

1959 Driving Lesson, South Carolina Highway 77

—for my father & uncle

Daddy lets us take the car & we lose track of time.  
Aimless cruising down Market Street in Cheraw.  
Two-toned Oldsmobile 98 Starfire, almost like new.  
We just want to be seen—you not quite 20 & me  
barely 19, both of us eager for a dance & a taste.  
The jook is packed with fine Bettys & cats who jump salty  
at our slick ride. Brown liquor & slow grooves. We hit 'em  
with our out-of-town game. You're the dancer,  
I'm the talker. We have ourselves a time! But soon  
the sun will be long gone & towns like these make certain  
boys like us make moves before dark. It's a long stretch  
back to our neck of the woods in this world  
where anything can happen.

They pass us  
idled at the stop sign—the truckload of white boys  
who darken their eyes, the looks saying what they hope  
we both know—we don't belong in a car like this,  
well-oiled American machine shined, as if by God.  
I look at you when you look at me & our eyes  
say it all—I *got you, brother*. I press the gas, marvel  
at those horses screaming, a quarter mile down the road  
fast, laughing like maybe we are mistaken. But then,  
the half-dollar moons waxing in the rearview  
& the sound of the pickup's angry engine, rattle  
of a night breaking. Centrifugal force be damned—  
I take the curve at full speed & thank Daddy's sure hand  
with a wrench for escape's sturdy hum. But I can see you  
thinking down a different line, your hand slipping  
the .38 Special from the glove box, lips mouthing  
a silent prayer. The glow fades in the distance but there  
ain't no stopping now. I clutch the wheel tighter & lean  
the last leg toward the state line's announcement.  
Just hold it steady baby! Only a few more miles home.