



Nashville
Tennessee

A young boy climbs a riverbank. He steps onto a railway bridge. He is twelve years old.

He kneels down, under a harsh sun, and puts his ear to the track. The track does not vibrate. There is no train approaching around the bend on the other side of the river.

The boy starts to run along the tracks. He arrives in the middle of the bridge. He stands on the edge and looks down at the muddy river below.

On the left side is a concrete pylon that supports the bridge. On the right, a half-felled tree lies across the river, its branches sticking out into the dark water. In between there is a small space about four feet wide.

He has been told that it is possible to jump in at this point, but he cannot be sure, as he has never seen anybody do it.

The stones beneath his feet begin to tremble. He crouches down and again he puts his ear to the track.

The track begins to vibrate. The train is coming.

He stares down at the dark, muddy water, his heart pounding.

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The boy does not realise that he is not a boy at all, but rather the memory of a boy.

He is the memory of a boy running through the mind of a man in a suite at the Sheraton Hotel in downtown Nashville, Tennessee, who is being injected in the thigh with a steroid shot that will transform the jet-lagged, flu-ridden singer into a deity.

In three hours he will burst from the hotel room. He will move through the empty city, crossing vast rivers, driving through empty prairies, along tremendous, multi-laned highways, under darkening skies, like a small god, to be with you, tonight.



Manchester
Tennessee

And I will walk on stage at Bonnaroo Festival in Manchester, Tennessee, and become an object of great fascination to almost no one. The dazed crowd will drift back and forth across the fields and the sinking sun will flood the site with orange fire. After the show, I will sit outside on the steps of our trailer and smoke.

On the way back to Nashville, our van will be stalled on the highway for two hours at the scene of a terrible automobile accident. We will watch as ambulances and police cars speed down the slip roads. We will see a helicopter chopping above us, its searchlight cutting through the dark night. For an hour we will sit silently in our van, smoking and drinking. Eventually our tour manager will leave the vehicle to investigate. He will come back to report that two vehicles have collided, up ahead, and a girl lies decapitated on the road.

I will fall asleep in the back of the van, waking up when our vehicle begins to move. From the slow-moving side window I will see the decapitated body lying on the road, covered by a grim, bulging, blue plastic sheet.

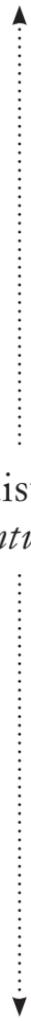
I will pick at a thread in my jacket sleeve all the way back to the Sheraton in downtown Nashville. Pick, pick, pick.

An angel will unfold its wings and speak into my ear.

You must take the first step alone.

Then the angel will nudge me and send me sailing out into the unknown.

This is how I will begin The Sick Bag Song.



Louisville
Kentucky

You must take the first step alone.
I move tentatively toward the lip of the world.
North America stretches out before me like a split bag of sick.
The nine daughter-Muses sweeten their encouraging breath.
And the nine unfolding angels prepare to bear me away.

Bear me away on their white wings to Louisville, Kentucky,
Where I walk across the Big Four Pedestrian and Bicycle Bridge,
Eating fried chicken, right across the mighty Ohio. *Right on!*

And leaning against the railing, staring down at the water below,
I see a black girl in a tiny stars-and-stripes mini-skirt.
I open up my sick bag and say, *Right on! Jump in!* By the way,
This is exactly the sort of thing that will end up getting me hurt.

The girl in the stars-and-stripes mini-skirt leans out.
She elicits the sympathy of the entire world by revealing
The touching forethought of a sudden matching thong.

I am going to put that in my sick bag song!
I don't care about the flak!
I've got a flak jacket with the stars and stripes on!

The jacket is actually a sick bag,
And the sick bag is a long, slow-motion love song,

That has something to do with the ballad of 'The Butcher Boy',
Which ends with the line – *That the world may know I died of love.*

The girl places a single, shoeless foot on the railing of the bridge.
And then stands up on the barrier.

Take care, I say, and the girl turns to me and smiles and salutes.

My wife once heard 'The Butcher Boy' sung so beautifully she cried.
She folded up her flak jacket, closed her eyes and basically died.

I am a small god made of terracotta, trembling on a pedestal,
Interred in a maelstrom of sound.

Look what the little clay god has found, neatly folded!
A jumbled bundle of young black bones,
Secured by a teeny half-digested thong.

I read somewhere that my best work was behind me.
But where? When I turn around, the flying girl is gone.

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The next morning, I stand in the lobby of the 21c Museum Hotel in Louisville, awed by four terracotta sculptures of naked children, by the artist Judy Fox, arranged in a row behind the reception desk. They are really something to see as you check out of your hotel. The little child-heroes are small, scorched gods. They press their young faces against the windows of the iconic roles they are set to play. Look at them on their shuddering pedestals! Look at them standing on the precipice of their child-selves, with their baked and bletting bodies, preparing to leap! Look at them!

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Later still, we file onto the bus and our tour manager counts heads and we cling to our paper coffee cups, and as the bus turns into Main Street down comes a sudden summer shower and someone puts on 'Kentucky Rain' by Elvis Presley and I see, through the window, for an instant, along one of the adjacent streets that leads to the Ohio River, under the Big Four Pedestrian and Bicycle Bridge, a group of representatives from the emergency services, dressed in black jackets and peaked caps, dragging something from the rain-pocked river.



Kansas City
Missouri

I am a nervous system that runs on rhyme and ghosts.
The ghosts howl through the words making them chime.
I'd no idea I may have tasted your sweet breath
For the last time,
And when I think of you at home I notice
A brief expansion of worried longing in my chest,
As we cross the state line into Missouri,
And park our bus by the side of the road and disembark,
And in the unhurried dark, enter the low grass of the prairie
On our bellies like snakes.

We enact the slaughter of the bison by William 'Buffalo Bill' Cody,
Then the Indian Wars including the Battle of Coon Creek.
And that night at the Intercontinental in Kansas City,
I try to call you on the transatlantic communications cable,
But the phone just rings and rhymes.
So I leave an obscure, disembodied message
On our answering machine. It goes –

You are the statuesque bison standing in the prairie of my leave.

You are Squanto's grief upon returning home.

You are the tear spilt on the rawhide sleeve.

Pick up the phone

Pick up the phone

I am the skinned hump that paints the prairie red.

I am the guy with the flies. I am the one that dies.

I am the man that goes on tour and bides.

I am the one that wed and fled.

Pick up the phone

Pick up the phone

I am the dead.

Then I take a pill and go to bed.

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Under the bed sheet, I place the sick bag to my ear and shake it.
I hear the rattle of the nine Muses' emblems – the writing tablet,
the scroll, the flute, the arrows of love, the tragic mask, the harp,
the lyre, the comic mask, the globe and compass.

I can hear the warm blood seeping onto the highway, from my
severed neck, as I phone home and you do not answer.

I can hear the young boy's terrible heart calibrating itself to the
train that is rushing towards him.

I hear bloodless people, whispering, commiserating and plotting.
I recognise these voices as collaborators from a distant past.

My nine naked Muses sleep softly, piled on my chest, for their
work is done for today.

I regulate my breathing as the unfolding angels wing me away.

In sleep, I am borne across a gentle, purple North American
dreamscape – a panorama of solution and resolution, where the
next action that is best for us is effortlessly revealed.



Milwaukee
Wisconsin

