

THE
BRIDGE
AND
THE
RIVER

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TIMOTHY CARMODY



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction v
Painted Bird 5
Island 8
Detroit Bar 9
An Ode, on Dia de los Muertos 11
February 13, 2002 14
Tom in Dublin 16
Waiting for the Man 18
Horn 20
Felix Culpa 23
About the Author 25

The bridge connecting New York to Boston hung delicately over the Hudson, and it trembled when you squinted to see it. It seemed entirely without traffic and underneath it ran an inanimate, smooth belt of water. Everything in both of these giant cities seemed empty and pointlessly displayed. As for the buildings, there was barely any difference between the large ones and the small. In the invisible deep of the streets, the bustle went on after its own manner, but nothing moved above it except for a light haze which wouldn't be pushed away, but it was as if you could chase it away without any effort. Even in the harbor, the largest in the world, it was quiet, and only here and there, influenced by your memory of seeing it up close, you might believe you saw a ship pushing on for a short stretch. But you couldn't follow it for long, it escaped from your eyes and couldn't be found anymore.

—FRANZ KAFKA, THE MAN WHO DISAPPEARED

I don't know why I stopped writing poetry, at least with any regularity or sense of purpose, after I finished college. To be honest, "regularity" and "sense of purpose" had both been highly variable for some time. But in short order, not long after writing the last of the poems contained here, I began graduate school, moved across the country, began writing articles and essays, began teaching, married an alluring intelligent woman, had a beautiful brainy son. In short, the well, if not dry, has been harder to plumb and yielded different draughts. There is no Philadelphia poetry in this collection at all, possibly because with two major rivers and countless bridges across each of them, the muse is confused, on a beach somewhere with Mayakovsky's sun in South Jersey.

What you have in your hands, then, is a collection of student writing, penned in Detroit, Lansing, and Chicago during my four years at Michigan State University and a year at the University of Chicago. Many of the Chicago poems were workshopped with Karen Volkman, who was in residency that year. The earlier poems are Offbeat poems; poems that bounced around among the staff at *The Offbeat*, especially Gavin Craig, Brandon Kelley, and Theresa Mlinarcik, and most of which were eventually published in some form in that fine publication.

INTRODUCTION

The modus operandi in these poems is fairly consistent: thinly fabulized autobiography meets resonant cultural reference funneled through a provisional form or persona. I'm hardly the first nineteen-year-old to steal from Kafka, Lou Reed or T. S. Eliot—and old Tom, he had it coming. So, no apologies here, no footnotes required. If I had to peg my loyalties anywhere, it would be somewhere on the bleaker corner of John Ashbery's surrealist side, close company with Charles Simic, James Tate, and co., always with an envious eye on Frank O'Hara, that marvelous swimmer. Oh, and Homer, too. Nothing in particular, but I often think it would be nice if someone compared my small poems favorably to Homer. A grad student can dream, can't he?

Timothy Carmody, July 2007

THE BRIDGE AND THE RIVER

It will always be finer to go across the bridge to the Belvedere than to go through the river into heaven.

PAINTED BIRD

1.

Three gypsies are kneeling on the floor and throwing bones.

Mother breathes in my ear Anna Anna wach auf, and the train starts to stop.

I start a conversation with the two virtuosos, who are sitting on a cello case.

Two men start fighting when one reads poetry; The tall one says *Betrunken ist ein Meister aus Deutschland*. The small one hits him with the flat of his hand.

One of the virtuosos pulls me close and says in good English: *Aut mentem parandam, aut laqueum*; The other wants to take my picture.

When the ticket-taker comes around, Mother picks her pocket.

Two of the gypsies are laughing; The third has lost almost all of his clothes.

2.

I dreamt of grapes, sleetgreen on a silver field with sketches of white glovetrees and long tangled snowroots, signed in white ink. 3.

