

SCENES & SNAPS

*a photopoem
collection*

by

Geoffrey duBois

SNAPSHOTS

Rt 22 West
Cadillac
Strasbourg Cathedral
Peeling an Orange
Zentropa
Third Dog
Hands
She is Leaving
The Countryside
Edinboro
Extras
Tom Havermeyer's Model T Ford
Berkeley Bowl
Memoir*
Georgia
Finishing
Two Cafes
Art is Screaming

**Under Construction--
not included in 2017 edition*

Rt 22 is the old highway that winds its way through the villages of eastern New York.

SNAPSHOT: Retracing Rt 22 West, 1/4/96

"That's the thing about growing up on a farm
You have all these chickens and ducks
and they're all over the place for months
You give them names--
they're your pets, you know.
Well, not the chickens--
 they're just nasty evil creatures
 pecking ya and chasing ya
but the ducks, they're cute
And then the holidays come around
And your parents say you're having duck for dinner
It's awful--

(The car hovers forward, fresh tracks
on the road, snow drifts raising like Pacific waves
He's curled, the letter C, around the steering wheel.
This is his territory, he says. He appraises houses.
"You gotta find three of them," he says,
"Like the one you're looking at. That's
how you judge the value. The land
is a whole other issue."
The snow and motor, his
dusty 53 year old voice retracing...)

Anyhow, that's how I
don't eat duck today.
Chicken, though
Chicken's all right.

SNAPSHOT: The Kitchen, Blizzard 1/10/1996

The radio is talking, the radio is singing and mom sings along. Her black hair, the reflections and snow stir like sugar into tea through triptych kitchen panes. We're buried in perfect isolation, drifting backwards into the surety of the past. We know all the words. We know all the notes. Ginger bread and hazelnut coffee.

"Cadillac." "Yes, Mr Thomas D Carlyle."
"Cadillac, we are dancing. Indeed we are dancing in the studio, here at the best oldies CZX, shut-in like the rest of the world. It's cold, it's snowing mad, no one is going nowhere. The entire east coast is in a state of emergency, an empire ruled by storm. We haven't showered. We haven't shaved. Our loved ones are miles away. The time is now, Mr. Cadillac. Throw the program away. It's 1964. It's time for the beach, Cadillac. It's time for Surf City."

The snow is the warmth. We're limber like wolves, socks sliding, twisting on kitchen tile. The shoveling wait.

The cathedral is the catalyst. It stops the chatter moving through my mind and draws my attention upward. Billions of turbines ignite. In an instant, I pivot, lean and accelerate into a zigzagging sprint around pedestrians, newspaper stands, street lamp poles. School children at the bus stop clutch multi-colored briefcases. The central intersection radiates in five directions to tunnels, stadiums, parks, monstrous endpoint buildings. I cut and weave through looping cars to reach the sidewalk on the far side. The wool of my coat scruffs my neck with every pump of my arms. Run. I know how to run. It is there on the right--number 248, Madame Ehrlich, an enormous black door. Key in. Twist. I leap up the stairs, hooking the balustrade on the switchbacks with my right hand. Flight 2, Flight 3. Quadriceps on fire. The hallway switch light--a flick to ON--the timer ticks. My room down the long hall haunted by chamber maids. Another key, another twist. And there it is-- Canon AE 100--on the bed, in my hands, strapped over my shoulder. And I pivot to rewind: Down the hall, down the spiraling stairs, the black door open, shut and a sprint through the streets to serve the lords and ladies of light. I move through traffic with the ease of wind, generating delight with every step. The children have departed but 50 meters on, the scene is manifest. The sun beyond the spire eulogizes another day on earth--ripe, tired, in love--bowing towards dusk.

[Strasbourg Cathedral at Sundown, 2/6/96]

Nightfall, a newscast...

Beneath a tremendous blue sky, I stand looking across a great grass plain that holds ancient trees each a distance from another. Their thick twisted tendrils send shadow branches to hover on the ground. I am utterly alone yet serene and assured, warm and awake within some totality of being.

