



The Invisible Runner

poems by Gene Pfeiffer



Gene Pfeiffer

The Invisible Runner

UCity Review Chapbook Series

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Posted/Published in the United States of America
Cover art: by the author -- "An Official Senior League Baseball"

The UCity Review Chapbook Series is an invitation only online (PDF and "Print the Chap") chapbook publishing venue established in 2025. For more information, see www.ucityreview.com.

UCity Review is an ezine established in 2010 and published twice a year (June and December). For more information, see www.ucityreview.com.

ISSN 2159-5151 (Online)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank the editors of *Archetype: A Literary Journal* in which these poems first appeared:

"The Invisible Runner Remembers Empathy in the Storm"

"The Invisible Runner Meets Your Best Friend's Father"

FROM THE EDITORS

We have had the honor of publishing Gene Pfeiffer's poems in several issues in the past. We admire his work. Now we are excited to feature Pfeiffer's chapbook, *Invisible Runner*, as the inaugural book of our new chapbook series. These poems create an alter-ego if you will, the Invisible Runner, who is the "I" and sometimes not. The interplay allows the poems to discover territory as if the Invisible Runner were an explorer. We as readers are not left stranded on base. We are driven all the way home.

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“...we have observed several parties of youngsters playing ‘base,’ a certain game of ball.... Let us go forth awhile, and get better air in our lungs.”

— Walt Whitman, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*



THE INVISIBLE RUNNER



ANOTHER RUNNER BORN UNDER
THE SCALES OF ST. MICHAEL

I have been conjured brought up
with a simple incantation brought up
not for my speed but for the good
of the game pushed station to station
whenever the ball was put into play
by real batters and real runners
with legs scabs collar bones blisters
and endings for pain I never took a lead
I was pushed from behind and easily
advanced or forced out by those lower
in the order my speed measured
by their speed my existence
dependent on them like baseball
once depended on the summer
in '67 and '68 these boys were already
too old to see me they counted
magic numbers and were never told
they were counted as soldiers of Christ
innocents born under the scales of St. Michael
an attempt by the city and church to construct
affordable fairness in the old wards of a city
melting between its bricks and murder
the numbered apartments were a leveling out
so that the tar and shingles
could at least delay the rain before
they slipped into what might be forgiveness
each of these sorry structures would later
burn under the southern strategy
and I was there to see the flames
because one boy on an orange and red
evening after being called home for supper
forgot to unconjure me forgot
that once started the lies of believing
will circle the bases unchallenged
forgot the consequences of playing without fire
and the things we would see as we came home

would be unrecognized revelation flashes
in the numbness the boy was told to call America
we saw these things
because playing with the rules
keeps the line moving to all its ends
I saw these things
because of four words chanted
in a dusty field choking on the clumping tall fescue
invisible runner on first

SIDEWALK TECTONICS

It was on your walks that I first noticed the world was in pieces. Step by step, between the streets and houses, you crossed the floating plates poured and cured by hard and dull men. They paved paths to the delicatessen, an old name for delicious things. You brought coins for nickel packs of baseball cards, pieces of the major leagues wrapped in waxed paper, along with the cheap chalky slabs of pink bubble gum. Opening them was no insult to the jars full of penny candy, some wrapped and some naked to the air with no embarrassment. On these walks we would move faster than the drift of the plates, unaware that one day the sliding would finally end. Half a world and centuries away they will fall into the trenches where an ocean spreads her soft thighs. You saw maps and photos of the guilty seabed in the spreads of the old Geographics you and your buddies found in the dumpster, under the tattered Playboys, wet and heavy with the gravity of knowledge, lust and garbage. “Don’t step on the cracks,” your friends would say. Danger lurked in the spaces in between. But you loved your mother and didn’t dishonor anyone else’s. Even when small plates collide there is creation. You needed to step over the mountain ranges and the valleys. You all looked down to save your toes and to avoid the unshakeable truths that would stick to the bottom of your shoes, but it was only you who would stop after it rained and wonder why an earthworm would come to the top of things, put its trust in a temporary puddle, when step by step we were all certain to be caught by the heat of the sun, the light of the moon, the beak of a bird. I think one day you realized that none of us could stop even small water from evaporating with another life. I thought I might have been called here to change the future, because in south St. Louis time was a sidewalk, and you could never get home without passing the old men cracked and crumbled, just home from their shifts. Yard by yard they came out to stand guard with their brooms. They swept the concrete clean after we passed, never touching the spaces in between. Then they would turn to sweep their lawns into submission, grass growing in one direction, clean and obedient covering all the pieces, everything that moved below.

