

Michael Spence

Mistake

A city boy's mistake — I drove the road
Of dirt and gravel as if the thing were paved.

Though this was Tekoa (no one here would pronounce
The "a"), where fields of hay prevailed and the chance

Was small you'd see a car coming your way,
I hugged the right side. That's what they taught me

Back in Seattle: when taking a blind curve,
Prepare to meet someone. It took more nerve

Than I had to hog a road. Besides, it was rude —
Here, east of the Cascades, people were good:

They knew each other; didn't have the crime
My city did. Lloyd Lasz told me the same:

I was working for him this summer, bucking bales
And cutting lots of thistles. As though three moles

Had tunneled underneath the road, its gravel
Ran in ridges down each side and the middle.

I knew the passing tires created them;
I knew my tires were riding them. But time

Was pulling ahead of me: I knew I'd be late
If I didn't move out. Listening to *Spirit's*

"I've Got a Line on You" blast from the tape deck,
I pressed the pedal — then stomped the brakes

As the car began to slide. I really thought
I stomped the brakes. Instead, I guess I hit

The gas: the car whipped around in a circle
As if to meet my earlier self. A pile

Of dirt — dried out and solid as concrete — lined
The edge of the road. I slammed against that mound,

Flipping the Chevy over: the field cartwheeled
As though making fun of me outside the windshield.

I let go of the steering wheel. I must have —
I ended up half in the back (a shove

From fickle physics), landing with my stomach
Over the top of the passenger seat. What luck

Had let the car land on its feet? I tried
To start it up again: one cough, and it died

For good. The front door was jammed; I climbed
Out the rear. Checking for blood and pain, I seemed

Okay, then yelled: *Fuck, I'll be late for work!*
If I kept standing there I'd go berserk,

So I started hauling ass across a plain
Of uncut grass, tripping now and then

On an unseen hole or clump, as if the land
Wanted to prove my feet were not the kind

That belonged out here. I had to stop for breath
In the morning heat — I felt like a damp cloth

Getting wrung out — then lurch ahead some more,
Steering for my aunt and uncle's trailer.

Each time I stopped, I scanned the road, the fields:
No one anywhere. It seemed like I crawled,

It took so long to reach the trailer. The door
Swung open, and Aunt Joy watched me stagger

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Up the steps. *I was at the window, she said: You rest —
I've never seen anyone move so fast.*

My car got towed; the farmer loaned me a truck;
A beater then, now it's called a classic.

Its radio could only drag in three
Stations: two bible and one country.

The country seemed appropriate the nights
I brought the truck home full of chicken shit.

*Your final job this summer — clean the coop,
Lasz grinned. Then next morning, spread the crap*

*On the gardens. As if to welcome me to hell,
He handed me a pitchfork. Ain't no shovel*

*Gunna break up that stuff. Hard as brick.
I chipped away all day, scaring the chicks*

And rooster away: they kept on making sure
I did it right. I finally got the car

My last day on the Lasz's farm. It ran,
But the rear corner of the roof — *Stove in,*

Aunt Joy declared: *Like the devil thumped it good.
At least it'll get you home. No gravel roads*

*Over there. She smiled. Hope you'll come back.
Driving off, I leaned to put some music on*

And fingered air. The tape deck was gone.