

Hemingway and John Wayne Walk into a Bar

Hemingway has shot a wild boar in some almost empty place.

Wayne has shot a wild film in an equally almost empty place.

Each man holds a taxidermied dead trophy of their art and their presence in an almost empty place. Hemingway and his wild boar and Wayne and his wild.....movie poster.

Hemingway does not think to offer the boar head a drink of whiskey; Wayne does not think to offer his poster a drink of whiskey.

In the bar where Hemingway and John Wayne drink, there are thousands of trophies on the wall behind the bar. A few deer mounted on plaques, a full stuffed jack rabbit, a pay-phone booth with a pin up girl on the side, license plates, so many crumpled pieces of metal.

Common décor elements of the honky-tonk bar. You hear about them in the songs. Where the homesteader, the hunter, the oil man sit down to relieve the weight on their broad shoulders, the weight of feeling like they have to go on and fill spaces.

But back to the bar where Hemingway and John Wayne drink. Men have shot holes in the walls and filled them with snap-shots and shots of whiskey. Other deep voices affirm them from the juke box.

Hemingway and John Wayne are sitting at this bar with a boar's head and a movie poster.

Now I forgot where I was headed with this joke.

To the Cemetery Voices—

Dead men,
don't mischaracterize me.

That is a form of conquest. I'm sure you haven't thought about it that way yet.

You inhabit six square feet of earth thanklessly.
And I am luckless
standing talking to graves because
they cannot talk over me, and finally
I can step foot on the spaces you claimed.

Mapmaking

Trying to make a map, a few men with compasses searched for the longitude.

The latitude, the light source, the law even.

Trying to make a map, they measure the direction and speed of the wind.

Trying to make a map, they carry two guns, a little bag of gold coins, and a 14 year old who does not speak their language.

Trying to make a map, they hang a man.

Trying still to make a map, they write country songs, naming all the cities and their roads and lakes. Trying still to make a map, they make a dictionary. Trying still to make a map, they make history. One day, trying still to make a map, they send a man to the moon.

Trying to make a map, I crawl on my belly like snakes must only slow. Trying to make a map, I draw with my little pencil every time I go up some hills. Rather than cross the river I follow it down, back up, all the way up. By the time I'm done I don't know where those hills went. By the time I'm done I don't remember east or west. Rivers go to the ocean but I don't know where the ocean was, if it was up or down, if it still is.

Suddenly what's in front of me is behind me, and so how can I make a map? The land is changing with the wind.

Inventory

Glancing down at a hand with only four fingers, you knew how the fifth one got lobbed off or caught. Knowing bits of that finger are probably still in Oklahoma, wedged into the pulley of the auger.

Glancing up and seeing a face with only one eye, you knew under the patch there might be some burns from the rifle backfiring, and that maybe if he closed the good one he could still see what the other one was seeing—bloody grass, or the shoes of a doctor.

Glancing at those missing teeth, one or two replaced with gold, you knew that horse probably ran right off with them, with blood still staining the hoof.

I try to look at myself to put my finger on what's missing, where it went, how it was lost. There are subtle signs—faded bruises in the dark clouds, some gentle handfuls of grass pulled out from me, and if you can make it up to the rocky knees and brush off the snow, jagged small scars and splinters.