THE INVISIBLE RUNNER REMEMBERS
EMPATHY IN THE STORM

the storm's time met the bell's
these were the days before reliable warnings
before we knew the dangers of traveling alone

halfway home just a matter of blocks
it let loose flash and sudden clap
straight lines of wind and drops
as big as baseballs breathless

the school projects and lunch boxes
rolled down the streets
soaked assignments and mimeographed announcements
stuck to the young arms
trying to carry the messages home

and one small girl frozen to the corner of South 37th and Itaska
crying
her saddles stuck in place
as pieces of life blew past you all

where do you live
she kept crying

where do you live
nothing

where do you live
she pointed

and you made a decision

grabbing her hand you pulled in the direction
of her one small finger
you slowed to run as fast as she ran
without a word she guided you
all the way to the front door of her building

or so she said with her hands
and you left her at the entrance

in between a flash you were home
surrounded in the rage and fear of your mother's arms
don't ever do this to me again
you got out of the wet clothes
and waited for your father to come home
the sky would clear by then
and the asphalt would give up its steam

you can't remember what your father said
or what you had for dinner that night
and you believe
you never saw the girl again

it's only now that I wonder
does she remember
you grabbing her hand
to pull her down the street
and through the falling

does she remember you pushing her
through the door
and just a few steps further

does she remember you turning away
to run for your own home
water to your ankles
dodging the dangers of summers to come

while yellow sunshine
from the finger paintings she held at her side
dripped to the floor

WAITING ON YOUR FATHER

having just one is only the first
lie

yet your father
is a happy drunk

and honesty is the bucket
that will hold the drafts
pulled
in the dive across the street

revision is the second lie
easily spotted
by bartenders and hod carriers

who know that one take
is an honest day's work

it's the long necks that sweat now
bought and sold
holding
in the dark what comes next

and while the turning eats most of the light

the city glows pink
reading its new maps and constructions

and each of us will hide
from the wet hug
of this southside night

THE INVISIBLE RUNNER MEETS YOUR BEST FRIEND'S FATHER

“I’ll say it again boys. Don’t do what they tell you. Don’t stay and fight. Get up and run, or you’ll never run again,” and with only his arms, he lifted his hips from the couch and, somehow balanced on his crutches, he dragged the decisions of the command structure all the way to the kitchen. “C’mon, follow me,” he said. The blur of acceptance is how young boys often must see the world, even if it leads them away from it. The eyes of the apartment were dark, burned by time under the midday sun. You fell into step not seeing what was beneath your feet, and it’s this acceptance that haunts me, for I existed only to run. When you needed me to run, I ran. Station to station. Base to base. Command to command. And when you needed me to stay, I stayed. Yet this father preached disobedience as our only hope. Safely in the kitchen, we found that on this afternoon obedience would not cost you your legs. You were too young to wonder why, but still you wondered, why were they here, so far away from a home in Oregon. Certainly, there were VA hospitals in the northwest. Tanks roll over the infantry at every latitude. Bombs explode at all longitudes. Why here? Why did your friend’s father move him here? But the rules cleared no space for questions in this family’s game of cards. So, you sat down to drink homemade root beer. You listened to the sweetness of the rules as the cards were being shuffled. You sank into a hard kitchen chair like you were sliding into a hole. A weary mother sat down next to you. The father with no legs dealt from across the table, and the little sister stared at the spiral patterns in the Formica laminate. You and your best friend picked up your cards. You would both stand pat (for now). You both sat still, while outside the apartment the engines of our acceptance were running: cars, condensers, trucks, politicians all running hard (heating up) (spewing) (spinning as if their centers would not hold) (unstoppable momentum and noise) sticking to the blood running from your ears. Even the gummed-up creek that separated the sheet metal factory from the apartment buildings was running. Doing as it was told.

