

Potholes on the Yellow Brick Road

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THE BRICK AND I

I could be Lucky—in Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*—gone a week, but instead of a suitcase filled with sand, I carry back a red brick that now sits unglamorously on concrete next to where I park the car. My travels offered other trinkets—bottle stopper, ornament, magnet—but nothing as grand a memento as a hefty brick. It is larger than most bricks used in construction today: thicker, wider, longer. Imprinted deeply on its widest face is the manufacturer's name, "V.B. & T. Co.," above the town's name, Coffeyville, located in the southeastern corner of Kansas, not many miles from the borders of Missouri and Oklahoma.

Bricks seem to me emblematic of 19th-century European revolutions, but maybe those were cobblestones that peasants tore up from the streets and began hurling over the barricades at the advancing troops of the czar, king, queen, duke. This brick was not part of a revolution, unless the settling of the West, the near-genocide of Native

Americans, the near extinction of the buffalo, and the extinction of the carrier pigeon could be considered as such, the changes overwhelming though slower than the overthrow of a despotic government. This brick was less a participant than witness to a revolution before its edifice came down. Once, it shared a wall between a bank and jail, or the bank and a saloon, all three made famous by the outlaw Dalton Gang's visit and shoot-out on those streets in 1892. The event has become Coffeyville's triumphant historical moment, and dominates the exhibits at the local three-room museum that houses dioramas and postcards, and displays pictures of the gang's crumpled bodies and vacant faces.

Where exactly the brick once rested in its bed of mortar isn't important any longer, with the recently renovated downtown: wide sidewalks, plentiful, meterless diagonal parking, one-way streets to expedite the flow of traffic, ornate wrought-iron facsimile 19th-century gas lampposts that are now electric, the downtown advertised as having space for 100-plus stores, and all but a dozen are vacant, leaving dusty windows foggy as the eyes of a school of beached fish. This time the revolution is courtesy of the People's Republic of Wal-Mart, built just beyond the city limits to avoid paying city taxes. The day I stopped in looking for shower thongs, the parking lot was crowded. One step off the asphalt's edge, and I was standing in thirsty prairie grass that spread to the horizon.

Coffeyville has a rail yard, parallel tracks stitched through town as if a seamstress went mad. Boxcar after boxcar lines up along the side rails, tagged with the giant swirls and explosions of graffiti, a traveling art exhibition, enigmatic messages courtesy of distant megalopolises. Cathedral-high grain elevators sit beside tracks waiting to spill forth into rail cars their congregations of wheat. A refinery with its eternal flames spouting from black steel towers like an industrial birthday cake that's never blown

out day or night, though we are discovering that will not be the case—this cake's candles will sputter out someday sooner than we want. None of this commerce can or will reoccupy the downtown, the population having fallen to 11,000 from its peak of 18,000. There are only two kinds of businesses in town that are thriving—the care of aging, ravaged souls and the saving of aching, ravaged souls—long-term-care retirement homes, and churches. There are over 20 retirement homes and over 65 churches. The churches are growing at a faster rate, as denominations split over the when and how of the apocalypse, whether the earth is 4,004 years old or maybe 15,000, if gays are biologically doomed or not. I've been sent here for a week by an arts organization, funded by a program that once sent artists in prior decades to many small towns on the high plains; but Coffeyville is the only town that still participates. I'm here to give humanities presentations in the high schools and retirement homes, which turns out to be one high school in the nearby town of Taneyville, Coffeyville Community College, and 15 retirement homes. For me, that means talking about the writing of poetry, and reading poems, and that turns out to be like handing out bricks that won't ever get thrown but rest on laps like stones on the chests of the condemned during the Salem Witch Trials.

DAY 1: FLYING

Their walkers tangle in the hallway, slow planes on carpeted runways, waiting to take off for unknowable destinations. In one corner of the visitor's room, a pair of African finches twitter. No one pays them any mind. Here the cost of attention is too great and lost in other lifetimes, which are about to be forgotten themselves. The walls are relentless pastels. With much encouragement, one woman

tells her story: With her husband and three children, she traveled west out of the Ozarks in a Model A Ford in 1938 looking for work. Sixty-eight years later, she's still here, like a plane that landed and never took off again.

