Going Back, to Begin

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by

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Going Back, To Begin

(Poems about the Chemically Dependent in Nuclear Utah.)

This thesis project explores, in poetry, the effects of atomic testing and unrestrained pesticide use on the people who lived in or near Utah in the fifties and sixties.

Nuclear testing began in Nevada in 1951, the year I was born in south-east Idaho, where my family lived under radiation-tainted clouds for a decade along with the Utah downwinders. My father died of lung cancer caused from breathing pesticide-laden air in 1962, the year Rachel Carson wrote *Silent Spring*. These two dates stand out in my mind as important markers in my quest to discover why I think and act the way I do now.

I was taught to respect and never question authority. I found in my research that this unquestioning obedience to the rules of church and government has always been prevalent in Utah society. It seems that women are most oppressed because their behavior is strictly enforced by the men who dominate their lives.

I go back in my writing to the fifties, when fear of foreign powers was intense, and our trust was misplaced. I go back to the sixties, when trust and fear took on new dimensions. And I come out in the nineties, in a new world that is not so new, but is one that I understand better for having gone back and answered the questions I should have asked years ago.

I begin my poetry selections with "Cooked," which sets the scene for the atomic age of unwarranted trust. "Wild Turkeys" is next, and brings us up to date on the old pesticide story. "Examinations, Human Kind," explores the question of human survival from the standpoint of a leftover downwinder, and "Rock Chucks, Birds, and Lizards" takes a more universal view, this time of chemical effects on other creatures in the environment. "The Cellar" is a saga that goes back to what some congressmen have recently been calling "the good old days of family values," and "Caesarean" encompasses the modern view of the old issues that are still affecting our lives today.
They herded the chickens and goats into holding pens, fastened the heavy wire gates. They positioned the soldiers around the test area, sat them in rows, in army fatigues, boots, dark glasses, and sun-tan oil.

The countdown started, the numbers fell backward, one by one, down to Ground Zero. The soldiers, all salted with sand, watched the blast roll over the desert, crisping the chickens, turning the sand to glass.
Wild Turkeys

They make love in May. My cousin told me he and his wife watched a gobbler court two hens last year. Fanned his tail, dragged his wing feathers on the ground, strutted and pranced until his head turned red, gobbled loud enough to notify the world of his affair.

Better than a lot of stuff he sees on TV, my cousin says. Baby turkeys soon followed their mother around on his ranch, where the Idaho Fish and Game released twenty wild turkeys three winters ago, brought them from North Dakota and turned them loose among the cottonwood trees down by the river.

This April, the local newspaper reported that a flock of wild turkeys had feasted last Fall on a batch of Diazanon-tainted grain and promptly died. It seems a well-meaning citizen scattered the grain to feed the turkeys all winter, unaware of the danger of pesticide-treated feed.

It reminds my cousin of the turkey massacre he witnessed as a young boy, when Uncle Sam and Aunt Minnie raised a hundred turkeys and the coyotes attacked them on a hill behind the house. It was a deadly raid, the coyotes grabbing the turkeys and killing them as fast as they could, the turkeys flying too low for home to clear the barbed wire fence--my cousin said he had to turn his head when the wire squeaked with the impact and feathers flew.

(Cont. stanza break)
When the dust settled, my cousin and our uncle gathered up the dead and crippled turkeys, shouldered their rifles, and took care of some coyotes. But the new wild turkeys have more than coyotes, foxes, and bobcats to worry about, more than raccoons and skunks. And my cousin says they'd better make love while they can.
Examinations, Human Kind

My mother says our
time on earth is just a test, that
God gives us trials to make us
appreciate the good things in life,
and when we die, if we’ve been
good, we’ll get our reward, our
very own kingdom.

I don’t want a kingdom.

When I was in grade school
the teachers held bomb drills to
test our speed and efficiency
in duck-and-cover and single-file
orderly marches to shelter.
They said if we followed the rules,
we might survive.

Downwind from Nevada, I was
already a survivor.

Dropped out of school at
sixteen, tested equivalent
thirty years later and learned in
college that all tests favor
white upper-middle-class males
who want to excel in business and
national leadership.

Sounds like the kingdom story
all over again, where we play
follow the leader.

Reminds me of a radio voice,
a booming voice of manly authority
sent over the air waves to
quell hysteria, “This is only a test,
had this been a real emergency ...”
But we’ve been reassured
like this before

when federal scientists said
radiation’s good for us.

And now I get yearly exams,
mammograms, pap tests, uterine
(Cont. no break)
probes. They palpate my ovaries, finger my rectum, knead my breasts ... I'm a test site at countdown, and if I fail,

I still don't want a kingdom.
Rock Chucks, Birds, and Lizards

I once knew a city rock chuck
who lived in the
parking lot at the heavy
equipment rental on North
Main in downtown Logan, Utah.
He played in the front loaders,
under the tractors and back hoes,
popped up out of the asphalt,
it seemed, when I'd
park in the driveway on
Sunday afternoons and
watch for him.

On our farm, we had pet rock
chucks who lived under the old
siphon, but my mother says
they were dirty things and she
was almost glad when they finally
died out. My little sister
blames it on the DDT.

In the small town where I
spent my young married life,
there was a bird, I don't
remember what kind, but it
lived in our neighborhood for
a season, and dive-bombed
my daughter every day
for a week. It flew
out of nowhere and pecked
at her head when she
walked up the street,
same place every time,
halfway between our house
and the high school.
At fifteen, my daughter
promised to quit school if
I didn't drive her there,
one block away.

Hiking once in southern Utah,
I met a lizard on the West Rim
Trail in Zion's Park. It caught a
grasshopper half its own size

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and slowly ate it, head-first, 
banged its own head on a rock, 
back and forth, back and forth, 
to knock the grasshopper down 
into its throat. I watched 
the wings gradually disappear, 
and when the jagged hind legs 
were all that stuck out, the 
lizard massaged its throat on 
a rock and swallowed hard.

In a St. George oil-and-lube 
shop, we watched a displaced 
Whip Tail climb the cinder-block 
wall while we waited for my car. 
The owner said, Hey, Ralph, 
bring out the lizard catcher, 
and Ralph came out armed with a 
can of carburetor-cleaner, 
hit the lizard with a burst of 
spray, and it dropped, dazed, 
to the floor and stumbled out 
to the parking lot. 
We do it all the time, they 
said. It scares the ladies 
when it climbs the wall like that.

And we took the Whip Tail home 
with us, built it a big wood-and-glass 
aquarium with a bed of red sand 
and a hot-rock, and we fed it 
crickets and meal-worms, because 
I remembered the time I 
sprayed my trees for tent- 
caterpillars and found a dozen 
dead birds on the ground around my 
Chinese elm the next day, 
and how I used to spray my 
yard for bugs and weeds 
bare-armed and bare-faced, and 
I thought, sometimes we’re 
simply afraid of the wrong things.

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The Cellar

I haven’t thought of it for years, but yesterday, as I watered my plants, the smell of dank earth came back with the dark, the spider-hung beams, the plank door at the bottom of the rock steps.

The cellar. Cool and damp as the weather here, April in Utah. But I’ve just crossed the border in my mind, gone back to summer in south-east Idaho, the fifties, the garden, putting up food on the family farm.

I remember how old jars of fruit got lost in the far recesses of the cellar. Peaches brown with age would surface after years of storage, black dust on the bottles’ shoulders, rust around the metal caps.

The only pressure-cooked foods in the cellar were bottled deer meat and green beans, and a few rusted cans of old corn. The corn was a one-time family project, a full morning spent outside under the elm tree,

husking bushels of corn, pulling silk from the ears, cutting off long rows of kernels, filling large mixing bowls and metal dish-pans, throwing the husks, the silk, the sticky bare cobs into buckets for the cows and pigs.

We drove into town with the corn after noon, took pans and bowls of it to the Preston community canning center, a World War II project geared to benefit rural economy by putting the basement of the old school gym to good use.

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I still hear the clang of industrial-sized steel in that deep cement basement, the heavy cast lids slamming down on barrel-wide pressure cookers, the crash of colanders in big steel sinks, the women’s voices loud above the din.

We brought the corn home in tins, stacked it on the cellar shelves behind jars of fruit. Peaches, pears, and apricots packed in halves, tomatoes whole and juiced, apricot jam garnished with chopped nuts from the pits.

They say nowadays you can’t eat the pits, they have arsenic or some other poison. I wonder if we were immune to the poison then, or if the poison somehow evolved from the chemicals that killed my dad.

We stored grape juice in the cellar, in two-quart jars blue with age, to match the blue grapes my mother picked from the Youngmans’ family vineyard. She went by herself to pick the grapes, quit taking the kids along.

Whether we were naughty, or the Youngmans didn’t like us, or we whined about being bored, I don’t remember. Maybe my mother liked the time alone, the feel of the soft oval skins in her fingers, the conversation with other women picking grapes.

Later, when I was married in the 1970s, I bought some blue grapes at a fruit stand in Brigham, brought them home and bottled them in the old two-quart blue jars. I tried to hurry the process by using my brand-new pressure-cooker,

a double-stacking, cast aluminum canner, its
baked-on harvest gold enamel the latest color in kitchen appliances. Not like my mother's old water-bath canner, a blue-and-white graniteware antique, rusted from years of use.

My mother boiled her jars of grapes for thirty minutes, my canner pressured them for five. I watched the gauge reach twelve-and-a-half pounds, kept it steady for five minutes, let it fall back down to zero, loosened the lid, lifted it off.

graped the first jar with my tongs, and it exploded. Blinded with blue grapes, I felt my way to the sink, threw cold water into my face, and could see. I stripped out of my clothes, threw water over my breasts into the creases where

the skin came off with my bra's underwire, threw water down my front where my waistband helped the scald reach the third layer, my skin red and swollen like the tightly thin transparent covering of a blue grape bursting with juice.

For three months after the grape accident, I spent my time soaking in lukewarm water baths, wrapping my skin in white gauze, like the gauzy-thin white dishtowels we used for straining blue-plum jelly.

We picked the plums from the trees that grew wild along the river. We'd cross the siphon bridge in September, buckets swinging on our arms, gather the blue plums and make our way back, our fingers and mouths stained purple.

Also across the river, we found chokecherries growing up Cave Mountain alongside the siphon. We made them into pancake syrup.
We picked peaches from our own orchards on the hill above the ditchbank, turned them into sugary preserves.

My Uncle Lew grew watermelons in the east orchard, planted prickly pears to keep the melon-thieves away, plowed the ground with a horse-drawn cultivator, slept in a cot under an old apple tree with a shotgun at his side.

We packed Spanish prunes in thick syrup. We picked summer apples, ripe and ready for harvest in early August, cooked them to a thick chunky sauce, as tart as their juicy green promise in early July, when we’d eat them raw with salt and soda.

Sometimes we bottled strawberries. They floated lightly to the tops of the jars, softened and compressed from cooking, faded to a light maroon color that soon would turn to brown. Somehow I don’t remember any strawberry jam.

There was always raspberry jam, from our berry patch out beyond the garden. We always used up the raspberry jam before the year was half over, never found any spoiled jam lurking in any dark corner of the cellar.

Mother planted pansies on top of the cellar. They grew among the rocks and weeds, a spot of color against the brown dirt mound that housed our food storage. When I was eight years old, I started tending the pansies.

Dad planted cherry trees one year between the cellar and the chicken coop, and we bottled pie cherries for years, their tart flavor tamed with sugar and cornstarch. Dad planted sweet cherries too,
but they didn’t survive.

Dad hunted, Mother bottled the meat. Bottled it in chunks, cooked it for hours, made it soft enough to go through the Universal hand-crank grinder together with onions and bread crumbs. She then pattied it out and fried it in butter.

We lived on fish and wild game: deer, pheasant, duck and grouse. Dad and the boys did the hunting, gutted and hung the deer. Mother cut the deer up on the round wood table in the kitchen, throwing the scraps to Butch, Dad’s dog.

Butch was the only dog I ever knew, and I didn’t know him well. I was afraid of dogs. One year Butch got bit by a rattlesnake, laid on the back step for days, too sick to move. He got better. Once, at a family get-together,

down at our home-made park by the river, Butch wanted to go swimming, so Dad threw him in, but he didn’t clear the fence, and it ripped a hole in Butch’s belly. I ran home for a needle and thread, and Dad sewed him up on the spot.

One year I went hunting with my dad. He loaded up the little Ford tractor with gunny sacks full of straw, my sister and I sat on the sacks, and Dad drove the tractor up the hill. It was steep, I was afraid of falling off, and I never went with him again.

The Ford tractor served my dad well for hunting, farming, and spraying. In the fifties, the days of much-touted benefits from the new organo-pesticides, my dad hooked two long spray-rods on his tractor and started spraying fields.
Chlordane was the only thing that killed the alfalfa weevil, and Dad breathed the spray along with the weevils, the sick-sweet purgency of poison drifting in the air around the tractor. He'd come home tired and nauseous.

Thirty years later I asked my mother about his death from lung cancer in 1962. "It was the chlordane," she said, not the 2-4D or the DDT, "Thank goodness for that DDT," she told me, "It finally got us rid of the flies."

"DDT is Good for Me," the ads from the big chemical companies sang cheerily. But in 1960, when my sister was six, her teeth all rotted out. Our chickens laid soft-shelled eggs that year, and the song birds almost all disappeared.

No more rows of red-winged blackbirds sitting on fences and telephone lines for acres, quieter when the warblings diminished. No more droves of salamanders crossing the lane in the spring after a warm rain.

Chemical smells were everywhere on the farm and in the house. Fly spray drifted damply in the air on the back porch where metal cans of cloudy liquid leaked on shelves above the freezer, dripped down on the freezer lid.

I stayed in the house, my little sister played outside. She wandered the hills behind the house, went out to the pond, over to the river, played with toy cars in the dirt, using her hands to scrape roadways into the top of the cellar.

Our older brother died of a brain tumor. He was fourteen. He used to drop marbles
onto my head from his second-story bedroom window as I walked the narrow path between the cellar and the house. I wondered why I didn’t get the tumor.

The year my brother died (I was eight years old), the two-room school house closed, and I started going to school in town. The teachers all said we could use our cellars as bomb shelters when the Russians dropped the big one.

We had drills for the event, scampering all embarrassed under our desks, tucking our knees underneath our bellies, wrapping our arms around our heads, our faces pressed to the floor. They said we could stock our cellars and live underground for a year, and when we came out, the radiation would be gone. Sleeping out at night in the back yard behind the cellar, I’d look up, imagining a missile full of glowing radiation. I’d calculate the distance,

the time it would take for me to get to the cellar door after the missile exploded in outer-space. Once my sister and a brother (not the one who died) saw a space ship. It came down in a bright pink glow of dust out beyond the gravel pit behind the house. They told me they had just skirted the rock pile and gone around the hillside to Maple Hollow when the sky turned pink behind them, and something threw a dust screen out to blind them.

I was nervous when they told me. Aliens were as scary as the monsters that came out in the dark behind the cellar when we were playing hide-and-seek at night. They were as
scary as the spiders that hung from the cellar ceiling.

But they were not as frightening as the Russians with their bombs. We wouldn’t live long in the cellar, I realized, hating the dark and the damp, the spiders, the moldy smell. We wouldn’t be able to eat the bottled meat without cooking it first, and there wouldn’t be any water. We’d get pretty tired of fruit and pickles, and where would we pee? I guessed our health teachers must not have thought about sanitary conditions in cellars.

We stored pickles in the cellar. Mother put them up without the water bath. She washed and cut the cucumbers, packed them in sterilized jars with garlic and dill, poured a vinegar-and-salt solution up to the neck.

She boiled the lids in a separate pan, lifted them out with a fork, screwed them down tight on the jars. Sterile equipment was always the rule, whatever she bottled. She took great care to keep her family from diseases.

When my dad came home from the hospital to die, Mother boiled his dishes, boiled the clear plastic glasses he drank from, boiled the linens he slept in. The cancer spread to his other lung, his resistance went down, and pneumonia set in.

The smell of fetid sputum lingered thickly in the living room where he lay in a borrowed hospital bed. The smell of sickness filled the whole house, mingled with the heavy steam from water boiling in the kitchen.
An older married sister came to help. She smokes two packs a day. He coughed up rotten lung-phlegm, never having had a cigarette in all his life, and she is still happily smoking at sixty-two. But she wasn’t happy then.

She yelled at me for getting in the way, for seeming so oblivious when our own dad was dying. His dying didn’t seem as real as the Russians and their bomb. Until my sister said it, nobody had mentioned he might die.

