**Me and Time**

*By Callan Preece*

And then we crossed a country. We crossed together—in the Corolla with him driving because I never learnt to drive and with our stuff lodged in the backseat in such a way that furniture would dig into your back. He drove and I fiddled with the radio or talked about the kids or looked out at the cars and the road and sometimes I tried to read him things from my books—little things about patterns and places and people too distant to be real that I’d read in a mock serious voice to make him laugh. And he would laugh. Usually he’d say something funny too and that would sustain us for a while and then we’d go back to the silence and the watching of the road and the music and the way things seem to unfurl with time. A sort of rhythm to it; the quiet and then the sound and then the quiet again; the outlines and forms of the road. Sometimes we wouldn’t talk for so long and that would bother me, make me wonder if this stillness was new or if it had always been there—a natural thing just now revealed after years of screaming children. This quiet that I noticed and I wasn’t sure if he noticed, a thing that existed in backgrounds for years until it became overbearing and everything, a silence that seemed to stoop over you and guide the car as it drove. You wondered whether it’s the silence or the observing of the silence that’s wrong.

How you could exist as a single thing for years and then suddenly fracture into so many constituent parts.

We slept in hostels and reclaimed our youth. Small and unassuming places full of people where I was always paranoid that the car would be missing in the morning. Places where everything was transitory and the people were transitory and where I’d wonder what it meant to be loved by anyone. Places where I’d conclude that he must love me, where the same thought would return in this eternal and sad and disturbing way, where I found it strange how he hardly talked as he drove and how he was always so excited to arrive and never to be going anywhere.

I’d wanted to fly to our new home but he’d wanted to drive and I didn’t want to disappoint him. Once the kids had left I figured we could both need the distraction anyway, and so we drove and he was so excited, as if a whole world had appeared just for him. The hostels were his idea too, and I hated them; these small cramped hotels where we slept in bunkbeds surrounded by people and you had to a hang a towel over your bunk if you wanted privacy. All these young people. He’d go off alone and leave me there, hiding behind my towel, surrounded by the young. He’d talk to them—try and adhere himself into their world and exist as one of them—while I hid away and tried to make myself small, just this sagging and aging thing. It seems after a certain age you have to start making room, as if it becomes almost wrong to want space. I was so mad at him for leaving me and going off with them, it seemed he was in some way rebelling against a natural order, abandoning something higher than anything we could understand.

It was part of a change I’d noticed in him, a change or a way he’d always been that had never been clear to me until now. He seemed distant, jumpy, as if a million alchemical bonds within him were tearing away from themselves. It seemed impossible to imagine all the things he could do. There was something about the journey that made him cold and strange, different from how I remembered him. And it bothered me. It was that more than anything else that made the hostels so horrible.

It was easier when we were driving. Sometimes we moved so fast that you could barely remember the scene—just the speed and the way we could laugh together and pass sunflowers and how everything was so fresh and alive in the way only the country can be. It was when he drove that we’d talk, about silly and inconsequential things, letting the sounds and shapes of words smooth over any cracks that were forming between us. When it was like that I’d think that this was enough, that this could be enough for anybody. I’d find a passage in a book and make him laugh. We’d talk about the kids. He was still distant, but he was manageable, and for a while you could almost forget about it all, at least until he took a wrong turn, or I said something I shouldn’t have, or the furniture sticking into our backs became too much. When that happened he could become so angry. He didn’t yell because he never yelled, but you could feel the difference, the way the car would lose all the magic that comes with words. You’d know that in some way you were responsible for all wrongs. You’d feel all that furniture digging into your back: the sins of the world condensed into physical space.

He’d want to shout but he wouldn’t and I almost wished that he would, for things to progress and change as opposed to this silence that seemed to stretch out in all directions. It was as if it was conveying a meaning too vast for language to comprehend. We’d keep driving and all I could do was make myself small, hide away and try and become nothing. And then we’d arrive somewhere and he’d find some guests to go off with, the young ones, the ones who might just get to live forever, and I’d be alone again, wondering about him and who he used to be.

