

Christopher Cokinos

CAIRNS

In John Steuart Curry's *Sun Dogs*, light and chance reflection hover a trinity above a snow-cold prairie's gloom, an austerity made also tranquil by perspective, by composition—the artist's of course, but also the world's. Cirrostratus ice gives sunlight back, gifting out of one star an ephemeral pair of companions. The sun and sun dogs loom, gently, like cream-white proto-planets, like eggs, ascendent or descendent or simply unsure of direction. Painted, they hang forever above Barber County, Kansas.

Flat-topped, the Red Hills have gone blue-gray, providing a distant image of land, while white swales fill the space between here and far away. Various blues and grays and whites. Colors of ice and accumulated hesitations. Wavy skeletal trees—three on the left, three in midground and one between—seem both exaggerated and uncertain, as if this weather might be too much to bear, as if they're about to make some gesture toward concession. I think suddenly of how the heartwood cracks as, with maul and wedges, I split black locust for a fire. But no human shows in this scene. My memory's moment, the cutting of wood, scatters, synapses dispersed by this emphatic act of present looking. A gallery silence falls across the soul. Barber County, just into the Depression, abides in time-stopped museum quiet.

Still, there is the whisper of a windmill and a house (more like two homes stuck together, painted brownish tan with the geometric rumors of crimson shutters). The only opulence here—and it might be a misplaced faith in the land, which, in seasons soon to come, will silt with Dust Bowl grit—is the bright red barn whose roof pitches into a wind that skitters snow across it in hieroglyphic velocities.

Brushstrokes—north to south I'd like to think as the sun, not moving, goes down—give the wind its shape in pale greenish yellow oils. High above, the wind-caught sky becomes a blue-green that looks more like water than sky. This speaks, as we say, to an ice-blue margin in the lower background: the horizon, which must be land, yet looks more like a bay, a fjord in some fabled north. We have thought of prairie as ocean because of summer: wind rippling waves of grass and wheat. But Curry gives us a new imagined ocean for the plains. From a southern Kansas ranch, one could set out across the snowscape,

passing over or somehow missing the local rivers—the Salt Fork of the Arkansas, the Mule, the Medicine Lodge—and reach instead a treacherous sea, a polar beckoning.

It's then I remember the poem. Randall Jarrell's "90 North," which I memorized in college. I struggle to fetch the words out of the air, but little comes. Pain and wisdom and darkness. Those words, but how were they arranged? How did they construct themselves, with the poet's help, into the time-stopped moment I find myself wanting each day, one more ritual I need?

That night I look at the cover of Jarrell's *Complete Poems*. He reclines on a piece of junk, an old box, and I recognize the barracks. The photo is from 1943. Chanute, an Army Air Field that became an Air Force Base I encamped at some 40 years after Jarrell had passed through; I was a teenager in the Civil Air Patrol wanting to explore the sky in planes and capsules. Perhaps that's trivial, a mere conjunction of lives in place, but it is time, again, stopped. This moment criss-crosses with paths, my own, his, and all the others, until, in my mind, the photo, the painting and the poem are overlaid with fission tracks, the decays of unstable isotopes that damage some solid surface we cannot see, or, perhaps, the lines derive from exotic creation particles generated in a machine so briefly that we cannot know them directly but only infer their existence from what they've left behind.

In "90 North," the narrator remembers his imaginary childhood journey "up the globe's impossible sides" to the North Pole. He stays warm in his pajamas and worries over his made-up comrades who "lay frozen" while

The stiff furs knocked at my starveling throat,
And I gave my great sigh: the flakes came huddling,
Were they really my end? In the darkness I turned to my
rest.

—Here, the flag snaps in the glare and silence
Of the unbroken ice. I stand here,
The dogs bark, my beard is black, and I stare
At the North Pole. . .
And now what? Why, go back.

So he does. He returns, leaving behind what he calls "this final point/of cold and wretchedness." His imagined companions, I imagine, have perished there,

in youthful drama and adult recollection. And twice in the poem, Jarrell, always haunted, proclaims all endeavors meaningless.

I see at last that all the knowledge

I wrung from the darkness—that the darkness flung me—

Is worthless as ignorance: nothing comes from nothing,

The darkness from the darkness. Pain comes from the
darkness

And we call it wisdom. It is pain.

The poem pummels me, hurling bleak conclusion like a Greenlandic katabatic storm. It's Franklin's voice, the doomed explorer, I tell myself, or Dr. Elisha Kent Kane, who barely made it back. I can't stand that it's Jarrell speaking, the poet returning to the actual pole of grown existence, the day's work, with its desk, mail, lists and a yard framed by windows. In bed, reading, I gasp, and look for another poem, some answer to this maker's declaration of uselessness, rooted or journeying. It seems impossible, I think, that someone whose life was given over to giving words to strangers could believe life is only and always darkness and pain. The poem's existence is evidence enough to answer its assertion: why make a poem if one believed this nihilism? From despair to craft, "the world is everything that is the case," as Jarrell wrote elsewhere.

