

'Borderlands' by John Burnside

By John Burnside

If there is any sensation that is better than walking to the edge of a settlement - a town on the road, a lonely filling station, the huddle of cabins and steam on the highway through the Argentine pampas where, long ago, some friends and I stopped one night, on the way to Entre Rios, and sat for a while drinking coffee in the dim, antique gold nook of a makeshift café; if there is any sensation more pleasing, at the existential level, than getting up and going out into the dark, or the momentarily blinding gleam of noon, and gazing out into the space beyond, then I would like to know what it is. To walk away from the warmth and the lamplight into near desert or pampas is to walk into the earth-scent of creosote and dust - or, on that late night stop somewhere near Concepcion de Uruguay, into the fetid aftermath of a hog-nosed skunk, which is darker and, to my mind, stronger than the scent given off by its northern cousin - but it is also to step into a separate, windblown place that is exquisitely unlike the one from which you just came: a place without time, a place where both the animals and the stars seem only a hairsbreadth away. A place of sudden belonging - or perhaps a better word is *appropriateness*: appropriateness of being and movement and scale; appropriate presence; appropriate attention.

This is my greatest pleasure, this moment's pause at the border between one place and another, but I have seen that moment reversed, and I can only observe it now with something that feels like penitence. What happened was that I had spent the day in the Gila Desert with friends, wandering among saguaro and giant organ pipe cactus; then, when nightfall came, we had made our way to a small motel on the edge of Ajo, not far from the Mexican border. I am not good at staying in hotel rooms, they are too warm, too confining so, more often than not, I am up and about by daybreak - and that morning was no different. After a long dinner at the local Chinese restaurant, I had gone to bed fairly late, but I was out of my cabin by six the next morning, sitting on the tiny porch area and staring off across the yard, towards the desert beyond. A few feet away, an unhappy looking dog turned and looked at me wearily, but he didn't bark, or come to see if I had anything to offer him, he just lifted his head for a moment, checked to see what manner of beast I was and then, clearly disappointed, settled back into the dust. It

was more or less day already. The yard was partly separated from the desert beyond by a row of parched, twiggy shrubs, and though I knew that makeshift hedge for what it was - one of the *thin places* known to the Celts as borderlines between this world and the other - I let it be and stayed on my porch, feeling the morning cool on my skin and enjoying the fact that, for once, my mind was empty of noise. Twenty paces would have taken me through that invisible borderland into the mystery beyond, but I stayed put and studied to be quiet, and it was a long moment before I realised that I had grown apprehensive of something, though even then I didn't know what. It was nothing major, in the end - for a local, I later discovered, it was even a commonplace - but to me it was both magical and tragic. At first, I had no idea what was going on, but as I stood gazing into space, I became aware of movement and then, of a line of people, maybe a dozen, maybe fifteen or more, coming through one of the many gaps in the hedge and hurrying across the yard, men, women and children, clutching bundles to their chests, following a tall, very thin man who looked no better-off or sure of himself than they were, but must have been a coyote, nevertheless, one of those professional guides who lead bands of migrants across the border and up, into *El Norte*, where the money lives. When they saw me, some of the people in that line looked startled, not because they were afraid I might be a border guard or a busybody, but because I would have looked like an apparition to them (apparitions being common in the thin places) but most kept their eyes fixed on the man who was leading the way, hoping they could trust him, possibly wondering where they were and how far it was to safety - and I understood, suddenly, that while apparitions might be a source of fascination for me, for them, hurrying from nowhere to nowhere, and hoping for work and such dignity as life affords, such things were a needless luxury. Some of them would make it - or so I hoped - but most would be forcibly returned, sent back across a border no more real than that straggling line of dusty shrubs at the edge of the motel yard, to begin the journey again. Those who did stay would mostly be confined to other forms of borderland, where someone like me would not linger and, when they stood at the edge of their world, gazing out, their eyes would not be turned, not towards the desert, but to the streets and houses that, able to take them for granted, I am a little too eager to leave behind.



Borderlands are sites of mystery, but they are also theatres where, as often as

not, tragedy unfolds. This is especially true of hard shoulder: the verge of any road, major or minor, freeway or country lane, is in-between country - a long streamer of thin place between the flow of traffic and the land beyond - and, so, a locus of ordinary tragedy, where the dead still linger and the living come, on special occasions, to grieve. On Highway 86, between Tucson and the Tohono O'Odham reservation, that thin place is dotted with simple wooden crosses dedicated to the victims of auto accidents, makeshift shrines haphazardly, but sometimes beautifully, decorated with trinkets, dusty Valentine hearts, scraps of faded tinsel and magically-untarnished Dr Pepper cans. They are not unlike the wayside shrines that crop up in other parts of the world, home-made memorials to the casual dead festooned with football scarves and plastic flowers in Mexico, say, or rural Italy, strangely poignant in spite, or perhaps because of, their crude construction, and as transient as the lives they commemorate. Yet what marks out the shrines of southern Arizona is the way in which they differ, not only in number (and they are painfully common sights on this stretch of 86), but also in their remarkable inventiveness, their elaborate decoration and - most of all - in their oddly haunting beauty.

