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Larry Beckett

Sonnets

Clear out of Sundance, skirting to the north
of the Black Hills, by the actual Deadwood,
with the sharpshooters under Mt. Moriah,
in the absurd light over the Badlands: down-
pours did this, hollowing stone into holes
and hoodoos, unholy fingers at heaven:
cross into what grasses are left of the old
prairie, without a prayer, the bison gone,
and the Lakota still hunting them, with
no hope, in the glyphs cut into red quartz:
nine kisses, in bad faith, nine hundred miles
to this bleak oasis, where we must not add
meaning to the day, nothing's happening
here, and the red sundown signifies itself.

We light out, ninety, east, Great Plains,
by the red barn, the white farmhouse,
the blue silo, under the limestone bluffs,
across the Mississippi, thick with islands,
into Wisconsin, with the old calliope
still fanfaring the tightrope walker and
his woman, the snake charmer, start of
the confluence, the Ringling Brothers
and Barnum & Bailey. On a late page:
it's joy to see that circus, the absurd,
and written in the stars; she's with
the hard astronomer—will that last?
At the Weathervane Motel, out past
the swings, at dusk, tall grass, fireflies.

Out of this desolation, we power away,
in the foul air, from the cities of the plain,
past repetition farms, eighty all the way,
Ohio turnpike, the crossroads of nowhere:
I read, he's on the road, to his old home,
the unforgotten light, like in the morning
of the world. Where is the border? Every
look at the steaming map, it's miles to go,
in rain like cataclysm, the engine missing,
light fails. I look back, and the dead iris
and the moon down, all that delusion, go
into a salt song. The windshield is mist,
engine dying, electrical wet, the driver
drifting to the shoulder. Oh dark highway.

In the monotony plains, I look down at
the myth in black and white: —Sisyphus,
dying: Woman, roll my body, unburied,
into the agora. In the underworld: God,
let me return to earth, and light into her
for obeying, not loving. But back in this
old world, the sun, the shore, the ocean,
he shied from the dark inferno. Divinity
had summoned him, and burned, in vain,
for years; the god of messages had to

haul him from his indulgences down to
his hell, his stone, his mountain. He is
the absurd hero: his passions, his pain,
his sentence: do it, and do it for nothing.

Long haul, the waters the highways, into
the years, arriving at the sun, the junction,
the arc synoptic: from here, go anywhere,
in a cracked country, talk ten languages.
These confessions, fictions, in fourteen
lines, are ordered by the mystery of days,
a book of changes, rocking, odd or even,
counting on fingers up to blue voyages.
Oh to glorify, you, who gather, this
garland, and you, who gaze, this mirror,
as in the canto, this music, in the coil
of seasons, these sonnets, by the river,
oblivion, but what I sing's by heart,
in memory of that paradise, the page.

Larry Beckett's poetry has appeared in *Salamander*, *Field*, *Zyzyva*, and the anthology *Portland Lights*. His books include *Songs and Sonnets*; the book-length poems *Paul Bunyan Wyatt Earp*, and *Amelia Earhart*, which are included in the epic, *American Cycle*; and a study of the San Francisco renaissance, *Beat Poetry*. Jonah Raskin (who is currently nonfiction editor of *Caveat Lector*) wrote: "With *American Cycle*, Beckett lays claim to join the company of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg."