appalachian ballad.
Landslide.....	Carefree alter, prefers companionship to violence, favorite artists include: Lil B, Kool AD, Trinidad James, Flying Lotus.

Croak..... Night song, road to Seth's
childhood home, word for life
or death; a stick drawn across
tiny ridges plays all of these at
once. Even when we can't tell
where we're going, there are
noises that tell us we are
home.

Catfish

We start at midnight,
piercing chicken livers
with hooks. We throw
temptations into water
inky like the hour.

Juicy J comes on car speakers,
everyone waiting. We shoot the shit,
our poles resting in tubes, looking
for some action. Mine pulls down,
pointing a long fiberglass finger
at the prize, so I pull up
quick, with force and clarity
of purpose. Juicy J don't give a shit
as I reel in a face
full of slimy whiskers.

We're both gasping.

It would bite my hand if it could,
a quick bit of payback,
but I don't let it. Less
successful companions
have less greasy hands.
They want what I got.

Early Spring

Darkness & dirt
are all I know.
I witness other
seedlings grow,

coaxed up
by an Indian
Summer's day,
stretching out
revealing petals
to promises
never intended

as guarantees.
They never were
supposed to be.

The warmth of soil
has not escaped me,
though the pressure
to grow knows my name.
A broken shell is nothing
but empty shouting. "Broken"
does not have to be anyone's
last word.

Money Tree

At 11, Father wanted me to know
what \$1 was worth. He showed me
how to find it in backyards
and rusted lots where scrap grew
out of the ground. Summers,
I learned how to crush metal into cash
with either Q or Bob
when Father was at work. Bob taught
me how even the broken
can be valuable. He'd come
and gone like the junk in his arm,
but eventually found himself strong without it.
Bob knew what it was like to unintentionally cut,
but also how to get better from the bleeding.
Q got a real job,
and then it was just me and Bob
manning the back hoe, crushing cars,
pressing down and squeezing the last bit of cash
out of metal bodies, hauling away
the remains of some trailer trash
trash trailer no one else wanted.

Bob also knew how to drive
without a license.
He drove me to the bank
to cash checks many times
more than my first dollar.
Father came too. Proud
whenever the teller told him
that I made a lot of money
for someone my age,
that I really knew
how to make a buck. One summer,

Bob and I were removing the gas tank
from a long-dead truck. Bob looked at it
with recognition, a familiar surgery,
said he used to be heavy too.
My father knew this, I realized,
as Bob's kind look challenged
the decomposing frame. His unoxidized expression
was worth more than I'd known.
He told me how the real worth of a single bill
is in knowing that you haven't been

completely spent. The truck folded in on itself,
as I watched, entirely upright.

Fireball

Wind blows the fire in all directions,
trying to burn the feet of anyone
who forgets to pay attention.
We are a drunk circle of friends.
It is not my house and not my fire.
We found each other years ago,
when I was still the bad kid on the bus,
or at least that how my one friend
who also rode that bus said he saw me.
It's his house and his fire.
Someone asks why that Shane kid
is mad at me. I told him it's because
Shane thinks he's tough, trying to start shit
even though I'd kick his ass.
We're all high too. The wind twists
the fire up into the air
like a tornado
and we all look up
even though we've seen this
before. Out of nowhere flashes
a bottle of Everclear, and me and my neighbor
take sips and everyone else is afraid of it,
and we're all drunk and high,
and no one is saying anything,
so I put the bottle to my mouth
and blow into the fire which explodes
in my face in a flash of clarity.
We haven't seen this before,
so everyone is excited. The wind
dies down, and I do it again.

The Road Leading Home

A black bridge
of falling bolts
glass-dusted underbelly
graffiti, rocks
railroad track.

A narrow lane
leading along
sliced open mountainside
shaded overhang
blind, sudden turns.

A wooded path
sidled up against the town—
a so-called city—
a different kind of quiet
between the hairs
of a rolling green blanket.

A farmer's plot
of stalks
ripe rows to hide in
the summer
bare in
the winter.

A river
always moving
in that same direction,
a road nobody needed to build,
going so far, through so much space.
You're always going away and always
coming back.

II. Graft

Hillbilly Music

Will the circle
unbroken
by the sky
be waitin'
some place better?

We come
take branches
away on a cold n'
cloudy day.

Haulin' mother,
drive slow.
Glad to see 'em go.
Grab the haul n'
Take 'er under-
neath her home
near the power-
lines in the sky.

Circle, Lord
be broken,
waitin'
for a better home,
a place we don't
know somewhere
in the sky.

Paycheck

Quick wit kind boy
settles hands in ground,
reaches down, finds sharp
stone. Ground bites back.

Cut hands heal,
pink lines turn white as
smoke.

Father re-disappears.
Hands find money,
a trace of him.
Left for support.
Paycheck buys food,
buys a whole week
to themselves.

Motherside

Split wood
with Father.

Go to church
with Mother.

Crazy like
Westboro.

“God hates fags.”
Then God is stupid.

No swimming
with mother

because her brother
drowned alone.

She cannot
leave me and Q alone.

Mother for rednecks,
cooks and cleans,

deputy of house
and courthouse.

Got some good
hook-ups there.

Broken Beer

Smash bottle down
and hit my beer for foam,
fuck you, Q,
forget you're crazy
strong. Trying to make bubbles

rise, like we both grow
up into men.
Now holding

a broken bottle,
making a crown

from shattered lips.
A sip spills
glass in my mouth.
I spit out
like broken teeth,

the ones some guys around here are missing:
holey mouths, but no God,
no crowns.
We drink until it's gone.

Room to Grow

We often find secret sheds out here,
little houses tucked away
with no intention of being found,
trees within trees. Usually,
the men who built them hurry out
when they see us coming.
I see ATV's speed back and forth
through the trees, and I know
we're near a den of forbidden flowers.

We never get anyone
into trouble. Many of us have
enough of it ourselves, although I wouldn't
put it past some crew to take
a bouquet home with them.
Maybe this is what the racing men suspect.

An older and possibly wiser guy once
told me he could really go for a J
if he had someone
to share it with.

He sounded hungry. I refused,
even though I was hungry too.

Cougar Nite

at a best western begins
long after our drinks. women enter
like a high school reunion. cups in hand,
they look for a meal.
an old cat catches me
and i submit. dancing,
her fleshy thighs embrace my crotch
and i look for something
to hold on to. she thrusts one way
and my hips move with her.
her underarms have a rhythm
of their own. a co-worker moves in,
"you know he's only 19."
her eyes extinguish blood
rushing back into my head.
"you didn't care when you thought i was 21."
"honey," she says, "i have a son
who is a year older than you.
if i stayed what would that make me?"
i go to buy a drink. "not
until you're older" the bartender taunts. with liquor
on my breath i yell
"yeah well in 2 years i'll be 21
and you'll still be fat as shit."

i stumble up to my room
and go to bed dripping and raw.

Faded Light

All I wanted was unfiltered affection,
and you handed me a heap
of brown and yellow grains.
If I had known how hard
they would feel between my teeth
I might have suggested stones instead.

In a Scotch-soaked fit of dancing,
we tried to fit everything into place,
as if we could do more
than simply rearrange the furniture.

I think the stars are getting stronger
as our atmosphere disintegrates.
I can feel the light shining through
my molars whenever I grin.
“I don’t want to be scraped away,”
you say. With my mouth full
of starlight, I do my best to sing
an old tune about seeds and stars
and broken teeth. I spray some of it out
and choke on the rest.

40 Nite

Another night brought a broken rave.
Glo-Stick blood and splintered chairs occupied
the hotel room because the power was out,
and our food had gone bad, and fate, that shitty GPS,
had taken us by a liquor store on the way home
from work. Different crews mixed for the first time
since the cougar hunt. At some point, Q's empty bottle
breezed by my head, so I returned the favor
with my own, missing, adding teeth
to the parking lot through an open door.

I could not partake in the eventual expedition
for bare-chested women. I slept. Banging
in the morning, a "Time-for-work!" penetrated
the 40 oz. fog. "Get that, Q," I told the foreman. That day
I failed to make my chainsaw purr.

Dewey Buckets: Police Song

If you thought the law could hold me
then those cops have got you fooled.
I'm spittin' fresh off parole, we
ain't gonna be in the hold
of some fucking hog-ass old
rules that don't even know me.

You know I'm Dewey Buckets
cuz we only doin buckets,
take a water bottle, suck
all the smoke that fills it up.
Water pouring out the side,
the police gonna let this slide
cuz they only make their business
where the money's comin with it.

So the long dick of the law
can try giving me a call
and chase the smoke that sprawls
from my water-bottle-fall.

III. Exhale

Landslide: Freestyle

Imma bout to pulla trigga
Dick is only gettin bigga
But you know I'm not a killa
I'm an Ace-uh clubs,
Landslide thug
Drippin poker chips n love
Like a basement fulla tacks.

Natural disaster
Fuckin fuckin with a plaster
dick. No trick. Ice cold
master switch, white birds:

doves n shit.