THE INVISIBLE RUNNER SAYS THE MAGIC WORD

there was no blue
when we started to play in the empty field
calls and disputes were settled quickly
by the players involved
rules interpreted and invented
by boys in shorts and PF Flyers
only later in organized ball
were arbiters installed
they carried rules books and created justice
and if their rulings needed appeal
if the fleshy red rhubarb
split open at the crust
and bled onto the field
we wondered how far it could go
what needed to be said
to get you kicked out
you tried blind horrible terrible
incompetent lazy old
maybe these utterances
would bring ejection
but none were the magic word
none crossed the line within the lines
none were the sugar that mixed with the flesh
none sent you home for warm pie and ice cream
none until a second person was added to the argument
yes the magic word was you
the narrative always ascribed to you
the hero you the anti-hero you
immersed in the story is you
the point of view you
add this pronoun and see the sky for its color
asshole cocksucker motherfucker
it was always you
just you

THE INVISIBLE RUNNER ON THE NOMENCLATURE
OF THE GARDENS

MOBOT 1968 - present

your mother would drop us off at the gate
and we would wait until they let us in
we couldn't name the birds
or their ways of following
so we called them memories
and we sat with the grass between our toes
and new mountain dew at our lips

there were college students there to teach you
about the 12-foot limestone walls
and all those things within and beyond
we didn't know what the trees were called
what they gave as they bent in the wind
so we called them cool flesh
a chair your small guitar and the vibrations
of the bat on the ball

and if we found ourselves there at night
we were told there would be lights that wandered
neither of us knew the stories that connected the stars
so we called them distance
points and turns that marked the myths
of getting rich and holding power

and it is only now that we notice the insects are gone
back then they knew your young skin
and we called them hungry
filling their hollow shells with the same emptiness outside
well before their names disappeared

in a place so well designed there are still many things out of place
so we decide to call the flowers
flowers misplaced perfectly like families
and we watch the gardeners tending a circle of water
cool and deep while the walls tumble into the traffic
of course your mother won't be there to drive us home

but you can call her we can call out all the names
for as long as the soil is turned
alive dying and dead
the naming continues

INFIELD FLY

from MLB Rule 2.00

it only comes into play
when the answer seems apparent

can it be caught with ordinary effort

from the woman

a kiss

the stream

a fish

the air

a virus

and who on the infield remains
blue removes the mask to make that call

on such a short flight and fair
what use is game theory
play it safe or take a chance
we will do as we wish

even invisible runners
must advance at their own risk

THE INVISIBLE RUNNER EXPLORES THE ECONOMICS OF WEEDING

Your father's father had a yard full of beds, each made for the waking of flowers and the sleeping of bees, who came first to play and then to rest their wings. The yard was trimmed in peach, pear and cherry trees. Your seedlings, having already travelled from greenhouse vermiculite to the soil of a bedroom windowsill were now taking root in old suburban earth made new by the compost pile building its altitude of death. The yard tools you might need hung in the old garage decomposing inside of the peeling paint. You would come from the city to check on growth and progress. Your tomatoes and peppers now competed with the natives, and you were told to weed, pull the plantain, burclover and bedstraw out by the roots. Dig out the grass and broadleaf invaders. This was before the glyphosate, the profits and the cancers, before you cared about dirt under your nails, mud on your knees or the sun sticking to the skin of your neck. So you pulled weeds with names and no names while down the hill the MOPAC locomotives pulled soft coal east to its burning, and when the tracks were quiet and the rows finally clear, we sat on branches of the black cherry and let the warm wind blow through us. I think this was more than resting. We must have been waiting for summer to explain itself. We didn't yet know that the true cost of business was never to be paid, or that these plants needed only small packages delivered to them, minute inventories of light, earth and water, and certainly not our precious labor.

