

# Map for a Forgotten Valley

*Dispatches from  
Youngstown, Ohio*

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## **Mahoning Valley Blues**

Where I come from is fields of clover, cows chewing their cud with eyelids lowered, as if they are dreaming. Where I come from was trips to the grain mill with my grandfather, my hands in my grandmother's summer garden, the mint on my fingers for hours afterward.

Where I come from was my father out of work, again, because of the union striking, and taking meals to the workers on the picket line with my mother, who always shook her head and threw her hands in the air during arguments with my father, pleading, "Why don't you leave that place? They don't care about you. Why don't you find some place where you are valued as the good human being you are, doing good work for other people?"

Where I come from is an emptied-out place, a hollowed space, a fruit with the insides scraped clean, the rind left out in the sun to spot brown with rotting. Most people have never heard of where I come from, even though the steel my father and grandfather helped make, the steel under the gray facades of buildings throughout America, has my town's name on it—Youngstown, Ohio—invisible, holding people up in the sky. They never think about the shoulders they stand on.

Bruce Springsteen wrote a song about where I come from, but most people still think Jenny is the girlfriend of the song's narrator, not the name of a blast furnace that has been destroyed, the thing that provided my home with sustenance for over half a century. Where I come from, even a lot of people where I come from mistake Jenny for a girl.

Where I come from, people talk badly about where we come from. It's as if we have taken on the town's failure as our own. When the steel industry left in the seventies and eighties, the community

tried to purchase the mills, for the town, as a group, to own and operate. But the steel corporations—groups of their own—said the idea was socialist, and would not sell their mills to socialists. Instead, they left their mills behind to rot. And for us, the town, to pay for their demolition three decades later.

Where I come from, we say, “Downtown’s so empty, you can roll a bowling ball down the main street and it won’t hit a thing.”

Where I come from, we don’t care too much for the government, any government, any party, because all of them have come through to take pictures with us, posing for a photo-op to suggest that they are concerned. When it’s time for a national election, suddenly a parade of politicians comes through town, eager to shake hands and tell us that they’re going to do something to make sure this place’s suffering ends. They seal their promises with smiles wider than the Mahoning River, a river that, like the town, I am sure not many people have ever heard of. But they aren’t concerned, not any of them, they are not truly concerned with where I come from.

Where I come from is a place that has turned away from the rest of the world, to finally make our own world, on our own terms. What used to be a city is disappearing: neighborhoods, theaters, storefronts, and streets. Some houses go up in fires set by their owners. Others are taken by scavengers, sold off piece by piece. And the city has a list, a very long list, of buildings to demolish. In their places are backyards with vegetable gardens, and down the street a farmer’s market, and across the way, a ragtag community theater is going to do Shakespeare in the park, and there are women now, three or sometimes four of them, who stand on corners singing spirituals, and a group of African American teenage boys who tap-dance down the main street of downtown, where no bowling ball will ever touch them.

Where I come from, they say we’re going back to nature, as if this is a loss of something. But I say it is a becoming of something different than a smoke-addled city, and a becoming of something

other than an overwhelming front of leaf and vine. It’s becoming itself, where I come from, as we walk away from everything we’ve been and everything we’ve been told we are, or will be, or should be, by people who do not come from where I come from.

Where I come from, we sing the blues. The blues is something you sing when you feel all alone in the world. And when we sing them, we are at our happiest.

### **All the Cows I’ve Ever Known**

All the cows I’ve ever known are calling me home tonight, their voices lowing on the wind, under the winter moon that stares from the sky like a blind man’s eye. I am trying to remember what it was like before I took my first sip of language, before I got drunk on it, earned an education, forgot where I came from for a while in an effort to not be ashamed of it, felt bad about it afterward, wondered how I could be such a self-loathing fool, got over it; started to remember the grass beneath my bare feet each summer, the way my soles grew so thick from daily contact with the earth, a gravel drive couldn’t faze me.

I look up and the world is big again, looming. The trees I climbed so high I became like a cat and almost couldn’t get myself back down. The clouds, big as ocean liners, moving across the floor of the sky. Behind me are fields of clover, where I pull up the stiff rags of brown burdock by its roots with my grandmother. Weeding for the cows, she calls this, so that it doesn’t get inside them when they eat the clover later. “They’ll hate us if we let them eat this and they get sick,” she warns me, “and you don’t want a cow to hate you, no sirree.”

In the back woods, the cows are sitting beneath the shade of a copse of old-growth elms and beeches. In the summer, when the calves have all been born and my father no longer is called by my grandfather in the middle of the night to come down to the barn

and help him deliver another one—no more peering through a barn window to watch a calf slide out of its mother and fall in a steaming pile onto the straw-covered floor—I spend the afternoons with them under those trees, drawing them, petting them, talking to them, falling asleep against their warm sides. Their mothers hover over all of us, and occasionally one looks down at me and blinks, snorts, then lifts her head back up and stares off into the open space before her. My own mother says that those cow mothers must think she has a crazy son, and perhaps I shouldn't embarrass her in front of them by not knowing when to give them their privacy. She shakes her head at me, pets the back of my head.

The cows are Herefords, beef cattle: red body, white face. The two oldest, Judy and Jeanie, have horns. None of my nonfarming friends from school can understand that they are not bulls. "They have horns," my friend Michael says. "They're bulls." I explain that all cows have horns unless they've been bred not to, or maybe they've been cut off when they're young, but that those two were females. "Bulls," he says again. "Bull," I say, and we laugh and laugh.

My brothers join 4-H and raise a cow each year to take to the county fair in the summer. When I'm eleven, I join, too. My first cow's name is Patches. By the time a year has passed, I can ride on his back like a horse, and he never flinches. I brush him down as if he's a prize stallion, give him dried molasses in his feed each night to sweeten his meal. When I'm bored or lonely, I go out to the barn to sit against his side while he's bedded down. When I realize that, after the fair is over, the cows are sold at an auction, and a local grocer buys Patches and butchers him, placing the meat out in the cooler with a picture of me leading Patches around by a rope in the pasture, I stop eating beef and quit 4-H. It was supposed to raise us up to keep us on the farm, living that way, but it's had the opposite effect on me.

There were other cows after Patches: Duke, Buttercup, Lucky, Shotgun Red. I still trained some of these to lead behind me, even

if I'd given up showing them at the county fair. My grandfather's friends tease him about his herd of puppies. This is because my grandfather is as bad as me: talking to the cows like they're a part of the family instead of an ear-tagged number.

By the time I'm sixteen, though, I've grown further into the world of humans, or have been pulled into it by some undeniable force, almost a compelling, and all the cows I've ever known fade into the background, like my family: I am starting to separate, even though I don't realize it as it's happening. I read constantly. An aunt tells my mother it's not healthy for a boy to read so much. "It makes him happy," my mother says. "I'm not against anything that makes him happy." But with each word, each sentence, each paragraph, each page, I am learning things—ideas—that are carrying me further away from her. I am a leaf pulled along the current of language. It seems possible that it may set me free. And a year later my mother's crying as she and my father drop me off at college, only an hour away, proud but worried. Before she and my father leave, she pulls me aside and tells me, "Honey, don't you ever forget where you came from."

I say, "I won't, Mom."

Teary-eyed, she laughs and says, "I don't mean Kinsman, I mean me."

And here I am sixteen years later, still pulled along by the current of words. From a small farm in Ohio to a beach in Southern California, to the capital of Michigan, to the rice fields of Ibaraki and the frantic streets of Tokyo, back again, to the place I started. But all the cows I've ever known are gone now, sold by my grandfather after battling a brain tumor, afraid he couldn't take care of them the right way anymore. And this blind moon keeps looking down on me, blinking like those cow mothers did when I slept against the sides of their babies.

Now they snort and low, look down on me again. They know I'm here, years and years away, somehow trying to hear them.

## To Be Worked Out

It was the earth here, you see, the limestone and the river, that brought those men who carried canes and wore tails and top hats. It was those men who knew the earth here could make iron, pig iron, band iron, and bar iron, railroads and railroad spikes, hoops and hoops around the world. They brought the people here to work the furnaces, they brought them from a world across the ocean where they had lived scratching the earth for roots and vegetables, foraging along the base of Eastern European mountain ranges during the desperate days of winter. People like that are strong and tireless. They work and work, because they have had it worse elsewhere.

There is fire in the background of these men, whose portraits I am trying to frame on a blank wall. The downturned shadowed faces in family photographs, the sepia stains across the faces in daguerreotypes placed under oval glass. The smoke that hangs over their little row houses that climb the walls of the valley here, in this fold in the earth, where each spring they must wash the walls, inside and out, clean of soot. There is fire and there is smoke behind them, behind their houses. The men stand with sledgehammers slung over their shoulders, as if ready for battle. And they fight: owners, scabs, a group of ex-slaves that had been led up from the south under the promise of work, without knowledge of a strike occurring. They fight the wrong people. They fight among themselves. They fight their brothers because their skins are different. They never look up at the control room's dark windows.