Trial

At 14 I had
my trial-by-bike

competitions and rock
climbing with tires

with motors
without a seat

break disks
breaking, flat-

tires, torn open
on sharp stones

three bikes
blew their engines

because off-road
racing punches

where you'd least expect
up the ranks

races go down valleys
up boulders

to make it
8-feet high

you must
hit tire 45°

compress shocks
unload legs—

hold clutch
count to 3

hold bike
wide open

move body
looking up

let it take you
to the top

learn to fly.

Pocket Knife

There's a never-ending party
in my pants, and we're all invited.
Just unlock the belt and pay
the button the entry fee.
The zipper will let you in.

If you're a friend, you can follow me
up the left pant leg
and sneak past security.
I'll show you the fire
in my back pocket. We can sit
around it, drinking apple pie moonshine
since we're friends. I'll tell you about how
this party is still going on, how some people
refuse to leave. I told everyone
to smoke cigarettes in the other back pocket,
but we can smoke in this one. Because we're friends

sharing this jar of apple and moon,
I'll mention how it'll never stop burning
up there or down here, how no one will
ask it to. It's fun,

but sometimes it feels too late.
Sometimes I'll take my knife and cut a little hole
and sneak away for a bit. You can come too,
but just you, friend.

All the Roads Leading Home

Preserved in green and white,
like a frog's empty cry,
Croak Hollow,
a tilted slender sign
turning silver in the light.

The gravel road pulls you
farther down, endless
into hills,
where mountain laurel looks
with humid steam
and streams
like another hemisphere,
a narrow path ravine-
ing into deep bluegreens.

Hold tight to the bends,
the right turns,
to find a surprisingly familiar
old place,
like how you moved
through so much space
only bend back
towards where you began,
roads taking you
so far from where you started,
to find yourself next door
in the same woods
you've always known.

Goodnight

Irene, if rambling and gambling
and staying out in the strip clubs
at night is too much
to make me your man,
then I guess I'm not your man.

But before you say goodnight, Irene,
just tell me where's your morphine,
that little bit of take-you-away,
which you need and need to hide
and will drown you in the river,
drag you down the side?
Because I know it isn't me anymore.

Good God, Irene, I asked
your father for you,
and he took me up like a son.
And still you're gone,
I'll never see your face.
If only either of us hadn't been born.

It was a good fight,
Irene, and there'll be no
more good nights for me.
But one thing's still the same:
I'll see you in my dreams.

IV. De Capo

Susquehanna Gon' Hurt (Sometimes)

Ain't nobody's dirty business
How I treat myself
Nobody's business but mine

If I wake up boozy
Feeling a hard fist
Pressing my eyes
Then I'll swing back

If I punch you in the face
It's because you need it
And it's our punch
No one else's
Something we can't share

If I write you a letter
That's between us
Nobody's business but ours

If I want to kick the dirt
Shake it up
Whatever the cloud becomes
That's mine too

*Carved on a Tree Near a Burned Down Hut;
or, Nightsong in the Morning*

Above this river
nothing moves,
the trees have today off,
won't even
produce small breaths;

All of the birds recovering still.
I tell myself, *Soon,*
You'll rest as well.

To Lost Love and Rum

I twist you open, and look you in your one eye,
and you look back at my open one,
and neither of us are really sure of the other.
“Can you handle me?” asks your high proof stink.
“Can I handle you?” I like to think I can handle
your sour-mouthed kiss. I like to think you want
my mouth as much as it wants you. We promised
each other so much at the beginning. You were so sweet
before you burned me down. You made me feel good
before you made me sick.
Now I can’t even tell the difference.

Rammahead Spitta: Reflections

Crossbow and I'm ready to go.

For real dis dude is out-in the-woods
For real dis dude is hard-as a-tree
For real dis dude is me
Biggest high school redneck: 2013

Takin care of my shit in the streets
Flashing, throwing lightning in the streets
Fuckin up dudes tryna mess with me

hits bong
[new track plays]

Three bowls strong
I'm ready for da song
Always ready for a fight
If you're standing in my sight

But it don't have to be so wrong
If you wanna get along
Hey...where's my friend, White?
Gonna kiss him good night

Communion

I.

There's a sort of feeling
you only get when you're born
with a stone in your eye.
But you must be able to understand
the dust of it all, the rigid
language of bark, the hard
but still soft grazing against your cheek
that makes up childhood.

There are places where only you visit,
but you know others have been there too,
initials carved long ago into rock with another rock
that you found and so share through this space
each other's personal world: a Father often gone,
but still a father, a Mother pressing down
as hard as she can because that's a form love takes,
a brother to spit on and fight
because you're both spitting and fighting
and want to secure each other's strength.

