

Hannah's Travel · *Richard Speakes*

The fathers

May 3, 1851 Macune, Missouri

They recede from here like straight fence
that gives the land both sides,
like the bodies of men who settled
Missouri, Kentucky, western Virginia.
As young men, each one saw the land
left to him, & every time he looked
he heard all its stories, the early frost
& the luck of rain, the child who died
& his own fever passing.

One night John leans
against the table whose every mark is the light
it was made in, his father glaring out
at weather, making the boy feel like weather.
When it lifts in the sky the father thinks
the boy's soaring is what he was looking for
all along.

When John thinks what can't
be taken with us—how the table
is too much bulk for any wagon—the unspoken
skies of California, its unexplained ground
is what he wants. The travel.

Evidence

August 27, 1851 Macune, Missouri

John says, *It's darker & darker here,*
tearing off another hunk of bread,
making a meal of it. It is like all the loaves
I've ever baked or will, but for him
it is soured in thin light, from each detail
of his day the shining's been skimmed
off like cream.

Making ready

April 27, 1852 Macune, Missouri

I sang while I packed
as if I were in the woods, telling
the bear I'm on my way & mean
little, a bouquet, wildflowers
for the table.

I topped the last crate
with a hymnal, put all those songs
in the dark with jars of seed,
forget-me-nots and sweet pea,
one chopped clump of rose, roots
bound in burlap. I named them flute,
violin, drum.

Then I remembered
my book of pressed flowers, the passenger
that prepared, lighter every day,
the hyacinth just a blue powder held
in place hovering above its stalk.
The voice.

My father 3 days before we leave

May 3, 1852 Macune, Missouri

As a young man he'd taken us his
far way, when I was a baby,
my mother the age I am now.
He told her then, *A grandfather*
is an old man & that says it all.
Kentucky & fathers that held him down
we rolled away. It was simple
travel, a line you could make
on a map.

Now Papa's come back to it
wearing the mask of age
to hear the breath-like rightness of adventure in
a young man's hurried speech,
to hear the babbling of a baby girl
who tangles her hand in the mystery
of her grandfather's beard.
He must have promised silence
to be allowed to see this again.

The preacher at St. Joe

May 9, 1852 St. Joe, Missouri

There was no confusing him
with the sinner who fell drink-heavy
near the front, there where the preacher pointed
down, finger shaking as if its blood
were lightning, with wrath for every meek
inch of earth it struck.

That man

*is no emigrant, brothers, sisters.
His soul has already settled, squatter's rights
in hell, he's got.*

Then that preacher
remembered gold, the tons of mud & gravel
he'd sluiced for a wealth of dust, the refined
heap a man can carry in one sack.
He puffed up, straining the seams,
he stomped the stage & sweat mightily,
but he couldn't bring that finger back
to poke his own little pile, he
couldn't shut up. And so, as I've
done before for so many men,
I was silent for him.

Seeing my sister

June 3, 1852 South Fork of the Platte River

Across the Platte she waved
her bonnet, & the setting sun
behind her sent a shadow
over the slow water, each pass
of her arm a darkness crossed
over me, & then the red sun.
For a moment I thought it was rising,
that we were crossing to the other
side of things.

But the sun did fall,
& between Lucy's shouts
I heard her baby cry, saw her dress splotch
dark with milk, & then she rushed
to their wagon.

It can be pulled from you
just like that. Behind you
darkness has been gathering & you're wet
before you remember the milk
spills for that cry. Then you hurry
in your own time
while men linger over horses,
search out matches, & call
to you, calling your name long,
as if you were on the other side
of the river, as if calling
to the ferryman.

June 9, 1852

A line from Missouri to the Rockies
runs through my heart & shakes,
a string drawn taut until it hums,
the song that trembles in my throat
when I cook or mend or wash
dishes in sand.

I dream
of dragging a bow across our trail,
playing a note so low John
puts his ear to the ground to hear it.
*A horse, he says. Or something about
to break the surface
& still so far to go.*

At Ft. Laramie

I counted sacks of flour,
tugging the seams looking for strength
& I wondered how far the rice would go.
John said we only need food to get there.
Tending to these things makes loving
the man in my arms at night like eating,
the surplus & the wanting, the growl
of a stomach that won't stop working,
empty of all but its own juice.

For each thing the wagon can't hold,
for each thing abandoned to ease
the oxen's pull, my mind swells
to hold that much more. In this world
there is something wrong with love,
as its weight is what's wrong with the
china closet we left behind.
We placed it facing east as I insisted,
between the ruts. Let the next train roll
through its doors. I opened them wide
& thought of every yes I'd ever said to John.