

Steel City Blues

Errol Miller

For Alpha and Omega
and all the other smog-infested
lives of mine, I have dreamed a dream
apart from rural Alabama and found
me missing there, to the North
a great city of oil-splattered pavement,
pigeons, coffee roasting, mechanic-cousins,
obese aunts and uncles rocking on
a wide-brimmed white front porch.
Their collected poems turned cold and silent.
Lanterns flicker in the underbrush of Shades Mountain.
At Lover's Leap the same disoriented couple plunges
into the dark spaciousness of midnight air
over and over as if the result would be different.

Water has been drawn, and Papa is dead.
Mama wrings her handkerchief and clings to nothing.
Her voice failed and then her vision.
I cry for all of us stranded
in this decadent warehouse
on the banks of the Cahaba, I cry
for the profound musty silence invading
the bronze iron ore seams above The Valley.

Mysteries, I think they were mysteries,
psychological redneck thrillers where the hero
comes down from New York City
to find romance, where the cloven hooves

of the engine in his Tristar plane
succumbed over Cheaha Mountain: old CCC men
found the body and the hull, they found
arbitrary poems calling out to God,
a trunk full of posthumous love letters to
a maiden from a Jefferson County dairy.
So much for geography, beginnings and endings,
sad stories of last night when the moon
slipped over a rocky cliff, laying
sputtering and lifeless on Second Avenue.

God, your ghastly shimmer crystallized
into art, in the foursquare mill houses
of Brighton and Ensley and Fairfield,
your remarkable perceptive children
built a pseudo-shrine at Five Points South,
a bit of colloquial atmosphere, a bit of Europe,
wineshops, bakeries, bookstores, and giant white-oaks
expanding their memories over Southside boulevards.
This I remember the most: simpler figures
on homemade skateboards, their limbs drawn
back into their bodies, their grotesque smiles
asking for money as a paperseller
danced out the latest news, clawing the air
with the current edition of hard times.
Perhaps he was sending me a poem
to write later, a poem of the dingy gowns
of gauze tossed aside in the Redmont Hotel
or more exquisite appointments fulfilled
in the Tutwiler, deeply occupied
with my own sexuality I rode the manned
elevators up and down until I took my place
in the gratitude of experience, like
Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles the streets
were just as seedy, at every drive-in dacron punks
with their hair slicked down demanded confrontation.
They'd been to The Hop and destroyed its tranquility,
they'd been raised with only a rock & roll song
in their heart, they'd come to town
from the Acton coal fields, from Jasper and other

hard-core Walker County breeding-grounds.
I was scared of them, spasmodic to my response,
shifting into second gear to avoid stopping,
shaking at either alternative, how
I loved this city and never noticed it, how
it grew up all around me as I snoozed
in adolescent plight, seeking "real-life" in
the converging womanhood of sufficient
dirt-road girls from Shelby County, seeking
the future here or there or somewhere else.
Then the trolleys closed up shop, leaving
only the indentation of their tracks, and the mills
began to mechanize and my father
threw his chalk away, peddling apples
and bibles, letting the little country place go back.
I try now to embrace those times,
driving by on the Interstate, trying to smell
coffee roasting or the rock-gut smut
of iron ore burning in a hell-like furnace
where red-faced men from Chilton County
fan the flames, lighting up heaven
and the selfsame decaying neighborhoods
jutting out in circles, reaching to Bessemer
and beyond, toward infinity, I presume,
something that might be characterized as change:
the weighty knowledge of the past,
its sights and sounds and smells and ghosts,
silhouettes of lost lovers holding hands
on their way down, Vulcan framed
in the background changing his lamp
from passive green to red.