There are private places that we can all share,
and sure as you don't know mine,
we've found similar objects to hold onto
and turn over in our hands,
memorizing their textures and ridges,
working out the bones underneath,
using these bones as a model for the world
we've yet to discover
and using them to pick our teeth.

II.

A large, sweeping, grassy hill in the summer
can serve as someone's back yard
and as a place to find music.

A large, sweeping, grassy hill in the summer
is where hundreds gather to drink and laugh
as we wait for the next act to come on.

A stage down at the bottom of this dirt-y theater
looks across scattered fold-out chairs and RV's
and waits for the next bluegrass band to come on.

The stage at the bottom allows this place to be a theater.
It calls out the hula-hoops and tie-dye dresses and children.
It calls out the vendors of homespun goods and the sun.

We've been here for two days and wait for one more,
listening to folk music carried from below by the wind,
drinking moonshine and calling out the sun.

For two days and for one more, we only know this place,
its music and its people, their various sounds,
and the way it changes from day to night.

By day it is structure, a schedule, workshops and families.
By night the children are gone or asleep. We unfold.
Everyone keeps drinking, and grey-haired men grab their bongos,
and somewhere someone has a bag of mushrooms.

III.

A family is a line
and a circle.

It moves forward

by reproducing itself
in different ways.

This is what makes us brothers.

IV.

A beat connects the rhythm
to the flow,
and Tupac is still dead.

God knows we all miss him.
Gone, though
he lives on in our heads.

There was supposed to be unity,
East and West,
Blue and Red.

But a game got us thinking
those other dudes
are better off dead.

Cuz we're from different places
we think different,
they're not my brother
is what someone said.

And it's true. We have
different minds.
We don't know each other,
and Biggie is still dead.

V.

We eventually find others
Who themselves have found us
And form a communion
That no one suspected
We learn to crawl on two feet
Together on two feet
We want to show them
Our secret place
But can't find our way back
When we're not alone
We decide it doesn't matter
As we carve out a new shelter
To fit everyone into
They bring their own small stones
We all hang posters on the wall
And in a way it approximates
Our individual space
But gets expanded
To include foreign spices
Seeds from exotic places
We learn what we each have to offer
And marvel at what gets created
Through unexpected combinations
We still return to our personal spaces
Because we can never give them up
Just as we can never share them completely
But at midnight
when we cast out catfish lines
we can pick which fire
burns at our back

VI.

Eventually a man has to work rather than chore.
Some decisions come naturally
like working alongside your brother.

It takes a crew of men for each job.
The company has you cut branches.
Your Crew has you harnessed in a tree.
Some of them have been working this job
as long as your father. Some have not.
Some of them can't tie a good knot regardless,
even when your security is on the line.
Many Crew members have made bad decisions
like smoking rocks and shards and holes into their smile.
But just as many just work for the money.

It is good money,
especially right out of high school.
You've never known so much wealth
or freedom. As you walk through the woods
to your next location, you know what it's like
to make your own way in the world.
You might spend the night at a hotel
near the site because the job took you
too far from your bed, and if you want a drink
after the shift, no one would tell you not to.
Because you worked for it.
God knows you earned it.

VII.

There is no end of the line,
whatever anyone might say.
I'm gonna keep moving
til' the day I die,
and even then I'll probably stay on.
Have you ever seen the end of a river?
Because as far as I can tell
it only just gets bigger and bigger.
And that's me.
Don't say you never knew me
because you just watched me flow by,
stopping for nothing.
We're all just going on and on,
and we may never intersect,
never find the same hemisphere,
but I know what makes you move.
The same thing is in me too.

Power Lines

Cutting limbs just isn't cutting
it. Branches reaching for a line,
a voice to talk to,
pay the price for trying
to hold electricity. Communication
runs at 750 kA through chords
like tin cans. Voices spark,
threatening to burn the forest down.

I make sure those trees keep to themselves,
providing the companionship they desire
just long enough to break their arms.
I'd prefer a different kind of operation,

swinging arms of heavy steel,
adding instead of subtracting.
I could hold electric ropes with them
and let the voices run through me.
I could use these arms
to lift a roof into the air.
I could live beneath it. There,
I'd have no fear of burning down.

Susquehanna

This river, baby,
is a wild stream, licking
in a common tongue.
Winding roads have rocks
even when slow.
Don't go thinking
I wouldn't run up and down
this coast, cutting through
trees and even the remains
of mountains. Sus-
kwuh-Hannah moves like life-
blood pushing through a vein.