INHERITED RUNNERS

as an heir
the new pitcher
is responsible for managing us

we are unseen
more liability than asset
a mess to clean up

as the inherited
we were not built into the stats of your game
the pitcher won't be charged for our advances

so we take our leads unnoticed
me with your mother's nose
and your grandfather's focus

we are locked in
and dancing between the bases in silence
me with your father's smile
and your brothers' strength and humor

no one even tries to keep us close
me with the occasional melancholy of your sons
the grit of three sisters
the belly laugh of a granddaughter
and your speed of foot

of course we're ready to come home
but to what kind of accounting
living only to keep the line moving
between the myth of wealth accumulation
the invisible ancestors of the game
and all who stand to inherit
the fine dust of things

RIGHT FIELD CLOSED

in the same spirit of my creation
your other constructions appeared to me
the geometric planes of tampering with the rules

yes sometimes the rules must change

to wall off eliminate take away forbid
and it's the emptiness of thought
that convinced me to walk into your closed fields
and to sit instead of run

all around me
trading floors were littered with pay slips and peanut shells
casino slot machines and scoreboards flashed and chimed
pebbles and chalk rolled across the hopscotch grid
they were spinning on the asphalt of currency exchange
everything going from balance to imbalance
and back to balance again
so the games could be played
no matter how many players showed up

yes sometimes rules must change

and on my way out I saw
all along the invisible walls
shot clocks play clocks trading clocks draft clocks
and now pitch clocks
hung to measure time for a timeless game

but aren't all rules about the passage of time

the rule as written

*should a batted ball go into the closed plane
created by the foul line and a parallel baseline
extension through second base
the batter is automatically out*

worked because our bitterness
was well beyond the fences back then
it might not work now that we find it hard to forgive
those who do it just for the money

yes sometimes

with the short porches in right
it's meritocracy that takes a hit
most of the boys would close right field
it had to be that way in a right-handed world
but for you right field would always be open
a good businessman finds a way to beat the shift

finds ways to fill the stands with nothing more than consumers
who eat innings and drink from mountains of plastic
then stand in line to piss

they have no clue what their own analytics destroy
or that predicting their own futures requires
a long look at the history of stepping in the bucket

in the spring when the rules change
it brings an understanding of the dangers of bedtime stories
of being way out in front on the swing
and also the question why have we all become
pull hitters

STRANDED

LOB (Left on Base)

this is a lonely and circumstantial statistic
a raft of ducks left floating uselessly on the pond
we wait for bullets and frozen ropes
but the keepers have stopped counting the dead
and how many remain at the end

this measure was born
when the green and gray seas
were alive with monsters of plenty
back then people kept the book
and each base was an island
safely inches above the surface

today two and one is still a hitter's count
and why should it break my heart when
you lay down a bunt
the old game didn't call this a wasted out
but the new game asks us to lay our heads
down on the pillow and wait
to trust in progress trust in growth
and tonight the game is to lay yourself
next to a woman who looks for the lost ones
out of gas out of money broken machines
the waters rising around all of us
who have yet to make it home

THE INVISIBLE RUNNER FILLS IN SOME BACK STORY

these are stories of being out of place
but at home in America
a thousand trees from around the world
were planted on this prairie a century ago
and still they drop their branches and seeds
where we belong

what else can be made from a series of scenes
as you walk through the park
where the ruby throats look for the last flowers
change color as the sun drops in the sky
then turn into moths that follow the light
and when the full night comes
you will both join them in playing dead

too often a story starts in the wrong place
Tower Grove is just the grass covering
the open space between two stories of brick
one about a girl
made of tangled and precious wood
the other about a boy
made of rust and Missouri clay

by the end
both you and she
will be rich and fleshed-out

together you will be reliable and unreliable
as you tell of the Osage Orange
seed pods big enough to kill
and the burnt wood stands
that guard a hedge row long gone

together you will make meaning of the smell of grass
and the stains that sequence these events

you see what came before and what comes next
will be seen in the paper spread across the floor

and on the lawns just off Arsenal
where red playground balls full of air
bounce wildly as young women kick at them
and young men run to catch
everything that falls

but neither of you can control the setting
or who will enter these worlds

you both must put your faith in streetlights
that no longer burn gas
and their promise to light themselves
and help you find a way out

and in the confusion of sunset
you are still together
when the car scrapes bottom on the hidden speed bump
and the girl in this story declares
that this will never be home
how could this between be home for anyone

this is all just set up you understand
just back story a place to start
a clear sense of where you have been
and how the past colors the trees

your story will not be an onslaught of exposition

it is no more than baked clay and mortar
as meaningless as volumes perfectly bound
and unopened on their shelves

holding the heat
and leaning east to the river
in the long wait for the earth to move