Then waters begin to rush about me, lifting me from the ground and speeding me over the land of my nearest memory now a massive current of deep blue and gray reflecting the sun in crests and eddies. I want to struggle. I believe I should struggle but I do not grapple or grasp, floating along curiously embraced and weeping in the deepest part of my body. My life weeps for its own breath. The only words that rise to my mind are "I cannot believe I am dying... I cannot believe I am dying."

It's there that the newscast ends. Returned to my reclining chair, I linger between the blue pixels of the TV screen and the dark illumination of the room. My breath and awareness continue to pose a very quiet riddle I am unable to solve.

[Zentropa]

Third Dog

I'm sandpapering my fingerprints off at \$12 an hour while removing the finish on an old oak staircase rail. Rufus Helen & Petey are pitbulls. Don Bragg and his son own the place but aren't there. I can't remember the Carpenter's name. He said to me one time, "What are you doing, writing down your whole fucking life?"

Carpenter: Listen, you're telling me that if someone starts destroying your work you're not going to level the guy. It's natural man.

Dino, the Spackler: I tell you something, you'd be really brave if you walk away. You pat the guy on the back. I've got a wife and a kid. I can't be messing with things like that. But if he takes the first knock, I wait for him to take the first knock. Then I kill him.

Carpenter: That Bragg guy coming in here and saying he's going to rip the molding off. He had it coming to him if I decked him. Just like Rufus did.

Dino: I'm glad Petey took him out. That dog had it coming. They've been getting in fights for weeks. We came in here one day and there was blood all over the place. He'd been chewing on Petey's ear and they'd had a scrap. Then they were fighting outside and Donnie's daughter was there trying to break it up till Rufus bit her on the hand

Carpenter: I tell you whose fault it is. It's Donnie's. He's got no right to get that third dog. He's not part of the family.

Dino: Exactly, that's what I tell him early. You have this family. They've all been raised together and you bring in this strange dog and now there will be trouble. Just like with us. Some stranger come to your house you have problems.

Carpenter: And if one tries to fuck your sister (laughing and punching his fists together) then you have big problems. I mean it's only natural. He's going to defend his sister.

Dino: I tell you, I thought Rufus would take him. He's a muscular dog

Carpenter: But Petey's barrel-chested and strong and he's been taking a lot of shit from that dog. Rufus had it coming.

Dino: They were standing up and grabbing each other then rolling on the ground just like we fight. [The dogs lick each others' cuts] And now it's like they're best of friends

Carpenter: That's what I say about dogs. You let them fight till it's over. You don't stop them because they have to learn for themselves.

Dino: Look at the size of that gash [Pulls back Rufus' ear]

Carpenter: Rufus wanted to be the Boss. Ha ha. Not this time.

Hands, a circle. The room is blue, a ledger filled with our names. The brothers, my uncles--they are fathers and sons--their arms are bridges.

The casket is open. The casket in the circle, the closing of the arc. The brothers who are fathers are speaking in turn. Their tears, their words, their condolence is a current. "We stand here as one." I feel the press of life moving through my heart and hands.

I am greater than myself.

Shoulder to shoulder, poised across the field, we watch the fog roam the trees at the forest's edge. Wet silk, cobwebs. Rain. The moment before the beginning arrives like a condensing drop of dew-- Silence.

And then the gun fires. The gun like a whipsnap of a leather cord. Our spikes drive into the damp ground, an explosion of motion, of mud. Our teeth clench to not fall, not fail, to will...to reach the forest first

She is leaving. She is leaving. She is leaving.

Our converging scrum, from the breadth of our starting scene, forms a battering wedge that bursts the invisible tree line gate. We funnel man by man into the winding path. Stride by stride, the crowd's roar submerges into a cadence of breath and footfall. I press forward and press again and again reaching alone as the trees suddenly give way to a thread of earth running between a great reservoir's wings. An island in a crystal ball. I am crossing. I am crossing. Do you see? Do you see? No one hears the heart crossing. No one hears I will I will--

She is leaving. She is leaving. She is leaving.