My sister and I were sleeping out under the clothesline the night he died, June 29, 1962. A brother, sixteen, came out to tell us. We went in, Mother wouldn’t let us look, but I glimpsed him sitting slumped in an easy chair, not lying in the bed.

After the morticians came and wheeled him away, I saw the stain on the seat cushion, spread out wide like the stains under the cans of chemicals on the porch, the smell of both kinds of stains were the smell of death, intolerable still.

The funeral was held at the big "stake center" in town, where they needed extra space to hold church conferences, and there still was not enough room, so they opened up the curtains that separated the chapel from the gymnasium.

They added chairs until there was standing room only. "Such a young man," they all said. To me he was old. 56. He had grandchildren older than I was. But he died long before most of his brothers did, they all lived into their eighties.

His parents were long dead before I was

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born, old before he was born, the last of eleven children. My brother was dead, aunts and cousins and others. I’d seen a lot of funerals, and cancer was cropping up everywhere.

After my dad died I started smoking. Two years later the house burned down. I wasn’t there, but people tell me there were explosions from ammunition for the deer rifles and shot guns, that the fire got so hot it melted everything into the ground. When they hauled away the ashes and dug the basement for the next house, they levelled the old cellar. It hadn’t been used since my dad died and my mother went to work in town.

Last year, my mother moved back to the farm after fifteen years in St. George. She rents the house from my little sister, who bought the farm ten years ago. She doesn’t keep cows, but she uses the barn to store hay for a llama.

Last summer Mother planted four-o’clocks, geraniums, and petunias out by the old yellow rose bush behind the clothesline. She planted daffodils on the west side of the house, and pansies in the flower bed.

The pansies grace the edges of a rock path in between two 75-year old lilacs that used to stand directly behind the cellar. My mother stores a gallon-sized jar of insecticide on the back porch, complete with a pump sprayer.

She keeps the back yard rid of bugs that eat her flowers, bees that bother her hummingbirds, and spiders that leave dirty
cobwebs lining her basement walls. Her extra cans of chemicals share space with her bottled food storage.

I think of my mother, the fifties, the chemical age. I water my tomato starts. Peat and vermiculite rise then settle, the clean soil smell drifts up, fecund, alive. A solitary spider throws a line of silk across the ceiling beams.
Caesarean

"For more than a millennium, the survival of the Gypsies has depended on secrecy: on disguise and misrepresentation, on keeping customs and ambitions hidden, on burying the past."

"Among the Gypsies," Isabel Fonseca

I

All day at the hospital.
All day.

6 A.M. surgery prep:
My daughter, her husband both vanish past the doors of "No admittance of children under fourteen without special permission."

Grandbaby Dee and I wait. Her brother, little Kip Elijah, is coming out today.

"Star," that's what she calls me, "the peck-bird's coming to the hospital too. It has to peck Mom's belly-button to get the baby out."

Dee is a Gypsy. Her mom is my daughter, her dad is a Romichelle. Not sure how to spell it, neither is he. Their language is oral, not written.

They've named the baby already, watched him on ultrasound video dozens of times, forward and back, scanned for the arrow that points to his penis, "his unit," his dad says.

Kip Elijah, his dad's birth name. Hasn't used that name for years. Isn't Dee's birth father. But he calls her "my girl," and she is.

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They are a travelling family, 
stopping over to have a baby, 
lending their Gypsy lore to 
the place they’re in at the moment.

Back to the peck-bird, the Labor and Delivery 
doors. We wait, cartoons on TV, The 
New Yorker, powdered donuts and 
cranberry juice, for an hour.

But Dee doesn’t follow hospital rules. 
Gypsy children, adopted or not, don’t 
conform to No Admittance. We go in 
the double doors, demand to see her mom. 
They let us.

All my life, if I had only spoken, 
make the demand, I could have been 
admitted. Instead, I was quiet, 
dreamed of running away with the Gypsies.

II

This is Utah. "In Mormon culture," 
Terry Tempest Williams writes, 
"authority is respected, obedience is 
revered, independent thinking is not."

For years, she sat in hospital 
waiting rooms, obeyed the signs of 
no admittance, watched the women in 
her family die.

For her, the price of obedience 
came too high, now she questions 
everything, openly defies No Admittance 
Beyond This Point.

Military secrets don’t impress her 
anymore. She travels with her friends 
to take back the desert in the name 
of their children.

