

POETRY

Mark Wagenaar

DAN RIVER GOSPEL

Light as a dream drifting through the horsehair mesh
of the catcher

a coyote picks its way through

plume-headed cogongrass

just beyond a homemade tin roof carport

with a rust-mottled '84 Corvette inside,

official car of the Appalachian millionaire.

Last week its owner—like the Cheerwine made just across
the NC border a few miles south, born in the south

& raised in a glass—

walked into the bathroom

clutching his father's Ka-Bar,

& saw the toys in the bathtub, red boat, blue whale

over the faucet, & something surfaced—

he couldn't finish his life. Not here. Not now,

not in the room where he holds his son up each evening,

naked & gleaming,

after the day is sponged from each inch of the boy's skin.

This is the only man I've ever known who has kissed

a rubber ducky in gratitude—this man, who once scrubbed a car rad with a toothbrush
until he could use it as a MacGyvered condenser

instead of a worm.

Tomorrow's easy, but today's

a bastard, today a baby was left on the cardboard boxes

in the women's room of the BP—

the one on 29, just past the cemetery. Today's a long way

from payday, it's the '29 girls' working the oldest trade,

truck stops & motels,

it's fifty cent waters at Mickey Dees

& a window at the pawn shop with your guitar hanging by its neck

like a skinned duck.

Today goes on

in the Last Capitol of the Confederacy, River City, City of Churches,
more per square mile than anywhere else,

but where's the body we'll know by its wounds, five & counting,
older than America

& sweeter than Oxy?

The land I love is the land I'm working,

& some day soon the cash crop will come in, bright leaf

or maryjane,

the land I love is the land I'm working,

Lord take away these chains.

And before this land

was America, the explorer Byrd prophesied over this river—
someday a settlement will be built here.

Prophet of the appaloosa & slash pine,
he must have missed the rest of it, when the voice on the air

spoke of the disappearance of every Sihouan tongue,
& the closing of the river mills & the great warehouses

that once housed tobacco hung
to dry & half-starved Yankee POWs dying of dysentery.

No voice today, only sunlight in sheets through blue spruce,

& light as it is still heavier

than the transfigured body,
heavier than the body surfacing from the bath tub, sunlight & blue

of burning oil out the Corvette's four tailpipes
as it rolls up, no voice on the air

save the man who mumbles an invocation

before the long cast
to the hand-tied fly pulled from his mouth, off his tongue—
or maybe it's a prayer for his son in the stroller,

or a plea to the river,

no one else can hear.

And who needs to,
when today is get-through-able,
with the Black Pennell or Gray Ghost or Spent-Wing Brown Drake

skitter-shaking

across the water (& maybe the soul is even smaller),
who needs to when you've a new angle on the river,
when you've one more day at least

& a singlings heart hauled through the hardwood ashes

of loss,
a bit of river shine & prints on the water to follow
if you don't look too long.