"We work them out," the superintendent tells Pastor Hudson when he is given a tour of the building, "and then get in a new batch."

Twelve-hour work days. Chemical explosions. Unshielded equipment. A body pulled away from the floor. Another steps in to replace it.

We work them out, and then get in a new batch.

These men are my father, my grandfather, his father who died

when my grandfather was five, killed in the mill. An accident, they say, an accident. When I straighten their pictures, or rub the dust away from the oval glass covering them, I can see the reasons for their downturned shadowed faces, their gloomy pallor.

Then the fire goes out, then the smoke goes away, and the men stand in parking lots, carrying signs, screaming, shouting, threatening violence. The mills are empty, and no one is coming to unlock the gates again, but the men will not leave. They scream and shout and call for the owners to come out, but the owners aren't inside. They are already in Guatemala, Mexico, Indonesia, Honduras, India, Haiti. They are no longer these men's owners.

When winter is over, a few men walk away, signs lowered, faces to the ground. Summer ends in warm light rains, and a few weeks later more men walk away, orange and brown leaves blowing around their feet in circles. More and more lay down their signs, go home, pack up their clothes, their children, their wives, their aging parents, and lock their doors behind them. Down and around the corner they go with their families, the dogs barking, the cats howling in their carriers or in the arms of little girls, until they walk down the street and out of the city, farther and farther away, until they disappear into the horizon. Those who return home and refuse to leave, their skin turns to stone one day as they are sitting at their kitchen tables drinking coffee, or on their front porches, where they used to look out and across the yard at the sidewalk or the neighbor children playing, or at nothing, nothing at all, just feeling the sunlight on their faces, the heat of it, and they never move again. They are sitting there still, these men, these men whose portraits fade a little more each year, no matter how I try to keep them.

We work them out, and then get in a new batch.

## Salt Springs

The Mahoning River: You cannot touch it, you cannot swim it, my dear, for thirty miles. Do not take its fish: they are full of poison. Do

not dangle your toes in its dark water between Lowellville and Warren, where the mills begin to disappear and the dams built to hold the water for the mills begin to end.

Salt Springs is the closest translation for the Mahoning River, an Indian word we take for granted, like Mosquito Creek, Yellow Creek, Eagle Creek, West Branch, Meander Creek, and Mill Creek, the tributaries that feed the Salt Springs, that make the Salt Springs, a word we have taken, used, and abandoned. Deer used to lean down here to drink in great numbers, once upon a time, before steel came to this forgotten valley, the eastern gateway to the Middle West, an opening, an entrance, where once they cut down the forests to create the Erie Canal, and the fetid swamps that stagnated in the wake of progress brought malaria to settlers from New England, killed them. Mosquito Creek, the tributary of my childhood in Northern Trumbull County, is justly named.

The river is not a river. Do not believe it when it introduces itself as a river. We know it for what it is: a tool, a resource. Not a living river, but a way of life. You take a river, see, and you build dams within it. We have ten dams along those thirty miles of the Mahoning. You dam a river to increase the water that sits at the feet of a steel mill. You take that water and you use it to cool molten steel, to cool the machines that have made the steel, and then you take that water, a hundred degrees and full of toxins, and pour it back into the river. Now that's a river.

Dead things swim these waters, and the dead are always jealous creatures. They want life, they want the life that's been taken from them. The river is no different. Do not be fooled by its shining, dark, slowly drifting beauty. It will kill if you let it. It will kill with petroleum hydrocarbons, it will kill with benzo(a)pyrene, it will kill with mercury.

These words are not of native origin.

Along this stretch of the Mahoning, the mills line up like old soldiers, guns slung over their shoulders, rust in the summer sun,

collapse beneath the weight of winter. In the spring, vines clamber along the wreckage of their histories, saplings sprout between cracks in their foundations. (The foundations, the foundations, we have lost our foundations. It will take a hundred million dollars to heal this river, the foundation of our foundations, the foundations we have lost.)

Odd flowers push up in the dead, brown fields that surround the mills and factories. Life struggles beneath their corpses, and the river flows beside them, waiting, waiting while the people wait and wait.

Death, after all, is not one-sided.