We’d never spend more than a day or two before moving on. He was restless and the progress made him happy and I suppose all I’ve ever wanted is to see him happy. We’d leave in the mornings, mostly in silence but in a calmer silence, a stillness born out of low energy and the hopes that the early hours bring. We’d try and forget yesterday and all those previous yesterdays, sit together and travel, talk about the kids or the new house, sometimes we’d search through the radio for all those odd stations firing their frequencies across the country—DJs shouting in foreign languages and alien sounds, the pop songs that we did recognise (how pop music seemed the same everywhere now, the same patterns seeping to the surface). There’d also be static sometimes far out between towns, places where the wavelengths hadn’t yet penetrated, and there we just had our silence. There’d be the quiet and the country and the way you could drive for miles without seeing a single person, and in those moments I mostly thought about him. It was becoming strange, seeing him as he was then and also imagining him as the man before. Had he always been so angry? I wondered if you can only ever reveal the real you once it’s too late to do anything else; certain songs creeping in slowly, one by one, until suddenly they’re all you can hear. We’d be in those points between places where static reigned and I’d think about the him that existed inside of me, this unchanging and shining person, and how there was this other him beside me now that I didn’t know, that seemed to be a whole new creature that bubbled up in notes over the years until there was this thing that I could never understand. And there was this perfect person and then this new person, there were all these incongruities that seemed to make up a mind.

Static would ebb and new songs would appear—different tunes with different DJs and different languages and then the same pop songs again. The road stretched out and we watched the sheer incomprehensible power of space unfold through the glass screen. It’s incredible how there can be so much out there and there still never be enough room. There was a person next to me and a person within me and it was becoming harder and harder to marry those two lives, DJs on the radio raving about things we couldn’t understand, everybody so angry. He wouldn’t speak to me and there was something so wrong and I didn’t know what was wrong, just that there was a person here that I didn’t know. It seemed that maybe the world was just filled with the lies that your mind wanted to see, people these disparate, distant things, your idea of them no more real than the sounds that appeared between places, the dead air of creaking, far off space. We were halfway to our new home and it seemed endlessly far away.

And I tried a few things. Sometimes, when he’d let me, I’d go with him when he explored the hostels; I’d speak to the young people and try to be unafraid, drink when he’d drink, overwhelm myself with the night and try to pretend with him that we were young until the mornings came and the world would become shaky and painful. It was nice being something he could enjoy. And when we were out together I did try to know him—not as his imagined self but as he was—this searching thing, this person that seemed so desperate when he was around these young people, acting like them, living for some possibility it was unlikely he’d ever see. He was looking for some future and I wanted the past and it seemed such a sin to just exist in a moment forever. And I couldn’t get how he could handle these headaches. We’d drive with them and it was stupid that we’d ever tried being something we weren’t. The hangovers would make him angry too, and that would add another colour to the journey, everything becoming icy with that same silence, static appearing through the radio. At our next destination he’d go out alone, the one after that I might come with him; and it’s strange, the patterns we develop. It seemed, with the hangovers and the static and the way he looked so intently upon the road, that there really was no moment you could cling to. That there was just the constant movement and repeated cycles, as if it’s the natural state of objects to be in motion, as if stasis was just this odd form of protest. Things repeated and never arrived anywhere, static in the air, and I missed living in our home with our children so much and I resented him so much; it seemed ridiculous—so stupid to think you could exist as anything but this infernal moving thing.

And we’d move to the next place, then the next, tracing lines closer and closer to our final destination, some home we’d never seen except in pictures.