They walk brazenly through the 
contaminated town of Mercury, 
commit civil disobedience at the 
Nevada Test Site.

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All protestors walk along a fenced, paved road, between signs that say "Do Not Cross. Desert Tortoise. BLM." At the end of the road, another fence, a high chain-link, signs posted by the "DOE. No Trespassing. Violators subject to Federal Prosecution."

They cross the cattle guard from BLM land, are immediately arrested, thrown into holding pens, and trucked out on a bus.

III

My daughter said, three years ago, "I've met a man. He's good to me. There are some things I can't tell you."

When a Gypsy marries a gadje, my daughter, a person outside the tribe, there is a promise, an allegiance to be made.

For weeks, I wouldn't hear from them. Dee learns new words, but not a new language. The language is fading.

Ultrasound and television, delivery rooms and snack machines, tax and license, health insurance, proof of identification, trailer courts that charge as much as apartments, work that can't be found, a wife whose babies don't descend, family scattered from Kansas to Texas, Florida to Wisconsin, dilutes the Gypsy life.

The father of the baby, slender, well proportioned, straight black hair, brown almond eyes, bends down with Dee's little brother.

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IV

In Wisconsin
in the woods
Gypsy children played,
hundreds of them,
he said.

At dinnertime
a car horn sounded
twice, kids swarmed
into the camp from
every direction.

Doesn’t happen anymore
he says. Now there is
too much crime, too many
murders. Nobody dares
play there anymore.

No matter where
they travel now, there is
danger. In KFC in
Logan, they watched a
gun fall out of a
man’s coat and clatter to
the floor. At a rest stop in
Colorado, a tall black man
stood between Dee and her mom and
their way out of the restroom.

Dee lives at gas stations.
She knows no woods, but
she plays at city parks in
every town.

V

They come home from the
hospital a day early,
settle in with their new baby.

she smells plastic burning,
he hears buzzing in the fuse box
in the bedroom.
Get out, get out, he yells,
    flying out the back door of
    their trailer.

She lands in the snow,
    bare feet, no panties,
    baby in one arm, Dee in the other.

staples ripped, blood soaking
    through her nightshirt.

He kicks at the electrical plug,
    frees it from the hook-up post,
    grabs an extinguisher.

Black and thick, the smoke rolls out
    the fuse box, into the bedroom.

The what-ifs, later, are phenomenal.
    Seven minutes, start to finish, in a
    trailer fire.

VI

All this bravado:
    I distance myself so my
    children can’t hurt me.

Get close, they may tell me too much.
    They hurt out loud, and I
    catch the pain.

The pain comes inside if I listen.
    If it does, I can’t help it.
    I can’t help them.

So I put on a brave front,
    an aloofness, I don’t worry.

Distance and coolness, that’s
    how I get through a life with
    children. Otherwise,

when they’re grown up and I’m
    poverty stricken, and they need help,

all I will be able to do is

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sit in a chair, my head in my hands, and cry.

VII

Later, I hear they’re leaving again. The last fight she had with Dee’s former dad, he threatened to burn them alive.

A Gypsy man protects his family. His woman stays at home. Their home is the camp.

1985, Ficowski:
"Opposition to the traveling of the Gypsy craftsmen ... began gradually to bring about the disappearance of ... traditional Gypsy skills."

Not enough work around here, they say. In twelve more years, the baby will be a man.

Perfectly shaped, he doesn’t have the pointed head of babies who come through the birth canal.

Well-proportioned, straight black hair, dark eyes, strong and smart: a Gypsy, like his sister Dee.

VIII

They’ll go to California; his cousin wired some money, says there’s work down there.

I went to California once, mid-sixties, fifteen, rode with the Hell’s Angels.

Yearning for the Gypsy life, I told my daughters this, but

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really I went in a Chevrolet with two guys; one had an original Hell's Angels jacket. We picked up a hitchhiker, a skinny old man who climbed in the back seat, lit up a smoke, thanking us for the ride, started a conversation.

My friend in the front, the driver, sat up tall, rolled his shoulders, adjusted his leather jacket to show Hell's Angels, stitched on the back. The old man stopped mid-sentence. Hard enough life to worry about getting rolled, let alone ending up murdered by two Hell's Angels and their girlfriend.