A woman, shy of a hundred by one year, sits deep in a chair; her head falls on the shoulder of another, as she flies pilotless through sleep. To those still awake, I mention the Kalahari Bushmen, a nomadic people, who lived in one of the most inhospitable places of earth, how they carried only spear, bow and arrow, and how months later in their parched wanderings, they could remember in hundreds of miles of nearly featureless, shifting dunes, where they had buried water-filled ostrich eggs corked with dry grasses. I ask my nodding audience what they think these nomads considered their most valuable possession? After some quizzical looks, one woman responds, "Their Bibles." Yes, I say, it was their stories, and their stories centered them, helped them locate themselves in that vast sea of shimmering sand and heat. They believed they flew in from the star Sirius, the Dog Star, in the constellation Canis Major.

DAY 2: THE WOMEN COME AND GO

If the aluminum walker's wheels are inflatable, it's called a limousine. Hallways branch one from another from another; each one has its cat or dog in attendance that wanders and wags from room to room. A man with his back to the door, both his hands gripping the wheelchair's armrests, head balanced on the wizened stalk of his neck, declares his abandonment to no one in particular, and therefore everyone who's not listening, again and again. The long-haired black cat strolls past, as if it's heard it all before, headed for the next room, where plastic English ivy mocks taking over a wall. There's a pair of cockatiels hanging upside down in their cage in the waiting room.

Above reclined recliners, cushioned chairs heaped with blankets, and wheelchairs with no place to go, the television broadcasts the news. The new German Pope's procession will have to wait for me to finish drawing a circle around each day, imploring those who don't always know where they are to find something new.

A high-cheekboned woman near the front of the activity room, her mouth open—amused, amazed, befuddled?—has raised one arm in the air as if waiting to be called upon to respond, maybe to tell the group what she has discovered. Her arm sways rhythmically back and forth like a fan at a rock concert, holding up a lit Bic lighter, or perhaps she's writing a poem on the air, lines capturing this ephemeral life. No, she's entranced by the blades of the soul-sucking ceiling fan. Round and round she goes and only the staff knows where she will stop.

Another woman at the back of the room randomly cries an uprising "whoooo," a sound similar to what I've made two or three times over the years, startling myself awake from a nightmare, when there's nothing left but to face the unexplained lights flashing under the stairs. She's caught in a waking nightmare, discovering that another alien breath has colonized her body and must be expelled.

The only two men in the room sit along opposite walls, their hair shorn like death camp survivors, or shell-shocked soldiers diving together into an exploding foxhole, now lost between the four walls of this room. On the piano bench next to me, I've stacked poetry books. A woman dressed in the pastel of hallways approaches me as I begin to recite "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and claims two books: one by the first poet laureate of Kansas and the other a poetry anthology on clothes, as if there's a chance to improve the pentameter of her wardrobe. I stop to move the books and make room for her, but I'm told she walks around all day grabbing whatever she can—just like a poem.

DAY 3, MORNING: NO SPRINTING FOR THE EXIT

Perfectly mirrored bookends at either end of the couch, two women sleep. Heads thrown back, celebrating the many-shelved decades, a celebration they've never recovered from; and now covered with blankets, they are angled for a slide off the cushions into something deeper, except that their arms, stacked like cord wood on the armrests, keep them from falling to the floor.

Beyond the couch, backed against the same wall, half-concealed by potted plastic carnations, a woman repeatedly slams her frail right arm against the chrome architecture of her chair, a demanding rhythm, generally ignored, as she seems to beat down years of pain. Is she keeping time to the poem that I'm reading?

In the middle of presenting how writing energizes the writer, I half hear the words of a middle-age daughter dressed in a dark-blue uniform, fire department or some emergency service; she excuses herself with long hours, too far away to drive for regular visits, though not absolutely out of the question, and promises not to forget to visit more than once a year. In a raspy, smoke-choked voice, her mother is pleased with this fealty and turns to tell me she is now ready for the poem about eating a peach, or the hot fudge sundae.

DAY 3, AFTERNOON: THE CLICK OF RED SHOES

Gracie and James sit on either side of the third-floor door. They are the only two here, and I sit in a chair opposite them. She's 93 and, at 50, he's chaired by his raveling nerves. Once he lived in Chicago where it was just as windy as this corner of Kansas plains. Out the window we can see that the flags never relax, always full-faced and charging in one direction or another. He recalls the wind off

Lake Michigan—cool, if not cold, and clammy, if not frigid, but not so fearsome. His baseball cap is pulled down low on his poetic forehead, perhaps expecting an unexpected gust in the community room. Gracie listens as if she hadn't heard James mention his faraway Emerald City before.