The lady's gun sounds. Swarms of onlookers and the men's teams--our races long over--crisscross the field cheering and peering into the forest for signs of progress of our favorites. At last, Jenny emerges from the wood--the hills, the golden reeds, halting rains, all the beauty and strength of the countryside seems absorbed in her. The trees race behind her. I run to the field's final turn to cheer her in the homestretch. But she begins to falter--to stumble, to stagger, her face blankens and she collapses languidly to the ground. The crowd circles like clocks, adorning her skin with eyes. Jenny is on the ground. I reach her first. I hold her breath in my hands. Jenny is on the ground.

[Above Portsmouth, England, a cross-country race. Jenny recovered fully--she'd had a grand mal epileptic seizure]

I walk past windows seeing the her that is me.

She is standing on the bluff, on the horizon, above cemeteries and relics, grass fields and the city beyond the castle cliffs. There is a courage and a peace filling all things. These are her words. All is full. The wind rises and she is standing.

[Mom, Edinboro, Scotland, 1993]

Extras

The rain is so loud they can't film the scene. The door opens, sprinkles blow in on my arms. Everyone who was talking gets quiet. The A.D.--he's drenched. "We're gonna wait out the rain. We can't get a clean take on the sound." He walks past us into the pit where the band sits.

The drama is us. Kara, my assigned scene date, pulls out a flask. She and I later on will continue this trend, drinking too much tequila at Barracuda and sharing strange Martian kisses. Right now, she's saying she's going to Wyoming tomorrow a.m then New Mexico to shoot a rodeo. She grew up riding horses in Connecticut. I'm a writer working on a screenplay about an island restaurant. I tell my tale of the hot springs at Truth & Consequences, a chocolate Lab and walking the burnt mountains at night.

The rain is lifting in drifts, resounding in infinite echos on Norfolk Ave & the synagogue's colored glass. The set here is real--real wood, panels, doors, chairs, fans.

Someone is saying there is a tree growing inside a house that's breaking apart. I have a love for fragments of conversation. Alston slides over and has a swig. He's says dancers make shit for money but he knew what art he chose and what it would take and what it's about. He's working on a piece about streetlights. And just like that, we're his rehearsal choir-- "I am the green the yellow the blue." He's flapping his wings crouching and leaping forward, a choreography, he says, for moving across cultures. "These are for the horizontal lines," he says. He slides one foot as far as he can without lifting the back foot and pulls his arms back, his chest out and leans up into his front foot on tippy toe. The AD re-appears from the pit and waves us to follow him. "We're going to shoot the scene with you guys in the pews."

Row by row, we slide in as the room darkens. The techs test the strobes. Kara, my date, smelling in my mind of horses and immense western blue skies, clutches my hand. The band takes the stage. All our eyes turn to them.

Tom Havermeyer's Model T Ford

Pop was talking about the farm. It was when he was young. His father was a tailor so they lived in the town, were city folk in a sense. But every summer, or at least a couple of them ("two" becomes "every" after a while), he'd go out to work on his uncle's farm. It wasn't like a camp or anything. He wasn't there to experience the countryside. He was there to work because they needed him. He got free room and board and a little money every week he'd save up to buy a saxophone when school started again.

"On the weekend I rode my bike back home. It was all dirt road. Man, you talk about a sore ass, try riding a bike like that 15 miles."

The farm work wasn't glamorous. he talks about it with no nostalgia at all. "Farm work is the hardest work I ever did. It's terrible. There's no way I'd do it again." Just his images, his recollections all caught up in remembering the names and the exact dates that things happened. My grandfather--I wouldn't call it an obsession or preoccupation, it's just his way of organizing and keeping track like little objective bookmarks over his past. Maybe that's it, names and dates and mile distance and the exact recipe of a meal, are all the objective verifications that he existed in a world that was always there. His haggling, driving 20 miles out of the way for the best deal on orange juice, no matter how much it seems a passion for a deal, is a means to say you can control that objective world. Not only navigate it but control it. Anyways, my grandfather has a knack for the mathematics of life's literature--place, date, person, price, ingredients. Who was it? Who was that 77 years ago who taught him to drive the Model T?