The train is filled with gypsies, caged birds, and Russians singing songs. Three gypsies are kneeling on the floor and throwing bones. Two are laughing, the third has lost almost all of his clothes; two more are painting the sparrows to be tropical birds with white and silver feet. The ticket-taker comes around; Mother picks her pocket. She breathes in my ear *Anna Anna wach auf*, and the train starts to stop. A gypsy tries to sell her a bird; she pushes him away. I start a conversation with the two virtuosos on the cello case. One pulls me close and says in good English *aut mentem parandam*, *aut laqueum*; the other wants to take my picture. The sparrows and the Russians are both singing now. Two men fight when one reads poetry; the tall one says *Der Trinken ist ein Meister aus Deutschland*. The small one hits him with the flat of his hand. Two green and silver birds fly through the window while the gypsy raises his paint knife, once, quick.

4.

Years later
I will still draw
the red stripe on the officer's
stiff tan hat. And my mother
will tell my children *Your*mother should sell you to the gypsies
if they lose their gloves
in the snow.

5.

A gypsy tries to sell Mother a bird, and she pushes him away.

The train is filled with caged birds and gypsies, Russians singing songs.

Two green and silver birds fly through the window while the gypsy rises above his head, once, quick.

The sparrows and the Russians are both singing now.

Two gypsies are painting sparrows, Tropical birds with white silver feet.

ISLAND

When my father came to America he carried a piece of Ireland hidden in his pocket. It went with him always, and served him in good stead. When he died I planted it and it became all of Europe. I carry it now on my back everywhere I go, no matter how heavy it gets.

There it always rains. Here it always snows. Neither one is mine.

DETROIT BAR

Sometimes things are better when you're drunk.—
We're drinking blend whiskey and longnecked beers
in a westside Irish bar, I forget the name,
and Tommy the shortdicked Scot starts talking books
and Meg starts talking back.
At least Tommy can drink. I see the look on Davey's face
and I says to Meg and Tommy,
"You know my friends don't read."

Davey laughs and then comes back
"I read a book once. *Catch-22*, Joseph Heller."
Meg laughs in her hair and Davey drinks
and we all sit up at the bar.

Next round I order a brandy alexander and catch hell.

The old Polish bartender tells me he ain't even got milk for coffee but he's got the booze for it. Chuck and Davey laugh at me but I run across Southfield over the bridge on Tireman and stop for a second to cling to the fence over the freeway, plasticize the cars and trucks and grey and metal in my mind. It's cloudy as hell. Looks like those projects burned down.

The liquor store on the other side is open and I buy a carton, red, Vitamin D, cow on the front and a kid on the back.
When I mix the drink back at the bar I pass it around and everyone agrees it's good. Sharp and cream.

THE BRIDGE AND THE RIVER

"Know your bartender," Tommy says.

"Bartender's the only decent people left any more," chimes Davey.

The old Pole is gone and a good-looking Mexican with a thin goatee is pouring bourbon and smiling.

Everything exhales.

I go back to whiskey while Meg smokes a Newport and Chuck and Davey tell Tommy dirty jokes. Fat Firas talks to me in a low soothing voice at the end of the bar. Meg smiles and fixes her glasses, soaking in the room, butching up.

I touch one of her curls and she looks straight ahead. The Mexican is mixing a clear apple liqueur with caramel and mint leaves in a tall frosted glass. Every so often, he drinks from the bottle and makes a pinched face. When I order another double, Meg asks the bartender in Spanish about his tattoo, a weave design on his left arm. It's an indigo knife covered with pink and white-plossomed roses.

"Una mujer," he shrugs, and we all laugh, but nobody thinks it's funny.

7/21/00

AN ODE. ON DIA DE LOS MUERTOS.

1. Candle

O Death, on this, the day of dead, As Demeter mourns at th'immortal pyre, We show you as you are, grotesque; With masks of skulls, of caulk and wire, We light our votive candles' fire. From he whose pow'r was heaven sent, We take this day our sacrament.

The fire too is smoke and ash,
A child's death, another's birth;
From ourselves we've had to wash
The dream of living without hurt.
With bodies, too, come dung and dirt.
There is only the choice of pyre or pyre—
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

2. Mexicantown

On summer Sundays we took communion at Holy Redeemer. When church broke we ran down Vernor Hwy to Clark Park,

Past the *bodegas* we just called *stores* if we didn't know them by name.