BELGIAN CONGO YELLOW CAKE

A half-life beyond Cold Water Creek

It was a secret that they baked yellow cake on the riverfront. A secret, before they placed a candle on top and with a wish blew away a whole city. It was a secret that they swept the crumbs into dust bins on wheels and spread them over the northside. Mixed it with the airport asphalt. Dumped it to dissolve in Coldwater Creek, where the children would dance, and then burn, before the rest was covered up by the thin dirt of a land fill. It was a secret that it caught fire, that it could burn even underground, but no modern poet would have the courage for this journey to hell, and the Italians on the southside stayed put and cooked pasta while the cake collected into its layers, once again becoming a creature that bakes within the Earth. It was a secret that for 30 years the wind would blow decaying travelers towards a dozen diamonds not even a half-life away, where countless squads would play baseball under the eastern glide slopes. These fields were always your favorite place to play and tonight you stand in the dirt of one infield under the landing planes that connect a world more comfortable in its myths and long poems than in what settles under foot. A world of faith that corporate bishops will do the right thing, but there are no regulators here only the umpires carrying their small rule books. You and the blue suspect there are other secrets being kept here, off the books and in the wind. Dads losing their edge. Moms in the bleachers wanting to wear different clothes. Children building new cities that will glow in the dirt, while you and your teammates refuse to leave the dusty half-lived celebrations. After the retiring, some of the lights do go out and you stay to crack beers and wash the dirt from your throats in the Missouri River darkness. This is your chance to extinguish a few small fires before you struggle to find light enough for the secret roads to home. Before more dust settles on the tops of your bags and bats, on the hoods of your cars, and on the lashes of your eyes, old crumbs ready to burn the shallow future that remains.

THE INVISIBLE RUNNER WATCHES
MONDAY NIGHT FOOTBALL

complicit when the heart stops
there is singing in the concrete tunnels

but not one toy under the tree
Cossel is dead Meredith is dead Gifford is dead

but the theme song remains the same and you
still complicit for short careers and children without food

whistles are blown in these unfortunate spectacles
but there is no safety in numbers

just remnants of the nickel and a simple crossing pattern
culpable these shells that protect and attack at the same time

and still you watch accomplices
you are all folded together

you are the complication united intimately by the intertwining
the twisting together in several layers of luxury boxes

upper-level seats 50-yard line views cable television twitter replays
explicit there are too few attempts to unfold

the damage done to beautiful bodies
intentional and un-intentional grounding

of the lightning in the heart
implicit yellow cloth is folded in and around the sandbags

but they go un-thrown implying
no foul no penalty no solution no worries

play on in a few days
yes when the heart stops

seedings will be set by winning percentages
or some other numbers

and pitchers and catchers report in six weeks

DODGING THE DAISY CUTTERS

Slaves were sent into the fields to collect them before battle. Their sap a styptic to bind wounds and glue bandages to the bodies of soldiers. Old women would place their seeds in the pockets of men and boys on either side, and before the woman left for the beautiful, she placed a yellow descendant in a tall glass by your window. A flower made of flowers, she said, odd in its clarity and complications. Daisy chains like these once surrounded her in summer. Now their hollow stems bend under the spring sun and sovereign blue. This war's reason: immediate commerce, and what grows in the fields. You'll wait for the nightingales to descend upon the blooms and pray it's safe to land in the flood meadows and road ditches of empire. The next war's reason: a complex flower, and how its dissolving life might stop the bleeding and deflect the flakes of melting dust that will fall through the young bodies. Inevitable that the flowers will finally lose their flower-ness, becoming the oilseed of your amber and fatty deaths, and the winds of the steppe will lie down to one day be captured, leaving the linens hanging limp and dry. After the winter is used as a weapon, you will pour a different brew into the remaining china, touch it to your lips, and make plans for queens and butterfly blooms, ladies and gentlemen in the gardens of both the morning and evening suns, and you will have no choice but to drink to the cuttings of coming days.

