Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Curtis Hayes: Two Poems

Curtis Hayes · Wednesday, May 18th, 2016

Curtis Hayes has worked in sawmills, greasy spoons, and as a grip, gaffer, set builder and camera assistant in film productions. He's been a truck driver, boat rigger and a screenwriter in both television and cinema. Somewhere along the way, he earned a BA in Creative Writing from California State University, Long Beach. His work has been featured in *Chiron Review* and other small presses.

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White Castle

my father was ill at the end,
ravaged by Parkinson's
confined to a bed,
the bag,
the whole bit.
I'd call him from L.A.
not knowing what to say and he'd talk,
sometimes only for a minute before
his tongue and mouth muscles
froze up
making him undecipherable.
other times he'd ruminate
for 10, 20 minutes,
sounding strong
like he could just rise up out of that bed and
walk the hell out of that Texas VA
death room.
I was nothing like him.
he had been a banker, rarely took a drink
didn't curse much.
he liked sports
and I couldn't even small talk scores
or any team's championship prospects with him.
once, near the end,
I was on the phone,

stumbling, concealing pity
and breaking long silences by
mumbling about the California sunshine.
he cut me off with,
“Did I ever tell you about how I burned down
the White Castle Whorehouse in Tokyo?”
he had failed to mention that when I was growing up.
actually, he’d split with his secretary
before I was old enough to hear that one.
our father-son communication
wasn’t what could be called intimate after that
and anyway,
he had never been one to tell Navy stories.
I knew that he had escaped a grim childhood
for 4 years as a sailor during the Korean War
and that he liked his time aboard ship.
he had been a radarman on the mighty battleship Wisconsin.
he had recently speculated that taking smoke breaks
all those years ago
while stretched out on the radar discs with his buddies
may have somehow later triggered the Parkinson’s.
“I had a pass and I was drunk in a room with a girl
and a bottle of Sake.
half of Tokyo was a red light district
but The White Castle was one of the better places.
you’re supposed to drink Sake warm- have you ever had it?”
“No”, I lied
“I had an idea to use this candle to heat it,
so I rigged it up and
the sake bottle fell over
and the candle fell over
and I was busy with the girl and the room caught on fire.”
I laughed into the telephone. So did he.
“Those buildings were all sticks and paper.
It spreads and the whole goddamn brothel goes up.”
his speech was becoming hard to understand,
the muscles in his mouth not responding
fast enough to keep up with his words,
but he was excited,
alive again.
his voice pushed through the disease,
“We all got out, but that place burned to the ground.”
I was speechless,
taking in a part of this man that I never knew existed.
“The Shore Patrol came but my shipmates smuggled me back onboard.
I was scared shitless.”
he was having even more difficulty speaking.
“The next morning we were all up assembled at attention on deck,

and a Tokyo Police launch cruises up alongside the ship.
This guy next to me says-
‘This is it.
They’re coming for you Hayes.
Five years in stir.
Nice knowin’ you.’
I stood at attention and sweat through my blues.
That fucking boat passed us by
and kept right on going to some other ship.”
he stopped there, his voice weak
he wanted me to know that story;
his antics on a Tokyo shore leave
as a 19-year-old, with a whole life in front of him.
it was more than he’d ever shared with me about his career
as a banker.
he lasted a few more weeks in that bed.
and then he was gone.

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The New Deal

I would fire up my motorcycle at 6:30 every morning
it was a quick ride to one of the last working sawmills in Los Angeles
where I would run rough lumber through a ten-ton planer
for nine hours a day.
the machine was an Industrial Age survivor
once painted green, now weathered but still solid,
with the year 1907 cast into the framework in large numerals
by the long-shuttered LA foundry that had created it.
sticking to surface streets,
I would glide through the morning air
lucky to leave the hell of the choked freeways to others.
my route took me past a bar called The New Deal Saloon,
ramshackle, sun-bleached and open for business at 5am.
the front door was always open
and I could usually make out three or four dark outlines
seated at the bar, lit by a juke in the back of the room.
I felt bad for them,
slumped, broken and smoking discount cigarettes,
still young enough to assume that they were different than me.
I’d tell myself that they were regular guys
just off a swing shift at one of the South Bay refineries,
except the refineries were miles away
and my route was mostly past
shut-down defense plants and boarded-up machine shops.
every morning I’d approach the New Deal and
slow down a little bit to get a look inside,
telling myself that I would never be one of them.

it was obvious that inside that dank room
The New Deal was always the old deal.
at the mill I'd pour a cup of coffee
and start pushing trees.
no one wore work gloves at the saws,
they could catch on a blade and pull your hand in with it.
the old men at the mill would hold up their hands as they shuffled by
and with a kind of salute
they'd show off their missing fingers and disfigurements.
no one had to open their mouth and say
"Be careful, kid."
The New Deal was finally bulldozed into splinters and sticks.
the gravel parking lot with it's 50 year saturation of piss and puke
is now jammed tight with cheaply built condos.
soon after, I split from my job at the mill,
with all my fingers intact.
I began drifting from one thing to the next,
working hard,
still hanging on to the great lie,
and unaware that the graveyard shifts
and the early morning drinking
were waiting for me
only a few years down the road.

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