"Let me see," he picks his teeth, turns his head slightly down to the left, looks back at me straight in the face opening his features--"It was Tom Havermeyer--the fellow who ran the feed shop." And the story can now carry on. Tom Havermeyer let him try his hand at the Model T when he was 14 years old and he was good at it because he had strong hands and was pretty tall for his age. After a while, Tom let him drive it alone to deliver supplies all over the farm and to other farms to practice but also to save him, Tom, time for counting and configuring his stocks and talking. "That guy kept talking like he was going to fall dead if he shut up for more than a minute."

Well, one time it was raining. Road drowning in much. "That's why they've paved everything--that kind of road." And he was driving, normal speed but normal speed was too fast for abnormal rain and the car was pulled into the road track then slid down the grass and tipped. It tipped and I turned the wheel the wrong dame way," Pop says lighting up and smiling. "I still think of it when I'm driving in the rain."

The Model T--Steinbeck wrote the most classic lines on the Model T--well, this Model T taught a boy a man's responsibility and a man's madness and calm. He was, of course, just fine and so was the car but it was on it's side and there was nothing he could do about it himself. So what does he do? Waiting for another car would be no good--there were no together cars for miles in that rural part. So he turned the thing off and started to walk towards his uncle's a mile off. Soaked through, young, un-crazy--what'd my grandfather look like as a boy in that rain?--he knocked on one of the other helper's door, a boy not three years older than himself--What was his name?

"William Jameson." William Jameson said he'd help and he got another guy-- The conversation stalled a moment. "nope, can't get his name." And the three of them walked back to the car. They carried some thick pieces of wood as axle and fulcrum and somehow after covering

themselves in mud they put the thing back upright. Papa knew he owed those tow and would have to figure a way to pay them back--maybe with sweets or a football when he went back to town. But what he was most worried about was getting back and telling a story, a stall or something, that'd be believed about the car. Whatever that story was though he doesn't remember. "But," he says, "It must have worked."

At this point, Nana walks into the backroom. The backroom where all the eating takes place and where I watched more sports games in my youth than anywhere else. (Every Sunday, football games and Dinty Moore beef stew until it was dark and my dad walked up the porch steps to watch the last minutes, eat candy corn and take me home. Blessed were those hours away from home.) She had overheard. She used to let Pop do most of the talking but since she started writing her book she's been talking more and more. She'll say, "This is important. This is history. We can't forget." She starts in talking about her three old maid aunts who lived together on a farm and divided the tasks of its upkeep between them. She was a young girl, much poorer than Pop and remembers most standing around with the aunt's churning butter, endlessly passing the giant wood pestle around.

"Farm life was even harder for the women. The men at least got breaks for meals and sometimes a real rest. But a woman's work kept on and on without ever really stopping except for a few hours of sleep at night."

Nana wanted to ride horses but she was too poor. She couldn't afford lessons, not to mention a horse. So she got a job in the stables shoveling shit. That's the only time she ever uses that word--when she talks about the time she shoveled shit and she says it real slow and definite, sliding the shhh into the sharp tinging t. But she got to ride the horses and got ahold of an old used rider's outfit she patched up so she could enter contests. Once she placed third at an even. Third!--even with all the Vassar girls there.

She says the same thing: "Farm work was awful hard except for sometimes when they all come together. Except for the spectacle of community working together because that was the only way to get the work done. Like when only one guy owned a machine that could convey all the harvest into the silos so the men went house to house, farm to farm, with the machine to get it done. And the women cooked all day for days on end as this went on, setting up yards of benches and tables and feeding the hungry men, hardly eating themselves. "Life on the farm was nothing like life today with all our time to read and talk. People kept to themselves because that was how the work made them. Then when they came together they got it all out of themselves so they could go back to it or maybe to just forget about it a while."