THE GAME THEORY OF PLAYING POSSUM

The runner watches a zero sum game

It seems both of you will die on concrete. No soft bed for sons or daughters to gather around wives brothers sisters. Just a hard floor here, poured by another species. Death in warm weather is so forgetful. Nothing about the stench reminds you of chance meetings in the dark backyards, her grunt and slow waddle, or how ugly you must have been to her. No, death in warm weather is not as sweet as the night she climbed three stories of fire escape to hear the guitar, but you doubt everything about music now. In this chore, what has she lost and what have you gained? Nothing about the flies then maggots then flies will nourish you as they will the robins blackbirds wrens. And the hanging from the trees never happened. Just another myth, the way you both are supposed to fit into the story of economics selection gravity. A man without his corporation is like a possum without her hole. Neither of you chose this spot. Nature gave you no territory to defend, only children who may or may not make it without you. You know there is all of time on either side of this task, and that her brain and your brain and my brain are too small to take us much beyond the omnivorous gathering the sex the rising from the dead. So, now you must clean up this small mistake made in the wandering, living catch as catch can.

THE INVISIBLE RUNNER NOTICES THE DIFFERENCES

when I was conjured
we were all new
and the fields were young gardens

now there are extra chalk lines in these faces
the lights are as dim as your eyes
and you must stand between the grass
growing in angry fists
clinging to punch at grounders as they roll by
candy hops into bad hops into errors
bruises and immediate pain

when I was conjured
the ball had red seams
and you could see the spinning
not like it is now
in the twilight that colors
everything in the color of the dirt
dust rising from the streets
the city still crumbling beyond the factory lights
a ball in the teeth of commerce

yes there were days of free and easy swings
moon shots over the boards
and strippers strolling over the highway
they followed the lights like the moths
smoked in the bleachers with their legs crossed
laughed at the nylon pants and the ping of the bats
while our curiosity rose into the night sky

when I was conjured
there were stars at night
no nothing was like it is now
after tonight's game
the dugout talk was all about bodies failing
the rusting and rattling of wheels falling off
the far-reaching implications of tying shoes

with your guts hanging over your belts
you will all make adjustments
and grab for the steering wheels
as if they were bats
then start the engines that will carry you
over the river and into the city
where it's harder than ever to see
the stars arc over your lives

END THE INNING

you have always seen
right through me

never knowingly saying a word to me
since I first occupied a base

I am just memory
of all the words you have used until now

and I wonder if I have become imagination
neither of us will remember

though I try to speak the remembering
so important to you

and I will be there when it goes
whispering which base to throw to

reminding the player and the man
that when in doubt

hit the cut off
get the easy out

end the inning

YOU AND THE INVISIBLE RUNNER WAIT
FOR MEMORY TO TAKE ITS SEAT

you do not remember the verses
hymns empty passages
you learned as a young boy
or the Versed dripped into your vein
as an old man

you don't remember your mother or your beginning
though you prefer beginnings
clean sheets and starts
trips not yet taken
subjects unlearned
and all of love's firsts

nor do you remember what was eaten
before the procedure
food's last stand
what you have swallowed from the start
how it has made more and more of you
created cavities and joy
and the other holes inside
of who you are

and you can't for the life of you
remember how you came to be sitting
in this room of empty images
daytime television the only window
as you wait for memory to return
in the company of all these chairs

THE INVISIBLE RUNNER WARNS YOU
OF THE CROOKED HALOS

you once dressed in your mother's clothes
and called them the vestments of priesthood

