

I-70 West: Mile Marker 82  
\* 334 Miles to Zanesville

When I die

I want to come back  
as a 1969 Plymouth Barracuda  
midnight blue with black-tape accents,  
twin dummy hood scoops,  
and a 440 big-block engine  
stuffed between the fenders.  
An engine so big they had to install it  
with a shoehorn and a hammer.

I've got a six-pack of Mountain Dew,  
a book bag filled with Pop-Tarts, a jumbo pack  
of Sharpies, a change of socks,  
fifty dollars cash, a credit card in my wallet,  
and a loaded gun in the trunk.  
No rearview mirror. And no more worries.  
It's just over three hundred miles to Zanesville, Ohio.

A straight shot.

Gotta make good time.  
The sun's already up.  
By now they've probably  
found the old man's body.

I-70 West: Mile Marker 80  
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My mother used to read me this book,  
*Harold and the Purple Crayon.*

Harold was a little kid who made  
anything happen just by drawing it.  
He could draw a horizon, or a window,  
or a door, or stairs, or stars or a boat  
or a spaceship. No trouble existed  
that Harold couldn't fix.

A few years later  
Mom kept getting sicker, so Grandpa moved  
in with us for good. That's when I started  
writing on my bedroom walls.

Harold had a purple crayon. I've got Sharpies—  
medium-tip mostly,  
the occasional king size for big ideas.

I figured I could make everything work out  
if I just wrote on my walls. If I just wrote  
the right phrase the right number of times  
or in the right color.

*Give my mother back her mind.  
Calm the demons in her head.*

*Leave the darkness far behind.  
If need be, take me instead.*

My Wyandot shaman father was not  
around to give me spiritual guidance.  
So I created my own heaven, Zane-atopia,  
and I drew a picture of it on my ceiling.

Zane-atopia existed at the top of  
Mount Guesswind, and my life was the climb.  
The earthly world was a dragon's tail  
wrapped around the mountain's base. The bad times  
were dark clouds. The good times a rainbow.  
A bright flash of light shone at the tip-top point  
of the mountain (where good people went  
to live with God) and inside the light was my mom  
and my brother, Zach, and Stanley (he's my dad),  
and even the old man.

All of this I drew on the ceiling  
until my arms were like lead pipes  
and my neck was a train wreck.

But it felt good in my stomach.  
Like Michelangelo must have felt  
painting the Sistine Chapel. Like reaching  
up to touch God's fingertip.

Now my walls are whispering ten miles back.  
I'll never draw on them or write on them again.  
But I can't help looking at the Barracuda's dash:  
an empty space waiting to be filled.  
These Sharpies are dependable.  
The only thing I can count on.  
They'll write on just about anything.

The thought of it  
makes my fingertips itch.

I-70 West: Mile Marker 79  
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I never did belong in Baltimore.  
It hit me like the voice of God  
a few weeks ago, with summer break  
gasping to an end:

*You don't belong, Zane.*

*You don't belong.*

I wrote it on my walls all day.

*Don't belong. Don't belong. Don't belong.*

Till I got fed up and Googled myself.  
And there it was, just a couple pages in:  
"Zanesville, Ohio—population 25,586.  
Home of the world's only Y Bridge."  
A bridge where three roads intersect!

A town named after me  
with a bridge that asks, *Why, why, why?*  
I drew the bridge. I drew myself in its center.  
And I gave it a caption. I inked it into my walls.

*Zane belongs in Zanesville.*

*Zanesville is the place for Zane.*

Why had I not thought of it before?  
Zanesville is the town where Mom is buried.

I may as well be buried there too.

I-70 West: Mile Marker 77  
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*Give my mother back her mind.  
Calm the demons in her head.  
Leave the darkness far behind.  
If need be, take me instead.*

The day I began to write on my walls  
I was listening to the old man  
hound my mother in his usual way.

*Ee-liz-a-beth, this. Ee-liz-a-beth, that.*

My grandfather's voice carried down  
the air ducts to my basement bedroom,  
poisoning the stillness, dimly lit.  
The floor was gray cement, the walls light blue,  
the ceiling bright white and easy to reach.  
I was lying on my bed flipping a penny  
and considering my options—  
    should I smother the old man with a pillow?  
    or plunge a knife into his black heart?  
heads, tails, tails, heads, tails, heads—  
when the penny took a wild hop,  
fell between the bed and the wall,  
and lodged in a gap behind the baseboard.

And just like that, it had disappeared.

*Ee-liz-a-beth, this. Ee-liz-a-beth, that.*

That's when I heard the music in my head.

Music like a wind-up jack-in-the-box ready to pop.

This was the first of the usual signs:

A seizure was on its way.

I-70 West: Mile Marker 75  
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I knew from experience  
I had about five minutes  
till the seizure hit.

*Ee-liz-a-beth, this. Ee-liz-a-beth, that.*

I broke into a sweat. I felt dizzy.  
I began to hear the voices.  
My mother. My brother. The old man.  
All of them calling to me.  
But they weren't there.

*The penny is hidden, I thought.  
Hidden behind the baseboard.  
No one will know. Only me.  
My responsibility.*

I had to tell.

Someone had to know.

Not about the seizure,  
not about my mother, but the penny.

So I pulled my bed away from the wall.  
And very carefully. Very lightly,

in pencil, just above the spot  
where the penny had gone, I wrote:

*Penny lost here by Zane Harold Guesswind.*

Just like that the panic was gone.  
It almost felt as if that penny  
had been trapped inside of me.  
Or maybe I felt I *was* the penny.  
Or maybe it's all the same.

Whatever it was, the simple act of writing  
on my wall had strengthened me somehow.

I went through my usual routine.  
Called up the stairs to Grandpa and Mom.  
Removed my shoes. Spit out my gum.  
And despite myself, I savored this moment:  
the twilight zone between the onset and the blackout.  
I climbed into bed as I always did  
to wait for the seizure to hit . . .

but the seizure never came.  
Just that once, it didn't come.  
The voices in my head faded.

The jack-in-the-box music came to an end.  
And for an instant my grandfather ceased  
his bickering through the duct work.  
Alone in my room. My walls whispered to me.  
Hummed to me. Soothed me.  
I read what I had written:

*Penny lost . . . Zane Harold Guesswind . . .  
. . . lost here . . . lost . . .*

Then I got out of bed,  
and I wrote some more. And I wrote  
for a couple hours. Pencil at first.  
Then crayons. Then watercolor markers.  
Then permanent markers.  
These last gave the most satisfaction.  
The ink so vivid and real.  
The ink so here-to-stay real.  
So I-will-never-leave-you real.  
It seeped in and spread just slightly,  
binding itself into the pores  
of the whispering wall forever.

I felt how Harold must feel  
when he's drowning in the sea  
and draws himself a boat.