### **The Feral Houses of Youngstown, Ohio**

The feral house is an odd creature. It lives among domestic houses, but I have seen entire packs of feral houses, too. They tend to roam in bands when their neighborhoods have been lost, forsaken, and huddle together in their emptiness, shedding their aluminum siding, their most antique decor, their copper piping and glass doorknobs. They are mangy and sometimes rabid. I have known friends and acquaintances who have been attacked by a feral house. They were only trying to take a photo, or they were trying to see what the house might have looked like long ago by entering through the front door, and then stepped on a nail, plunged through a floorboard.

I am fascinated by feral houses, and look to them when I cross their paths. Often I ignore the more domesticated, quiet, good houses I pass by. They are not dangerous, these good houses. Their histories have come to better ends. Romance does not exist in a domestic house; it's their sound reason and judgment, their sustained ability to hold up against the burdens of the world. I prefer the damaged pose of the feral houses as they patrol their corners like fallen heroes. In their disintegration they have been found. We measure love by its absence. We see what we have by what we have lost.

I once knew a feral house so well I visited it almost daily. It was on my way home from school, so I shouldn't claim to be noble: I did not go out of my way. But I did make a point of acknowledging it, instead of looking at anything else but it. We are trained to notice beauty, to flinch at scenes of despair, to unsee them. I have learned a different kind of vision here in Youngstown, though. I have learned how to find decay and disintegration, the coming apart of what was once composed, a beautiful process, a return rather than a disappearance.

This house, my feral house, is surrounded by disintegrating homes that have been abandoned for the last ten or twenty years. The doors have all been broken off their hinges, the windows smashed to pieces. The porch roof of the house across the street fell off during the first heavy snowfall this winter. The siding has been stripped from its walls, leaving silver insulation wrap to flicker in the sunlight. It was once a beautiful street, this street of feral houses, but I never saw it like that except in pictures I've found in the historical society's online repository. I love those pictures. I copy them and keep them with the ones I take of feral houses.

That's a secret of mine. What I do sometimes is, I take a camera and I ride the bus to different parts of the city where the houses are all disintegrating, and walk the streets waiting for a house to call to me. Sometimes I have to walk forever, sometimes it will happen right away. No matter how long it takes, though, one or two always demand that I take their pictures. So I snap pictures of a collapsed roof, the shattered windows that look in on empty, dusty, shadow-shrouded rooms, the wide staircase that leads up to the second or third floors of these old Victorians that have been abandoned for years, left to weather the weather and to observe their own decline as they take another step each year toward oblivion.

I have pictures from as far back as 1995. What got me started on this particular endeavor was the day I first heard their voices—the voices of the feral houses—and followed their directions until I

found myself on the north side of the city, where a pink house and a blue house stood side by side on a corner near the university, their windows busted out, their doors flung open. As soon as I arrived at the base of the front porch, where a step was missing, the voices stopped, and I knew what they wanted from me: to be seen for what they no longer were. Homes.

So I stood at the foot of that first feral house and imagined the families who once lived there, children laughing as they chased each other through upstairs rooms down to the first floor, imagined Christmas trees that had once decorated living room corners, parties thrown in wide hallways and dining rooms where people sat around talking about the state of worldly affairs. When I could see it all, finally, the life this house once had within it, I lifted my camera and snapped a picture. I think I hoped that everything I had imagined would be in the photos after I developed them, but the photos only showed the house as it was: sagging, broken, empty-eyed, a piano on the first floor, lid up, keys silent, the wires broken coils. When I look at these pictures, though, I can still remember what I saw in those empty, rotting, wind-driven, rain-swamped, gorgeous lovelies. I can still see the families I'd imagined living in them, I can still imagine what it must have been like to live within their walls, what it must have been like for the houses to have life within them.

It is spring now, so the houses are starting to be torn down again. Two years ago the city razed a hundred. Last year, four hundred more. We have a list, a long list, a very long list of thousands of feral houses that must be dealt with, destroyed, buried. Sometimes you have to amputate parts to save the whole, is our mayor's philosophy. It makes the place look better, but it is unsettling to someone who can hear the voices of these houses before, during, and even after they fall. There is always that squeal and moan as the wrecker breaks into them, the beams snapping before that final, quiet moment when the whole structure begins to collapse. Each time a house is demolished, I am watching someone's dream of a

safe life for themselves and their families on earth being destroyed, I am watching death take a city, stretching its shadow, house by house, street by street, block by block.

