

# **The town beneath the notch**

**I.**

**Preface**

## the town beneath the notch

In the quiet state of New Hampshire, in the quiet town of Sandwich, up a quiet street that becomes dirt two miles from the village, there is an old road that winds up and over a shallow mountain pass.

There was a time before the road, the British, and the rest. When Abenaki echoed through the trees from lake to notch to ridge. Before the wagons wore out a trade track to the sea through the mountains dipping low. Before the trees were gone, the road was carved, and the immigrants settled down. Forty homesteads, two schoolhouses, a church, a tavern, and a mill.

Now the farmers have fled the rocky soil and only old Crowley keeps a lonely summer residence up notch. Stonewalls wander through the forest, leafy humus fills abandoned cellar holes to their brim, moss creeps over the crooked gravestones of family plots, and the road slowly crumbles.

Though these haunted  
woods be filled  
with many histories  
none my own,

this dwindling town  
beneath the notch is cradle,  
in this town here  
I was grown.

*As a boy*

I wondered  
what life would be  
in the middle  
of nowhere

no one pointed to  
the rotting plywood  
empty churches  
and houses peeling

paint, abandoned  
orchards and yards  
littered with Trump  
signs and rusted out cars

no one pointed  
so I didn't see  
the signs that read  
*Nowhere*

## **II.**

**Sketches:**

**the season of decay**

*Sunrise, driving north to market*

west of the krumholz ridges  
the mist lies in layers

over the sleepy land  
the sun peels them back

one by one in dripping  
shining sheets to reveal

the rusting corn tassles  
head height or higher

in the valleys and intervalles.

Intervale: the English translation

for an Abenaki word  
meaning:

small steep valley with flat, fertile  
floor that floods with river water

today filled with wasps  
wild apple and rusting cars

*\*krumholz - a type of stunted, deformed vegetation encountered in subarctic and subalpine tree line landscapes, shaped by continual exposure to fierce, freezing wind*

*sorting apples the last afternoon of September*

leafy dales  
disintegrate  
into a blue sky  
chilly and nude

wasps wander  
among the rafters  
and rotten  
summer fruit

I inspect an apple  
for blemishes  
then another  
then another

*Crossing the downtown bridge*

A flock of pigeons flashes  
above the stark square brick

of Main, their shadows rippling  
across the river divided

so neatly above the crashing falls  
by three stone arches ignored

by all the villagers  
rushing to and fro

*Evening wander*

Grass clippings and ladies  
perfume the park lit gold  
by the setting sun

but below the old mill house  
spiders weave their webs  
in the chinks of wall where

the concrete rotted  
away and stagnant river  
water smells like decay

I inhale the mucky  
scent and forget  
ladies, gold, and grass

reminded instead  
sunset is nothing more  
than the day, dying

*Visions of old age*

buried beneath  
a pile of quilts  
an old grandmother  
chuckles

at the the purple ridge,  
the wasps, the spilt milk  
pooled on the floor  
by the cat's bowl

her husband died  
of pneumonia, so  
she sits at the table  
alone

only a laugh  
and broken  
memories  
left

*The night the white house on Weybridge burned*

a spark  
from the hearth  
floated up to light  
the papery wasp's nest  
nestled in the flue

flames trickled into  
the maple tree nearby  
the crackling, smoking  
leaves drifted down  
to light the browning lawn

smoldering beams  
collapsed to the foundation  
in a halo of sparks and so  
the furious revolution finished  
in the glory of ash and dust

*\*flue – a channel in a chimney for conveying flame and smoke to the outer air*

*Thursday in October*

the vintner died  
of a brain hemorrhage  
this day last year

now he ain't and  
now his grapes  
rot on the vine

wasps wander  
in his fallow vineyard  
among the yellowing

rust stains spread  
dust settles over  
buckets, bottles, etc

we mourned  
the obscure hobbyist  
and I remember how

the day he died  
someone in the apartment  
above the tavern had

the good sense to pull  
the blinds down  
tight

*\*vintner - a person who makes wine*

*notch wandering*

overgrown cellar  
    filled with leafy  
        brine

damp crag  
    spruce beards  
        cairn stumbling

between two rubbled  
    towns, this torn  
        and tattered line

fading  
    haunting  
        passing time

\*cairn - a mound of rough stones built as a memorial or landmark,  
*typically on a hilltop or skyline*

*dusk, November*

behind the abandoned schoolhouse  
the crows caucus about

winter settling on the mountain  
ridges to knock the rusted

ornaments of autumn down, stars  
popping into the sky

streetlights, silhouettes, and shadows  
– the usual seasonal business –

listening, the tips of my ears  
burn cold

*December, grey dawn*

I stepped out the door  
to wander for a minute

in the dusty snow  
and ponder for a minute

the charismatic ducks  
and the rusted out oil barrel

dissolving into the river  
rib cage rotted away to expose

echoing innards.  
I wondered about the teeming life

beyond sight in the river  
then I turned towards home and coffee

only to find the radio blaring  
and a morning dissolved in distraction

### **III.**

**Sketches:**

**the cycle of regret**

*September/second/morning*

we lay there  
and you described  
the tongue  
cradling  
the *g* in *bedraggled*

we talked about  
Arabic morning  
greetings, I asked  
what time  
do you usually wake up?