Berkeley Bowl Interlude

He reminds me of the guy who'd come into The City Grocery in Breckenridge, take a can of Campbell's soup from the aisle, find a seat in the cafe, open the can with a Swiss army knife, eat the soup with a plastic spoon then throw the carcass into the trash.

But this guy has a jug of honey. He also has two avocados
whole clover milk
strawberries
a slab of dark chocolate
and mini bananas

He washes the strawberries in the bathroom and pulls the chocolate from his bag. He looks around. He slices open the avocados and cracks the carton of milk. He eats a piece of chocolate then dips the spoon into the honey to coat a tiny banana. He eats this followed by three strawberries and a piece of avocado and a gulp of milk. He eats another piece of chocolate. He looks around. His lips are red and loose as he sashes the flavors with his tongue. He dips the spoon into the honey and coats another banana. This he eats followed again by three strawberries, a piece of avo and a gulp of milk then another square of chocolate. He carries on with this sequence in a rhythmic manner. I sense some cellular ecstasy alive in him--his ritual working its magic. He may eat everything he has---

I look around. There's a woman a couple tables away to my right. She has mixed nuts, arugula, tomatoes and a sack of oranges. She puts the nuts in the bag of arugula and cuts the tomatoes with a plastic knife causing their guts to gush over the counter. These go into the bag where she mixes everything together with a few shakes then reaches in. Chewing the first handful, she peels an orange and works a slice free with her thumb that she eats in two bites. Then she reaches again for the arugula and tomato.

I return my attention to what's in front of me as if my cue has arrived. I reach for my pumpkin raisin bread, aware of some intent to eat the entire thing. I crumb off a piece, knead it into a dense ball of dough, rummage it in my mouth and wash it down with sips from a quart of almond milk. I like the creamy density, the smile in my belly, the gradually misshapen erosion of the cinnamon colored loaf. I take another hunk and press it into ball.

The three of us have formed now a small strange eaters orchestra composing as we chew our otherworldly snacks. I toss another ball of pumpkin raisin bread into my mouth and reach for the almond milk.

We reach Georgia
and veer from the highway's path
in long slow southward arcs
Like a train's mating dance
we snake and meander
at a forest's threshold
Golfers out the eastern
windows seem to struggle
with their own opinions
crawling the brush &
waiting in their cabs
as puddles collect
drop by drop
on winter's browning fairways
To the west
weeds have greened and strawed
in an abandoned outpost
of industry
Scrap metal mountains
offered to rain and sun
rise and ache with
every new wreck
Machines for harvest
return to soil
cursed and
blessed
mud currents
flow under the rails
And we continue our weave
long slow arcs left and right
evergreen red cedar
white pine
even the inside of the train
feels like a cave in the wood

She's gone. Her singular form will never make another entrance--never speak or breathe or move us as if the entire world were her magical illusion. I am unprepared--

I expected some definitive conclusion, some proof that there was something more certain than mystery. My mind instinctively searches for a way to ease the shock. I could pretend her life continues, that her story further unfolds elsewhere and this was simply my taste of her immortality. I could return to the interior, steeping in the moments stored there till I am ready--mature enough--for what her ending actually reveals.

Finishing this book has the weight of a casket closing. I feel a need for a month of silence and prayer.

Two Cafes

At the end, there are two cafes spilling out onto the lane--one to the left with blue-checked tablecloths, one to the right with red-checked tablecloths. The distance between them is three feet. Each has a certain taste, a certain style for an exact mood. There is never any indecision which one will suit you when you arrive.

At one, the chairs face out towards a white wall dotted with small fragments of a cracked mirror. This one is particularly known for its cappuccinos.

At the other, the people face each other. An inexpressibly perfect espresso is served here.

A child roams between the two, singing and smiling then falling down and crying. He has one parent at each cafe. Each time he falls, one gently lifts him up and whispers loving words into his ear till he settles. He eventually quiets, stands delicately on the cobblestone, then wide-eyed looks around, laughs and rushes back to weaving, dancing and parading along the midline of the cafes,

I have not seen anyone cross between the cafes and am not certain if it is possible. I myself have not attempted it though I have come here many many times.