And one night we were in some hostel I can’t remember now; it was one of the good days where he’d let me go with him on his night and we’d met some transient people whose names I didn’t hear properly and he was telling stories—things from before me and before the kids, sometimes things that happened in tandem with but without me. We were all drinking something hard to pronounce and bitter that stained your teeth red, and I remember noticing how these young people weren’t finding him funny. (It’s strange how much lesser you can be around those you don’t know.) They weren’t finding him funny and it seemed to me that we were just old. He kept telling stories and they didn’t seem to care and kept glancing away at the gate and the outside foreign air. I kept thinking what it must look like—us keeping them trapped, the aged feeding on the young. You could feel the inevitabilities in the air as the red drink went round, how the transients started answering less and less, until there were hardly any words anywhere, until they made their excuses and were gone, these transient people, lost somewhere out in the city. And then we were alone. Everyone with any life in them were out to the places only they know about. We were alone in the usual silence with just the sound of the outside world bleeding into the inside, and he seemed so hurt by that, this being alone, this being rejected. I think I noticed for the first time how small he’d become, such a child (this old child), seething in this quiet, so angry and so sad at these random transient people for leaving us, leaving him. Angry at all the voices outside speaking and laughing and existing, angry at the way our inside differed from the outside, with all this heat inside him. The heat and the car’s heat and all the heat powering the earth far below—combustion and chemicals and fire and the force of all those breaking particles. Almost as if nothing can be done without that destruction.

It’s incredible how much heat is inside everything.

To see him like that, angry and sad and pathetic, so broken due to a few transient people, it was almost nice. He seemed malleable again, easier to match to that inner version of him inside me, both of us together on the bunk and me feeling all those radiating particles. I thought he might cry and maybe he did cry. And that helped too, seeing him pathetic and human. I caressed his palm and stroked all those thousands of particles of him. I held his hand and he turned to me and then his arm was around me and it was wonderful; it was us alone together and being together, it felt in that moment as if everything could be forgiven, that there was nothing to forgive. We undressed each other with a touch guiding to a thing long dead. Then the heat of bodies touching. Heat and the way your molecules contain all this heat, the way bonds form and break and the sheer power that comes from combustion. I felt him and everything he was and I tried to contain him, his smell and warmth and the red stained teeth. We hung a towel over the bunk to hide ourselves. His hand was in mine and then we weren’t diverging things but a single thing—old atoms connected by older things, molecules joined by ancient and sacred bonds. Then hearing those outside and his breath and feeling the exertion of using long dormant muscles. It felt so good to appreciate the sheer magnitude of a person—a knowledge of how the world was a pit that sucked and dragged you down and how it was only by the invisible chemical chains of others that you didn’t plummet into oblivion. Us together, our bonds bound. He took me and we were a single thing and it seemed ridiculous to be anything else but there. And it was like that, with his breath and my breath and the heat of fusing particles, the towel hanging as a barrier between us and the world, the way bodies radiate heat, reactions and hormones and the sounds of flesh; and then, slowly, he became tired and I think I became tired, our bodies showed that hint of decay, the ceasing of exertion, and then we couldn’t continue anymore. It was over and we were separate people and those molecular bonds were still there but were hidden again. I don’t think he ever finished.

When I came back from the bathroom he was already asleep, the moment gone, just another of those unclassified emotions, another fleeting feeling damned by its lack of symbol. I crept into the bunk above his and thought about just how terrible the inside of a mind can be.

In the morning we got in the car and we travelled and there was one fewer day between us and some place we’d never been to. We felt the motion of the car, the heat and sound of combusting particles, and we didn’t talk to each other; we hadn’t talked all morning. It’s amazing how much silence there can be around people. The memory of the previous night seemed to be burning through everything and I didn’t ask him about it and it seemed impossible to ask. There was just the motion; the motion and the maybe unspoken knowledge between us of those tiny molecular chains that tied us together. All the bonds that bind. It seems after a while those connections can form with anything, the world growing more frightening as you age until you just need something to cling to over this giant and seething hole. We saw another hostel and I went out into the night with him again and we drank again and it all seemed forgettable. I remember I tried to be something worth loving. Another day we drove and he brushed his hand over mine and I felt those fusing atoms and I think he tried to do the same. The days upon days and the way things fall away from time and soon we were nearing wherever we were going and we braced ourselves for that coming thing. When we did laugh together it was always wonderful. It was as if all life could be saved by the delusions formed by such small and isolated instants. Those inscrutable hidden bonds that bind the old together.