my fingers  
wandered  
like a hungry wasp  
on a half  
rotten quince as

again I traced  
your eyes to  
your nose  
ring to your half  
open lips

*\* a hard, acid, pear-shaped fruit used in preserves or as flavoring*

*Dream sequence*

in a chestnut afternoon  
the long drought yields  
eighteen mating pairs of geese  
feed in the corn field

the golden light  
highlights the crimson riot  
flared up across the ridges  
like a shirt-shined apple blush

our legs tangle in the dying grass  
I lay my hand against your cheek  
to feel the shape of your  
cheekbone in my palm

*Driving north*

The first snow fell with twilight.  
I was driving alone in Vermont,  
hurtling through the white  
forest of flakes swirling

down only to dissolve into  
four muddy bands of asphalt,  
salt, and sand, remembering  
the last time I held you

for a brief moment against my chest  
beneath a street lamp in January  
and kissed you only once on the cheek,  
goodbye.

You dissolved so quickly  
in the sand and grit.

*broke(n)*

this morning I made  
my lonely mug of coffee and

toasted the stale bread,  
only to shatter into pieces

longing for Grace's bed

**IV.**

**Interlude**

**(brief)**

*Streamside prayer*

Small stone  
in this searing night:  
you dwarf me.

Sweet stone  
so silent, still,  
beyond geology:  
you strike me dumb.

Radiant pebble  
bathed in brook water:  
I fall to my knees

**V.**

**Sketches:**

**the arc of uncertainty**

*inheritance, unspeakable*

the soil warms with another sunrise  
the soil carries something

of all that came before  
rocky peaks, rivers, wars,

plagues, invasions, etc  
the dirty sweep of history

piles my inheritance high  
in soil tracts of goldenrod

and genocide

*Tedium*

I sit on synthetic cushions  
under fluorescent lights  
in row chairs bathed in stale air

No small schist altar  
half-buried in the krumholz

no ghostly moths fluttering  
above in the full moon mist

\*schist – a type of metamorphic rock common in Vermont and New Hampshire

\*krumholz - a type of stunted, deformed vegetation encountered in subarctic and subalpine tree line landscapes, shaped by continual exposure to fierce, freezing wind

*On election day*

The mail man paces the streets  
striding over cracked concrete

where the oak leaves rust  
and pool in empty parking lots

A woman smokes a cigarette  
and at the Good Will

cash register, an argument  
breaks out.

*Little histories*

the new soft inch of snow  
clings to lipstick red berries  
on the hawthorn bereft of leaves

my nose burns cold, my toes  
I feel them warming  
as I walk in the the parking lot

below my crooked apartment  
along the river  
the power lines looping

between geometric rooftops  
are a waterfall  
of history echoing loud

with the little histories  
I often forget, like mill town politics  
and rural electrification

*news from Standing Rock*

the Lakota were arrested  
again on the prairie today

the internet said the police  
carried shotguns, shields, dogs

armored vehicles and helicopters to ward  
off the prayers and peaceful protest

I saw the last yellow tear  
drip down from the elm

leaving nothing but the dark, ragged  
ruts of tears past carved into the sky

and I marked the day  
he could cry no more.

*for Aleppo, from nowhere*

I walked the dusty sidewalk  
humming a sickly

sentimental tune  
to ward off the thought

that today in Aleppo,  
ten thousand will be massacred

their goodbyes broadcast  
as clickbait and self-righteous porn.

Traffic backed up at the light,  
and a remixed ragtime blared

out of the first minivan in line  
as if the morning wasn't pink and cold,

as if the silhouettes of the elm  
trees didn't slash the sky,

as if the sky carried no dawn clouds  
like wisps of wool in a basket,

as if the full moon had not set down beyond  
the graveyard just half hour past,

as if the sorrow of ten thousand  
in Aleppo did not steam up

out of the sidewalk cracks  
in screams and wails

*protest song*

The oak tree outside clings  
to shivering leaves,

the wrought iron railings  
glisten wet,

the electric kettle clicks as evening  
slips over the day.

When I was younger, I drank tea  
with spoonfuls of sweet white sugar

from Granny's blue porcelain bowl  
and I left space for a swirling cloud of cream

Today,  
there were vigils in the street and rain  
so I drank the bitter tea black

## **VI.**

### **Postscript**

*Home again*

Snow covered the woods  
in a hopeful half-inch  
of delusion that I

cracked with a foot  
through the thin  
puddle ice in the driveway

to break the silence  
of these stony skies  
in this dead town