

# Michael Anthony Robinson

---

## Time Spent in Motion

I'll begin with the trip I went on a few days ago. I took it earlier this season—things don't die here in the winter the way they do in other places—and afterwards I was coming home in my car, driving on the highway. But it doesn't matter what my car looks like, or what I had been doing on the coast, or whether I hadn't reached Greenville, or had just passed it, the place doesn't matter at all, just that I was wherever I was in that small piece of time. That's the kind of thing I try to explain to my husband, but the kind of thing he doesn't understand.

"What do you mean it doesn't matter?" he says. "It matters to me."

"Why?"

"Because I'm curious about what you do during the week."

"I'm trying to tell you about what I did."

"But you always leave out the details."

"It just seems that way to you because you aren't paying attention."

"What does that mean?"

The day was in mid-winter, but looked and acted and felt like spring; the kind of day where you broil in the afternoon if you wear a sweater or jacket and freeze in the morning and evening if you don't. I used to catch cold in that kind of weather when I was a little girl. My mother used to tell us it was because of our pores; they would open up in the heat, she said, and when the day cooled, the cold air would get into our pores and give us a chill. She said that if we weren't careful, we would get pneumonia, and I used to imagine the bits of cold air hovering around my pores, waiting to swoop in. I used to try to close them by the force of my will, but I always caught a cold.

This day in my car was like that; because I was in the car I could take my jacket off and sit with the window lowered a crack while the sun and the sky and the smell of pine slipped in and washed over me. I remember reading once of experiments they did on people's brains about memory, and how they discovered that the sight or scent or texture of something could bring out feelings

that were buried in you; even if you can't remember what caused them, you feel the emotions all over again, with the same force. And that started to happen to me, as I looked down the highway: flat, winding, and slate-gray, dirt roads snaking off of it like dusty brown limbs, squirming their way over empty fields and among the skinny, distant pines. I suddenly felt an aimlessness that was piercing and strangely remote, like the pencil that I once accidentally stuck into my hand and hurt at first, but then became only a curiosity; it was as if I had come from nowhere and had no home at the end of my journey, as if no time was passing, as if I were part of some moment captured in a painting with percussive brush strokes.

"What does that mean?"

"I guess it means I felt very happy for no reason."

"Well," my husband offers, "it is really pretty out there."

A painting, one that you really enjoy, as you see it from the perfect distance: standing close enough to see the strokes, but far enough away that you can see this complete, whole thing that the strokes are small pieces of. Then you feel that you're one of the pieces and that you're part of the whole thing, just by watching. But I probably would have forgotten it all if I hadn't seen then something at once ordinary and startling, startling because it was so clear. I must have been going about 60 miles an hour, so that everything was floating past me, like waves or clouds, and I couldn't have seen the little girl for more than a few seconds. I know that, because by the time it occurred to me to consciously look, I would have had to turn all the way around in my seat to see her again, or even to get a glimpse of the house. She was a black girl, maybe seven or eight years old, and she had on a white dress, white stockings, white shoes that buckled across the top, and a pink sweater that buttoned down the front but had been left unbuttoned. Her skin was dark, or at least the white of her clothes made it seem so. She was moving across the porch of a white, one-story frame house, and at the moment I saw her, she had cradled in her right arm three books, and with her left hand had flung open the screen door and was about to turn the knob to go in. Something in the picture that my mind captured was so arresting, so pregnant with motion, that I remember it as if it were the last

thing that happened that day, as if I didn't drive another two hours before I arrived home.

"It's too bad you didn't have your camera," my husband says. "You might have been able to take a photo of the girl, or at least of the house."

I'm mean to my husband and really very unfair. He loves me from a distance that I'm not sure he is aware of. He is not extremely good looking, but dresses well and tastefully; and cries sincerely and without shame at sad movies, more than me; and does well in a good and demanding job; and would never hit me the way his father used to hit his mother. But something about me troubles him, and I don't think he yet knows what it is. If he did, he would speak to me less, or more, or differently. As it is, he tells me things I have no place for.

But maybe it's me; maybe I'm not making myself clear. Nothing about the girl made me want to capture the moment on film; it was how quickly the thing came and was gone that affected me. But it wasn't her movement that made me feel and remember, it was mine. All of a sudden, I was the little black girl on the porch instead of the grown black woman in the five-speed Chevette, even though I couldn't remember having had clothes like hers, and I never lived in a house on anything that resembled a farm. You see, my father was a burly, pitch-black man, who used to like to spend his Saturday afternoon in knee-length plaid shorts and plain white T-shirts, sitting on the fire escape plucking absently at the hairs on his legs and listening to KCMO in Kansas City on the radio in his bedroom. Every summer, he would take his wife — my patient, yellow mother—and his four children, and we would climb into the white stationwagon that was beat up even when he bought it, and wander around two or three or four states before going home, while the children squabbled over who got to lie in the back and who had to sit on the hump over the drive train. My father is long dead now, but he came back to me in the white Chevette on one side or the other of Greenville a few days ago. I saw him with the sunglasses and the plaid, porkpie hat that blew off his head in the mountains and rolled into a distant speck down a steep hillside as he watched it go and his laugh rumbled. I remember his swerving to avoid an oncoming car in Death Valley, and then leaning out of

the window, waving his fist and cursing; and the four children laughed with their hands over their mouths. But most of all, I remembered staring out the stationwagon's windows at the cars that passed us going the other direction, and expecting to see someone I knew. And when I didn't, the thought would seep into my head, uninvited and unwelcome, that maybe I was the only one in the world who really existed after all, and that the people in the passing cars were manufactured and run by for my sake, and ceased to be as soon as they vanished from sight. The thought terrified me because it wasn't hard to imagine that I didn't really exist either, and I would become acutely aware of my body and how it felt to be alive. Where were my eyes looking from, and how could they see? It all seems very silly now. It's silly to say and even to think about. What does the little girl think about? What was I to her as I passed in the car? How many sweaters will she leave unbuttoned? And how many men will she have loved when she is close to 30 and married?

"How many men have you loved?" my husband says quietly. And what the hell difference will it make? To anyone?