Bird-Self Accumulated

Judson, Don

Published by NYU Press

Judson, Don.
Bird-Self Accumulated.
NYU Press, 1996.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/15788.

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THANKSGIVING,
1979
I had decided to borrow someone’s car for a drive down by the water. The place where I worked at the time—it was a hospital for emotionally damaged children—couldn’t have been more than a couple of miles from the bay. My whole job consisted in being at my room by nine o’clock and waiting there to evacuate C and D wards as well as 9-North in case of fire.

But I went to find the security guard and bribe him with two of my pills.

“What are they?” he asked.

“Can’t you see the blue and green specks?” I insisted.

We were on the second floor hallway and I didn’t want Nurse to come walking up unexpectedly.

“Listen,” I urged, “it won’t take long. An hour at the most. I might stop, get out at the picnic benches—what could happen?”

He held the pills cupped in his hand underneath a lamp and moved them up close to its bulb where they looked like teeth polished and set side by side.
“Are these those things that were going around last summer?”

“Right,” I agreed although in actuality I could not remember where the pills came from, or when.

“Because those were all cut with rat poison.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Oh-uh.”

“Well, these are probably from a different batch. They’re good.”

And it was true. My head already felt as if it had been broken up into some kind of powdered substance. I could see right through the darkness into where autistic children lay asleep dreaming, though I could not imagine what those dreams might be or if they were even anything you or I would recognize as dreams at all.

Somehow I got lost. I drove up and down staring at streets whose names I remembered but now looked like different places altogether. I kept finding the same abandoned filling station. It was a cinder block square, busted out and with concrete pads where grew a series of wires capped and shut—but out front of its parking lot someone’s belongings were stacked sidewalk to sidewalk in a neat semicircle with a chair at each end, and several extension lines had been run through the alley
from some other building's window for a lamp; beneath it, a man in green sweats and a baseball cap worn backwards and lined with tinfoil fingered the band of a ruined watch while mumbling sternly at the lines of passing traffic as if we were, each one, rude and ill considered guests.

And at this street's other end, where it narrowed, there was a bar; and here, people who could not understand their own fate stared out toward the rest of us from behind slightly darkened windows. Soon, most of them would be back in jail. It was that kind of place. Some of the same ones, my comrades and road dogs, stood around at the corner waiting for something, anything. I recognized them all. And several did call out. But when I pulled over, these people only seemed to turn on me with murderous intent for a moment and then disappear, or were not really there at all to begin with. It reminded me of a time when I was no more than six and my mother and father had a party. We lived in the suburbs then; my father and another man were in business together—they ran a funeral home—and the plan was for us to move into a huge apartment right above it, but that never happened, and soon in fact my father was kicked out of the business and was gone anyway on drunks more than he was with us and we could barely afford to live . . . but on this night there
was a party. I'd been shown around a little, the kind of thing adults love when they're drinking—the cute boy in pajamas serving peanuts and such—and after that I was put to bed. But at some point I woke back up. I was frightened. The house had gone silent, and for several minutes I lay not moving, but finally got up from bed and began down the hall to the basement where the party had been held.

At the mouth of the cellar stairwell I hesitated, unsure—what if my parents were gone, If no one were in the house and I was there alone? I bent to peer down the stairs searching out partway along the cellar's backwall a lampbase, and in its thin shadow of light, set on several books, an old, black, extension phone.

I was terrified it might begin to ring.

All of this went on just as if it were in my sleep because I can recall now a faint mist beginning to cover everything inside the house. It was soft against the floor and wallboards. Against feet, hair, eyes. I could taste it along my tongue. Everything stood out.

Listen, it said.

Listen.

I went to the doorway and then out into the yard. The hedges, trees, driveways and homes of my neighborhood were there just as they'd been before but I couldn't find a name for a single one of them.
All of it had been set off balance.
The borders erased.
There was no way of understanding even where my body ended and the rest picked up. Can you imagine such a thing? How a person can step outside their own life? That's how I began to feel driving the security guard's car around and around on that street. I began to feel as if I might be taking place inside a television movie.

Finally, in desperation, I found a new turn and went along until it brought me out beneath a highway underpass which I recognized as being on the complete wrong side of the bay from where the park was. Factories appeared everywhere. They lit up into the sky like a carnival. I felt about them as a person who had been strangled and thrown away to be forgotten. But something happened then. In the distance I could see the black line of water. Clouds seemed to come down all at once over it. They were across the bay. Then snow began.

Our first snowfall of the season!

It fell in large, steady flakes which thickened against the windshield and road, and filled me, stupidly, with a vague sexual desire—I believe I've woken from wet dreams in just such a way, apprehensive, as if some undeniable truth about myself had been carefully and
irretrievably made known; yet now I'd not even been asleep, and, humiliated, needing as much to move as sensing in the snow an opportunity, I dimmed the car’s lights and made my way unnoticed between two lines of razor-topped fencing and a guardshack, and snuck this way in surrounding darkness down an access lane. . . . Heading, I knew, toward water, past walls of what appeared to be coal, and wide scars of land gouged flat where pipes sprouted and intersected at random—far off behind or to one side, smokestacks, ghostly, looming wraithdrab; and then to a place where these as well ended and there seemed to be nothing but vast skeletal night, and through it or up into and stamped upon, a constant falling, falling, and so without chance to see or react, unable to stop in time, found myself run out of road and driving headlong, axdeep out onto the tide-flats of the back end of the bay.

The car coughed and died.

There was no other sound at all.

Off to the right I could see a series of concrete breakwalls where rats the size of poodles romped like hungry children. Beyond them was a ruined liftbridge. Snow fell softly against it, and fell and softly settled on the water, and mudflats and road, erasing, and traffic in the distance—

I seemed to be very far away.
Out in the harbor itself, about two hundred yards offshore, lay on its side the immense hull of an oilboat sunk just that summer past.

It raised up as if it were God. And I think now that maybe it was. I pushed open the door and made my way toward it through the thin lights of the security guard's car and along the stand of mud and broken stone strewn with bottles and slender fishline, and down then to the oily black and cold water which was completely still, and heavy, and not so much reached up as shifted to accept my falling into: first ankle . . . then thigh, and waist; until I bent forward to it fully.