The shrines are not a new phenomenon in this landscape, but their construction has evolved, over many years, into a local art form that commemorates the mystery of the borderlands as much as the deceased. Often what began as a simple marker has developed into a thing of beauty: a stark white cross ringed around with blue or yellow painted stones, or draped with Christmas tree lights and ornaments, becomes a tiny description of a home both real and imagined, drawn, as all American homes are, from television, popular magazines and the myth of a better time, where the beloved may be sensed as continuing in the usual way, a can of Dr Pepper or an old-fashioned Coke bottle set in a conspicuous place among the knick-knacks and highway detritus, as if he might come back at any time to finish it off. Some of the crosses bear heartbreaking messages - "Killed By a Drunk Driver", or "We Love you Daddy" - but most are silent, anonymous, a private treaty between the lucky one who has passed away and the less fortunate who are left behind. Yet even as those unnamed dead continue, they are also magically transformed, like the dead of prehistoric times. The roadside shrines are not official, they have no orthodox function, yet they are the true focus of the region's most authentic funeral rites, better than Church, better than anything the state can provide. Here, for an hour or so, mourning, that much misunderstood process of regeneration, is home-made, just, and as true to those

who remain as to those who have gone.

There is no point, really, in pointing out that many, if not most, of these shrines have fairly banal histories. In this part of Arizona drunk driving is commonplace, especially on the reservations, where poverty, humiliation and boredom are rife. The standard vehicle is an old and painfully dilapidated pickup: a vehicle which should seat two or three at most in the cab, but which is often used to transport whole gangs of reckless partygoers, men, women and children perched in the back of the truck as it cannons along an empty road in the dark, the driver out of his head on cheap liquor, or exhausted after days of celebration. It's part of the culture, anyhow, to be fearless: life is too poor, too dull and too little prized by the outside world to be worth preserving, (consciously at least). A short drive through reservation land confirms it: even the police here are careless road-users, and they all too readily tolerate the drunk-driver who meanders blindly along the highway at dawn, weaving from lane to lane or sliding off into the chaparral to sleep it off, if he is lucky, in the shadow of a Saguaro cactus.

The unlucky ones kill themselves, or others, or both and - equals in death - are marked by wayside shrines tended by their family members and workmates, through feast days and holidays. The shrines are painted red and decked with hearts on St Valentine's Day, draped with the Stars and Stripes for foreign wars and days of remembrance, twined about with tinsel and hung with tiny coloured bells at Christmas. On birthdays and special occasions, whole families drive out with cakes and sweets and canned drinks to hold the kind of party they would have held back at home, yet nobody ever sees them, just as nobody ever sees the mourners who tend the shrines, making them, with each short visit, more beautiful, more elaborate. Naturally, the stores and service stations that line Highway 86 caught on to this mourning culture very quickly. Here, the gas stations have a wider selection of plastic flowers and decorations, everything from tinsel to coloured ribbon to Christmas tree baubles, than car accessories and snacks. Yet - and this really is spooky - nobody is ever looking at these displays when my friends and I stop in for road supplies, and the locals we encounter, the thin old grandfathers in cowboy shirts and hats, the obese children in sweatshirts and cutaway pants, are both shy and suspicious when we loiter at the plastic flower stall to stare, with surprised reverence, at the unacknowledged grave goods. It seems strange to us that, given the very exposed nature of the wayside shrines, the mystery of death, and the honouring of the deceased, is not a public

matter here.

In a strange way, the shrines are just as private. This is a country where nobody stops on the road unless death or chance intervenes. As my friends pulled over so I could get out of the car and gaze wonderingly at one particularly beautiful shrine, I felt awkward, somehow blasphemous, as if I might rip open one of those sacred Dr Pepper cans and steal precious liquid from the memorialised father, or son, whose death marked this particular spot. In fact, it was hard not to feel I was being watched, as I hunkered down to read the message - a simple, "We Miss You" - on the red, white and blue painted crucifix. When I looked up, however, nothing was there, not even a passing car. Only the desert, stretching away as far as the eye could see. This thin place at the highway's edge was a land of ghosts, a land of those who had died violently, but it was silent, empty, utterly peaceful. I hoped - perhaps I even prayed for a moment - that this silence, this peace, gave the unseen mourners who had built the shrine solace. Then I stood up and hurried back to the car where my friends were waiting, relieved, and disappointed, to be on my way.



On my way. I have no idea what that actually means, but I know that it's all there is. Nothing else endures: not really - which is just as well, because if it did, there would soon be no more thin places, just suburb and sprawl, endless miles of chainlink and warehouse and cheap housing for the migrant workers we need to keep the economy running but would rather not see. The one friend the non-human world has is our mortality and the perishability of our works: what we make eventually falls apart, who we are eventually fritters away in the wind - and this is why some of the most beautiful places on earth are the ghost towns and ruins we come across on desert walks, or on twilit promenades through old docklands and the margins of former boomtowns. On that long ago journey through Entre Rios I was taken to an old meat canning factory - a massive plant where they could process thousands of cattle in a day, herding them into pens at one end and loading them, as tins of the corned beef that once sustained me through an impoverished Scottish childhood, on to great cargo boats at the other - and I was stunned by the beauty of the ruins, where great white owls had set up home in the rafters and wild flowers dotted the yards. Friends tell me the place is a museum now but, back then, it was one of the thin places where this world and the beyond nudged against each other, especially at nightfall, when all at once the

sun dipped beyond the river and blackness flooded in - and even now, I recall the sensation I had, standing alone in the sudden dark, of being, not a stranger in that place, but a part of something larger, walking the borderlands in sidereal time, always in transit, always on the way - and if there is any pleasure greater than that, I would very much like to know what it is.

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