We camped out at rest stops. Other people avoided us when they noticed my friend's jacket.

We came back from California when his wife wired us money. I never saw them again.

IX

We drive into the camp, their trailer's gone. A gaping hole, a pulled tooth, a space of gravel ground in between two curbs. An electrical post devoid of plugs, a block of wood kicked out from under a tire, the tire, the wheel, the trailer, gone.

In the middle of the night--that's the best time to drive. You eat up road as far as your

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headlights go, thousands of miles, millions. The cool, the radio, the babies asleep on the seat beside your woman, your woman beside you, your home behind you, that's the way to travel.

X

In the old days parents told their naughty children, "If you don't be good we'll sell you to the Gypsies and you'll never see us again."

Folklore says the Gypsies stole our babies, but the truth is when a gadje brings her children to the nomad way of life she loses them.

Afraid, their fathers file for custody. And get it, so the Gypsy folklore goes, so never marry a gadje or she'll lose her kids.

Folklore advertises fear. Tragic stories, oldest slander. Private lifestyle, hidden language, different moral boundaries, their world view codified,

they bring on racism. The fear is that of Hitler for the Jews, the fear is of McCarthy's for the communists, the fear is hate for difference.

They are a separate people, the lost tribe, lost, because the time isn't right yet for them, the lies are not the theives' cant, but survival.

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XI

Got a letter from my sister yesterday. "You baby boomers," I'm 44, she's 63,

"seem not so much moved by democratic ideals as the need to assess the total morality of our planet. You blame us for our use of deadly poisons and atomic energy. You've seen the effects of acting without sufficient information."

My daughter, the one who isn't a Gypsy, wrote a research paper on the topic of nuclear testing in Nevada. Five years ago, at sixteen, she gathered the information, assessed the situation of our planet, crossed the line at the test site, attempted to protest.

Now, she tells me sometimes, she wishes she could travel with her sister, forget about all of it.

XII

In the 1950s, Gypsies didn't live in Utah, but they were downwinders, like the rest of us. Wherever they traveled, they couldn't escape the American nuclear mistake. Each test, 126 of them, Chernobyl ten times over.

Government deception, Carole Gallagher says.

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Good, gentle people victimized,
toxic secrets hidden in the landscape.

Mormon hierarchy officially silent,
politically in charge, its people
obedient, faithful, patriotic.

Babies died, mothers got breast cancer.
Clusters of leukemia deaths in 1951.
Radiation sickness diagnosed neurosis.

A thousand scientists issued a warning in
the mid-fifties about health effects,
small demonstrations began, but when

Darlene Phillips wanted to join, and
asked her bishop what was the proper
role for a good Mormon woman to take,

he said, "No, you stay away from it,
those people are communists," so she
didn't go. And Ground Zero kept up its

nuclear numbing, "a natural by-product of
trauma," tangling our wasted, bloodless
bodies in shock waves of betrayal.

XIII

Poems of the Gypsies,
1950s, weighted with
fatalism:

The long road, the
rootlessness, no
turning back,

the poverty, illiteracy,
lost dreams and
impossible love,

the no place of home,
nostalgia of doom:
Let it come,
It doesn't matter.

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Evening News, January 15:
In Topeka, Kansas, they’re creatively recycling missile silos, remnants of the cold war.

One sold, forty thousand dollars, to a bookish couple, a two-story library, modern kitchen, greenhouse,

the old control panel decorates one wall, the other, a bricked-in round missile exit adapted to an entry door.

One silo, a high school art lab, the new school built on top, saved the taxpayers six hundred thousand construction dollars.

It cost 4 million dollars to build the silos, the school gets, for one dollar, their own 18-inch thick concrete walls and a drive-in bus garage.

They called from Kansas last year, tornado warnings on TV in every MacDonalds, every gas station. They took pictures;

black funnels taller than outer space, able to pick up trailers like pieces of paper. Came back through town on their way to Florida,

checked in to the clinic with an ectopic pregnancy, lost one fallopian tube. Just as well,
it was hurricane season
by then.

Earthquakes in California,
but that's nothing next to
tornados in Kansas. Missile
silos won't save Gypsies who
don't live there,

like bomb shelters wouldn't have
saved us baby boomers, but we
didn't know it. Gypsies at least
know their own fate.