All the strained, steep polarities: life and death, love and loss, words and silence, being and nothingness. I chance upon his unpublished poem "There Was Glass and There Are Stars." It begins: "Whether one walks around the hill, or over,/One comes at last to the town." (In *Sun Dogs* has someone left the rickety house to reach town, needing help? God knows what that house has held or lost. Has a mother's speech gone blurry with stroke?) It is a lovely poem—" . . . and we and the words and the world / Are emptied into a dream. . . ."—but it ends so, well, not clumsily, but. . . what? "There is only love." In bed, thinking of the cold painting and the cold poem, their relentless coloring of my day, I want a crystal of recompense, even as the writerly impulse intrudes: the last line is right, but does the poem overcome that cliché? Or is the conclusion so resolutely genuine that to question its language is unfair? I close the book and think about this, reaching no certainty, which, in fact, I rather like.

In another Curry landscape, *Sunrise*, hanging next to *Sun Dogs* in my local museum, a wildly glorious, overly symbolic sun spreads its rays beneath clouds

arranged a bit like curtains. World as stagecraft. In that foreground, a mangy coyote eats something dead. My friend Kathrine, who works at the museum, says the sun captured Curry's renewal in a new marriage, while the predation—which is dark and hidden in the grasses—acknowledges the death of his first wife.

Not long ago, I drove from a hospital where my mother was being “stress tested,” to see how long her heart might last. We talked, I held her hand, and I was careful not to brush against any of the many tubes running into her body. After weeping in the men's room, I drove toward my sister's house, but arrived first at a bookstore, one of those large chains easily sneered at but whose light, chairs, and shelves of books comfort in the way that a library or good conversation can. In another vein, Nicholson Baker has noted that those who own books, who collect them, are ensuring themselves a measure of immortality: “. . . that bank of shelved time is your afterlife.” Memories become part of family. Books are like that. They are kin and relation. While there I bought several, holding them against me like hefty calm, like, it occurs to me now, a child.

If one not only collects books but writes them, there is a measure of after-life in that as well. This is not “a new thing under the sun,” but my own revised restatement; in the birds section of the store, I located a copy of my own book and “fronted” it, placing it on the shelf so its cover beckoned. I smiled. Before I left my mother to the technicians, who were kind and gave her water, she said, “Make your second book.” Few things have mattered more than hearing that, and I placed the bound time and calm of other books—temporary strangers, permanent companions—in a stack on the backseat of my niece's car.

In this world, is beauty just a chance of light? Is sadness? Today, taken by a desire to feel what is seen, in this world, today, I remind myself: looking over distance allows a shaping, a crafting of life and time, the deliberate hour, wasteless as possible. A fervor in making things to leave behind. There is a quote from the 19th century writer Walter Savage Landor, which I've recently come across; he says, “Every great writer is a writer of history, let him treat on almost what subject he may. He carries with him for thousands of years a portion of his times.”

I've said nothing of the road in *Sun Dogs*. I've crafted this seeing to save the foreground's most emphatic image for conclusion. Muddy road ruts cut quickly between too-thick grass stalks. A patch of wind-cleared ground to the right is

colored like flesh. In the spring, prairie chickens must gather there, while dickcissels and meadowlarks bend grasses slightly with their perched weight. They must sing. But the road ruts vanish. They dip into disappearance, and the snow takes them, the way a world you don't own can take ambition.

If you stare carefully, a faint black line writhes from where the road seems gone; the line runs toward the house and another goes down a nearby draw. These are contours that remind, as if the curves of what it's possible to arrive at still suggest the way to go.

Standing back, returned in mind to the museum, I'm near a road that goes down into valleyed drifts, and the land and the sky compose themselves before we do, in the deep time we blink in, clouds or sunshine, the weather of moments and epochs. Are we freer than we sometimes think to choose which trick of light (then more) to live by?

What is that ice called, I wonder, nearing sleep, that crystallizes directly out of cold air? Feelings come like that, little splinters in the body coalescing, filling, when, suddenly, the inner atmosphere is fit.

To fix it out of air. To make. Marking it down. Saying. Each day an expedition. Journey-work. We send back dispatches over time. Curry with his pipe and oils. Jarrell. A black typewriter. Paintings and poems chanced on in the span of hours wait like cairns along a path we find.

"And if I can't be an artist I'll be nothing," said Curry.