Except for the few people who have stayed behind to struggle, the neighborhood where my first and favorite feral house lives has been abandoned. It is true that Youngstown was once one of America's great hopes—it was called the City of Homes in its heyday—but after the captains of industry moved their work to poorer nations, thousands fled the City of Homes. In the last thirty years a hundred thousand people have stood up and walked away from their houses because they could no longer keep them. Down the street they went, saying they were going out for a pack of cigarettes, and never returned. Now the vines continue to stretch and wind their bodies over wood and brick and stone, over walls and rooftops, over cornices and cupolas, and the saplings continue to grow up through the cracks in rotten floorboards, the squirrels to nest in attics, the birds to build in the eaves of what's been left behind. You can't stop progress.

### **In a Forgotten Valley**

It is easy for you to forget us, deep in a valley, living below the line of the horizon. In the past, we sent up smoke signals, met by the river to trade iron and steel for a face, a name, an idea of ourselves existing. But it has been years since you have heard from us, and rarely do you venture down the slope into the folded land where we walk across the soil rich with indignation and bitterness. A glacier made our home, came down from Montreal fifteen thousand years ago, a knife of ice slicing through the earth, making the Great Lakes and this cut in the land, a scar from Western Pennsylvania to Northeastern Ohio. The lakes here are plentiful, the earth filled with the stones and the dirt of other countries, other regions, the tools of native peoples, spears and arrowheads, mounds where once another kind of people who lived here before us are buried, nameless. The

valley can do that, it can hold us so close in its hands that it never allows us to live in the light of the upper world. A valley in the earth is an alternate universe, where the signals traveling across the flat or mountainous or long rolling hillsides or stretches of desert gleaming in the sun are lost in translation. In a valley, you are always waiting for the time lag to catch up, to finally hear the question asked a minute ago, for the other shoe to drop.

In my travels through this valley, I have seen the return of the eagles, the disappearance of houses and people, and am struck each time I look out my window by the way light sits on top of roofs and windshields, as if its reach is limited, only its fingertips can brush against us. The cows are lowing in the pastures, the silos gleam along the back roads, the buildings in the downtowns vanish in despair, and more and more it seems fate is a fickle spread of cards played in a game where we were never dealt a hand. We keep losing anyway: jobs, neighborhoods, parks, downtown buildings, sports teams, rivers, memories, people, homes.

You are in this valley now. Imagine the river and the ruined line of factories and mills, the brown fields that spread out around them, the greening of the soil that sweeps up the walls of the valley, where the houses of the people spread out and away in waves. There are gaps in the streets of certain neighborhoods, places that have disappeared, gray smudges, blanks in memory, words struck out of a sentence left unfinished on the earth's page. When you walk through this valley, the people who have not left it, who have refused to leave or who could not climb out or who could not imagine anywhere but this valley, the people of this valley will look at you and wonder aloud, "Where did you come from? Of all places, why did you come here?" Do not worry. An answer is not truly expected. Often those travelers who have made their way here cannot fathom the reasons for their journeys to such places anyway. Sometimes it seems they arrive by accident, as if they have been washed ashore after a shipwreck, and suffer amnesia, unsure of who they are and where they

had been attempting to go. They settle in with the other inhabitants for a while, and sleep like they always belonged here, have finally found home.

But it is a home that the people of this valley are never and always surprised by, as if every day is the first day, a constant historyless present, a dip in the fields of time and space. The days are short here, as if it is always winter, and a person can forget his own mortality if he can forget himself or be forgotten. Some find this a blessing; others perceive it as a night terror that shakes a person so hard they cannot return to sleep.

There is a game that you will learn to play here, that asks you each morning to remember your dreams, to replay them in your memory throughout the course of each day. If, at the end of an evening, before it is time to sleep once more, you can recount your dreams from the previous night with the vividness of the present moment, and have not allowed your dreams to evaporate as dreams do—if you can tell them true, you will sleep soundly for another night, carrying your dreams into an endless competition to retain the life you lead behind closed eyes. Those who cannot pull the thread of one night into the next day will begin to fade a little more each day until they are gone completely. When this occurs, the people of the valley will say of these disappeared ones, “They are no longer playing.”

In this valley, we have forgotten something. Outside this valley, we have been forgotten. But we are not gone, not yet, not nearly. Having traveled so far, having come down here to walk among us for a while, will you now remember us? Or will you, too, forget your dreams?