On the third floor above a town where the only thing growing is the number of churches and retirement homes, where yard signs urge everyone to a city-wide prayer meeting next Thursday, Gracie and James are the guardians of the white-steepled grain elevators, the open-doored railroad cars, the shiny lace of steel tracks, the candled towers of the oil refinery, the dusty details of the Dalton Gang—they are the wizards holding the door.

DAY 4: BLUE PLATE SPECIAL

The Coffeyville High School doesn't want bearded, long-haired, blue-jeaned humanities presenters any longer. For them it means another joke-telling banjo strummer, guitar or mandolin picker, duet or trio, or some combination of musicians in need of a week to occupy them before moving on to gigs in Tulsa, Wichita, Amarillo, Colorado Springs. The presentations have turned into entertainment, subtracting from valuable instructional time. On the other hand, in Caneyville, where I traveled, 20 miles deeper into Kansas, the high school teachers have jumped at the chance to be free of their students for an hour, grateful to have a different face showing up in the middle of these arid ranch lands where the wind knows everything.

I stand on the floor below the elevated auditorium stage in front of rows of seats, each row climbing a little higher toward the back. Seventh through 11th-grade classes show up together, over 250 students by the end of the day. There are history, social studies, and home economics classes, but not a single English class. Out of all those students,

not a single one has ever heard the title of poet laureate, much less that the state of Kansas recently has appointed its first poet to this position. In fact, not a single student will admit to having read any poetry this entire school year. Perhaps that explains the paucity of English classes in the auditorium upon my visit—they are hurriedly conducting remedial poetry classes. I soon learn from a teacher that my reading a poem by the Kansas poet laureate describing the passionate eating of a peach would be too sensuous. Better to read a poem about the geologic layers of a hot fudge sundae where the sex stratifies into deeper, perhaps sweeter, layers that will go unnoticed.

Lunchtime arrives quickly, and I walk to the diner across the field near the two-lane highway. When I step inside, an old man shuffles toward the door, led by his saucer-sized gold and silver-plated belt buckle. He navigates his way across the diner, as if someone skipped a flat stone across the bulging pond of his belly, and at any moment he might sink to his knees from the weight of the buckle. He weaves closer, and I see that it's his bull-riding rodeo trophy. I realize that he's Zeus in disguise, trying to pull a fast one again, as if any woman sitting at the counter would fall for it a second time.

A gaunt young man walks through the parking lot, his sleeveless shirt unbuttoned to his waist. A hand-sized crucifix hammered out of tin cans hangs from his neck, gripping his bare chest. Along each forearm, a flaming tattooed skull burns upward, setting his shoulders on fire. As quickly as he falls into ashes, he rises with his next step. As quickly as he rises, he falls, riding the bull of eternity. In return, I face the afternoon in the auditorium, where I watch jocks, enthroned in their letterman jackets, next to their girlfriends, doze; I receive, after the last presentation, high-fives from two students drenched in black mascara, draped in trench coats.

DAY 5: IF I KNEW THE WAY

I arrive back in Coffeyville to a semi-circle of cushioned recliners and two sofas. Their elderly lives are settled, accounted for, until there is little sign of life in these chairs. Buried under blankets, their destination is permanent. This is another morning, another afternoon when their means have outdistanced their meaning.

They circle around the television, as others gathered once around a fire, but here the stories are silenced, the television turned off. The ashen screen still attracts their vacant eyes. Only the woman on the far side of the room, her eyes silver-dollar wide and darting from corner to corner, from person to person, feebly makes herself heard: "Are we ready to go? Are we going yet? Are we ready to go? When are we going? When do we get there?" Who here knows what white picket fence she might have stood beside, what flowers might have ringed her garden, or the porch swing where she spent summer evenings stirring up her own breeze?

She's insistent, persistent, doesn't grow tired: "I want to go home. I'm ready to go. Are we going yet?" With a twig-thin arm, she reaches out to the man who sits next to her. She lists like a row boat tossed by prairie winds that are shaking this modular room. She's blown against the wooden dock of another body. That body, a man, has held a full glass of orange juice perfectly still and unspilled for half-an-hour, as he stares through the wall. Finally, I say to her, "We are all headed home." She grows quiet and listens.