I've never believed in what they wear
probably because you placed
no faith in me at my creation
and I've found no religion that survives the empty fields

yet here we are
sitting in the back pew
and you still don't know who sings in your ear

listen
I will tell you what I see

they don't need the clothes they buy
they are terrible soldiers
they are stern chaperones
they start bar fights and pull you in
as they become the fists and punches
they are hunters ruthless and gentle
chasing the tired babies up the tundra hills
grabbing at the hind quarters
and feeding on the good light

listen
one day the sky

will be dressed in orange cloth
everyone will see and understand
wave to particle and back again
and that will be religion

until then the mirrors of rush hour
will reflect a million suns in one circle
blinding the congregations

on their long and wasteful commutes
they will burn more and more old death
never seeing the good light
that leads them home
and too tired when they arrive
to launder their dirty clothes
as crooked halos jump from the edge of the earth
and the darkness of your making

THE INVISIBLE RUNNER SITS THROUGH
YOUR SISTER'S FUNERAL

just days ago you watched one sister feed
another sister spoons of salty mashed potatoes
and pieces of rosemary roasted chicken

then you held a glass to her lips
like she once did for her children
and your children

white wine from a box in her kitchen
and she smiled like this
was a Christmas photo from the 60s

later you filled the same glass with water
and she made clear the disappointment
of life's expectations and fermentations

"that's not" was all she said

not the pathway to breaking down that we imagined
not a place to pause between fresh and rotten
not what I thought an urn would look like

there's a cardinal painted on the oak face
and the box and bird are placed under the altar
next to the disappointment of religion

of course it's not a true story neither merciful nor loving
not unleavened bread but a pie crust waiting to be filled
and there was never a meaningful hierarchy

funny how a cardinal is the only bird you can identify by song
it always comes back to baseball doesn't it
mascots and the disappointment of so many seasons

that's not the magic number
not how to calculate slugging percentage

that's not a mother's preferred way of communicating
but your sister was sure that the sighting of a cardinal
was a sign that your mother was still watching
you would smile and say to yourself

that's not
her

yet on the day of the diagnosis
a brilliant bird was trapped in the back hallway
you freed him simply by opening a window and raising a screen
(a little help) to fly beyond the disappointment of barriers

that's not the skin of a crushed grape
that's not the integrity of a cell wall
that's not rain you hear between the sunlight and stained glass

as disappointment is poured into the chalice
and the gay priest recites words that are nowhere near a song
you sit with her children
because the oldest uncle has never believed

they will spend days waiting for their birds to sing
you for the disappointment of water and wine
blood and body

THE INVISIBLE RUNNER AT THE HOUSE
OF THE LONG LOOK

Chesed Shel Emeth Cemetery, University City, MO

three shovels of clay three
shovels of clay

you help cover her bones
under the pine under the severe
sun and wind washing
your sight into a white blur

Ferguson still smolders five miles north
where last night you watched
the people carry what they could
across the fallen leaves

today all eyes are stones
rising from the soil in silent
surrender to granular convection
and the laws of the land

the rabbi is right
the way of things
even for a big blond gentile
standing outside the tent

is to grab onto these days
these days you are given
grab on

and feel free to walk
in the house of the long look

packed tight under
three shovels of clay
Jewish star granite
clear November

THE INVISIBLE RUNNER WONDERS
ABOUT YOUR DIGITAL FOOTPRINT

for AC and BC

I'm wondering why you make certain stops
the Razorbacks' new coach
Chief Wahoo's disgrace

yes you are a traveler open to visiting other worlds
usually you stop at the border
never truly entering but curious
and interested as a brother would be
in dog pounds and snowballs
and drives to muddy disappointment

and other stops bring more mud
as sounder in the weeds roaming and rooting
wrecking the farmland and pride of the southeast
and this drift is not afraid
to mess with Texas

of course the natural world for you and me
has always been colored in feathers of red
and the Cardinals and Hawks before they left
and the Blues playing "live"
on the transistor radio underneath your pillow
your old man checking the scores with you
as the 9-volt lost life with every click
of the clock at the aging Arena

but you say don't be such a homer
the natural world will always expand
because of brothers as emissaries

and even though the traveling is harder today
we are still welcomed by other tribes
and we are not surprised
that the Guardians at the bridge are awake now
they are there to connect us to the next verses

and a chorus of singing rising from under the girders
will take us away from what we used to call things
and into the unknown names
of your children's children







UCity Review Chapbook Series