Miguel lived on Christiancy,
which was faster; I liked Vernor

Where we could see Rosa skipping double-dutch, and where old Manuel gave us baseball cards and taffee, and warned me about *las mujeres*.

The men would watch their sons from the Clark Street stoops, kept mothers inside while we stained church clothes with grass and sweat.

A double to right field—I lost my shoes rounding first base, took off my socks and played barefoot.

After baseball, sliced oranges and sweet raisins, reruns of *Sanford and Son* or *Chico and the Man*. We hung sheets

Over doorways, ran fans to keep cool. Miguel's mother, my godmother, stroked my hair until I fell asleep.

After summer, *Dia De Muertos*, when we'd light candles and laugh at death. We took the long walk from Holy Redeemer to Holy Cross, the cemetery, praying

For Rosa's father, Manuel's wife, Willie Hernandez (who wasn't dead), and Novia, Miguel's sister who died still a baby—who had clear blue eyes—

TIMOTHY CARMODY

Our *angelitos*, our saints. When I returned years later, The milkweed still grew, and I drew

A self-portrait beneath the Ambassador Bridge. The miracle of art is its rediscovery of the real, That every day it breaks bread anew With the mountains and hollows of our memory,

And memory always seems lacking. We blessed ourselves and came away. I held the bat tighter, it cracked in my hand.

FEBRUARY 13, 2002

It's a rare and fine thing this is, a quick stroll arm in arm with chocolates still on our breath and your new DVD in my coat's breast pocket

because I never knew you liked musicals you know just old prints and Henry Miller (I swear I'll finish *Tropic of Cancer* then

I can read everything) but I still can't believe you've never seen the Seine, you just finish my sentences: because the thing about the river I

say as we cross the bridge is: well, you've just got to see the Seine to get it, and I probably should show you the Thames and my favorite, the Liffey,

because in Dublin everyone is on their way somewhere, but it's never somewhere else, just where they are, not like us: I say at least once a day

that Chicago is Purgatory: cold, quotidian and a little bit hard, but really more like life than life itself since we're all on our way somewhere

but who knows where, how long, or why we're going, just trying to work off these things we've done: I know this

is not bad because I'm twice as handsome as Woody Allen even after his hair cut (yes I really am going to get

TIMOTHY CARMODY

a haircut) and you like Uma Thurman and hot lezbo action more than I do (yes you really should rent *Henry and June* again and I

promise I'll watch it) and besides sarcasm just might conquer the world, and (yes) if it doesn't then, well, there's always New Orleans.

TOM IN DUBLIN

I like to call him *Tommy*, but he hates it—*Tom* seems to suit him. He has a blunt dignity captured neatly in the name. There's a peculiar luxury in the way he rolls up the sleeves on his blue button-down, a certain wry precision in even how his mouse-brown locks fall across his wire rims. Walking in the streets here he is happy. There's a new bounce, a skip in his short step. He checks the watch hung gunslinger-style at his hip,

And cranes his head up towards the bronze statue in the square. *Look*, he says, *It's Parnell*.

*

On warm bright days like these I wish I was Hemingway, gambling at the Paris racetrack, or under Africa's open skies. Today I am what I am, an Irishman. The cloud cover has finally broken, And the blue skies shine through. I catch a glimpse and I am happy. Friendship endures, as whiskey does.

After pub sandwiches and draughts we trace Ulysses's steps to the Davy Byrne. Joyce and Dublin loved each other, after he left. On the street we see hoary men, fire-cheeked, and young pregnant women toting strollers. *Tom should be Catholic*, I think, not for the first time. But no—here with his white shoes and Polish nose, he protrudes like Leopold Bloom, standing, a step away, the Irish Jew.

Here we perch like Bellow's parrots, set free, green plumes setting us off against the brown and gray. It feels right. For Joyce and for Hemingway, friendship endures.

Tom preens near Joyce's statue at Café Kylemore, blue and green against blue-green. This is how I will remember him—jaw jutting forward, quiet grace in profile, his glasses cutting the last rays of the setting Irish sun.

A parrot in the city, knowing when to let the city be silent and when to let his own voice speak.

WAITING FOR THE MAN

The young painter ducked past the fruit vendors and resale shops on 3rd avenue and pulled his blue wool cap close around his head. He blew into his hands and decided to cross over on 116th street and started walking the long block over to Lexington. A Puerto Rican girl shouted hey white boy what you doin uptown from a fourth-floor window but he just smiled and she smiled back and he thought about buying some brown and gray paints and coming back to work on a street scene. When he got to Lexington he checked his watch and slid against a rail support 'neath the train tracks and pulled out a joint and a pack of matches from his pocket. The commuter train rolled noisy above his head and he lost two matches staring at the pack and wondering why the matches looked so much like trees. A dead forest with red halos. He lit the third and when he was done he lit up the pack—a tiny forest fire. —He checked his watch again and headed up to 125th st with 26 dollars plus a dollar fifty for the subway in his pocket. At 125 and Lexington Ave he turned and waited outside a jazz café near the subway station with the money in his hand. The music was good, soft horns and Billie Holiday, and he wanted to go inside and have a drink but the man was late and he waited. You got used to waiting. Finally the man came from down 125 wearing a brown leather coat and shoes and a black skullcap. He walked with an exaggerated limp and it turned out he was missing two toes on his right foot. The art student followed the man into an old converted brownstone next to the jazz café and walked up two flights of stairs, stopping every few steps to accommodate the limp. He waited in the doorway while the man went into the apartment. The carpet was a fake tiger print, white with black streaks, and impeccably clean. He could hear a loud commotion and what sounded like a man and a woman's voices further into the apartment, but then the man returned and blocked his view from the doorway. The man handed him a small round blue jar wrapped in an offwhite hand towel to protect it from the cold. Just then he heard a glass bottle shatter against a wall and another male voice bellow in muted pain. He started to step into the room but the man said in a cool voice that he'd better get out of

TIMOTHY CARMODY

there. —When he walked back out onto the street, the air was cold and dry and everything appeared clear, weightless, and pristine. The lines of the buildings were pure and well defined and he was afraid to blink or daydream and lose it all. It was *achtung*, attention, the feeling one has reading tragedy, in depression, before the law—a piercing clarity and arresting respect upon confrontation with reality. He forgot to look back. He wiped his nose and went down the steps into the subway, slipping the blue jar into his coat. He was in no hurry to get downtown, so he got on the number 6 train, the local, and sat next to a Dominican boy flicking dead flies in the window and his mother and waited while the sublime slowly dissolved into radio static.

HORN

I

It's nice here on the porch, talking, smoking. The slightly sweet smell of cloves hangs everywhere. The moon's getting swallowed by the night tonight.

Time, like fate, is stretched out forever, and we get stretched along with it.

Ann St rolls around into Charles and back into Ann again. We're here, not there—

Now, not then. But now is then too—the fire from the lighter is smoke and ash. Maybe the now is the illusion—maybe the now is really the then and the yet to come. *Viens*,

Je viens d'aller, Je viens d'être, you say. Your French always was better than mine. I remember more than you forget. We're both being stretched along, like fate, like time.

It's hard to keep this up. The moon's getting swallowed by the night tonight. On the porch we're still talking.

History

is made and unmade every day, and remade again. We try to keep our promises. Into the same river we both step and do not step. We hold each other steady through the night. *Tu me tiens*. You look different in the dark, but somehow right.

The moon shines in your eyes tonight, a sliver of ivory.

The outside spills inside. We close our eyes and whisper

to each other. It's time to leave the said unsaid, to practice the art of implication. Now my tongue is a paint knife. We're painting our portrait together with each stroke. We're inventing new languages.

П

Suddenly

it becomes warmer, and I remember Africa. We came from Africa, and we are African still.

Now we wear masks carved of horn. Now our tongues are knives, and we paint each other red under the skies in Tunis. *To become*,

To remember, To hold, To come—I have just begun to understand the difference.

Time stretches

us across each other and over to one another, connecting fragments, spinning satellites of a distant sun. We feel that somehow.

I can feel you breathing against my chest. I try to hold onto now, but it vanishes. I become what I have been—*Devenir que venir d'être*.

Our places are marked by street signs. We let the air come in through the open window. *Ach*, du—We talk like lovers tonight, whispering prayers.

I don't believe in redemption, I say. We have fallen, and fallen too hard. *It doesn't matter*, you answer. *You mean what you won't say*.

Ш

Out of the night, the moon appears again, a sliver of ivory, a single horn in the clouds. We're discovering new mysteries, you and I.

We paint our picture on the wall, and we come to resemble the picture. We hold on to each other. Fate stretches like

Time—as we do, it anticipates, it guesses. I don't know where I'm going. This is what is happening now, which is

Yesterday and Tomorrow, what was and what is yet coming. I mean what I won't say. I'm keeping unsaid promises.

My horn sounds across the desert, to you. We're inventing new languages.

Life is getting stranger every day. I don't know what grace is, but I know this. Maybe this is love, holding us together. Maybe love is this. This is a beginning.

12/17/00

FELIX CULPA

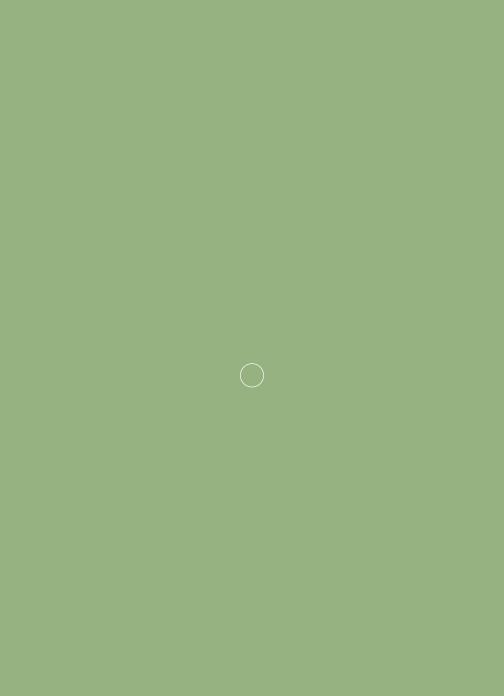
I met Franz K. the other day on a southbound train. The day was clear and cold. He said he'd been riding for hours. The red line runs right by my building, he said. I wish I could live somewhere in the North loop. At the laundromat he pulled me close and whispered, This is dead land. He goes on like this every day. How tired we all must be. I went into the kitchen, where my woman was sitting in the bathtub, poaching eggs. When you first came, you were as white as a corpse, I groaned. It's a dirty trick, she shouts back, our hips moving together in one swift hum. But my father, he's a jumper for the soda pop company. K. and I, we've pulled him out of every brothel on the West side. Why did I come here? I always forget to leave. I looked through the bookstacks for you, until I fell asleep.

When I sobered up, I was sweeping dead flies from K.'s windowsill. *Just one more and everything will be perfect*, he said before he broke into tears. I drove myself home. The sun was shining. We all wish none of this had ever happened.

2/12/02



TIMOTHY CARMODY was born in Detroit, Michigan. He currently lives with his family in Philadelphia, where he studies Comparative Literature and Literary Theory at the University of Pennsylvania.



"In the years I have worked with Timothy Carmody I have been frequently amazed and occasionally annoyed by his habitual production of really outstanding work. If *The Bridge and the River* sometimes betrays its influences—Charles Simic, James Baldwin, Frank O'Hara—it must be conceded that the poet's choices are admirable, and the raw materials are always his own. These are early poems, and in them Mr. Carmody experiments with imagery, narrative, and voice, but his experiments are never simply academic, and the results are both sophisticated and affecting. Place matters. Memory persists. The pleasures of the world, slow and hard-won, are worth savoring. The same can be said of this collection."

—GAVIN CRAIG



From Detroit and Chicago to Harlem and Dublin, *The Bridge and the River* gives us a poetry as notable for its geographic exploration as its literary ambition. While Timothy Carmody's poems create new landscapes of the temporal, linguistic, and structural, it is, in the end, Carmody's empathy that makes his writing so powerful.