

Sloane Scott

Faculty Advisor: Rachel Webster

Ode to Times Beach, MO (1925-1985)

Description and Artist Statement

Ode to Times Beach, MO (1925-1985) is a research poem written in Prof. Rachel Webster's class during the winter quarter of the creative writing poetry sequence. Times Beach, MO was a rural, primarily agricultural town of over 2,000 people, evacuated in 1983 just before the largest flood in the town's history, and after 260,000 gallons of waste oil containing dioxin were sprayed over the town's roads from 1972-1976. The town was declared a Superfund site, and the EPA finished decontaminating it, along with the entire state of Missouri, in 1997. I was drawn to Times Beach because I'm from Missouri but was prior unaware of the town's existence. My poem aims to recall and revitalize the memory of a crucial piece of Missouri history that the entire country was once aware of, making extensive use of interviews and newspapers from the time period. Since, in the words of e.e. cummings, feeling is first, I wrote into the poem starting with the emotional logic of a people facing environmental crisis, their government repeatedly failing to save them. By centering the emotional logic of a sensationalized and forgotten story, my poem found a greater understanding and clarity. My poem asks—what is at stake when we sacrifice the remembrance of our uglier history in exchange for the benign, or even a blank period where a town once was? To not write this poem would have been, for me, to let the town die a second death, and make its repetition more likely.

Ode to Times Beach, MO (1925-1985)

Times Beach, MO was a rural, primarily agricultural town of over 2,000 people, evacuated in 1983 just before the largest flood in the town's history, and after 260,000 gallons of waste oil containing dioxin were sprayed over the town's roads from 1972-1976 to suppress dust. The town was declared a Superfund site, and the EPA finished decontaminating it, along with the entire state of Missouri, in 1997. The land once known as Times Beach is now Route 66 State Park.

The dioxin came from two sources—many thought hell,
since the summer *had* been unusually hot,
the dust coating throats with its burning backroad scratch,
and some thought the Baptist catfish of the Meramec River
were enacting their slow, if lazy, revenge,
when they found out it couldn't have been God,
who was too busy planting Agent Orange into the tissues
and fibers and mitosis phases of the people of Vietnam,
and what would God do for the poor
anyway, who had prayed the Meramec might come and rise
and erode all trace of rural struggle from this life
but not like this—if the flood meant ruin, chemical burns,
a flaming pastoral?

*

You say it *Missouruh*

like *maple syrup*, like *molasses*, like *agave*, like *wildflower honey*, like *watermelon moonshine mash*, like *apple butter*, like *pumpkin pie*, like *June and July*, like *fish fry*, like *blackberry jam*, like *peach preserves*, like *Ozark gravy*, like *cornbread batter*, like *buttermilk biscuits*, like *black walnut ice cream*, like *honeyed grits*, like *bean stew*, like *smoked tomato soup*

has been pooling
in your mouth since you started speaking in sentences, pausing
for polite silences, letting the bees fly in and the *sweet uh ners*

drip
out.

*

You don't say it *Missouree*,

like *money*, like *thin blood*, like *green pus*, like *skinny
belly-up catfish floating down the Meramec*, like *flood plain*,
like *thin times*, like *Times Beach*, like *Town and Country*,
like *off-season*, like *November and December*, like *alcohol
poisoning*, like *chew*, like *chew juice*, like *teratogenicity*,
like *90 corroded barrels*, like *media frenzy*, like *dioxin baby*

has been pooling
in your mouth since you started speaking in sentences, pausing
in angry silences, letting the ghost town and your children's *chlor ac nee*

speak
for you.

*

If Adam Johnson talks to Midnight.
If Midnight doesn't talk back. If Midnight is a dead cat.

What else is midnight?

*

If incinerating dioxin is too expensive. If Russell Bliss
is a bad man. If you can't feel your limbs. If your horses
are too thin. If your skin bubbles red. If your children
rolled in waste oil as it was sprayed in every neighborhood.
If your house is now under a mound of earth and tourists
call it Route 66 State Park. If you have cancer. If the dogs
and birds have cancer. If 62 horses died at Shenandoah Stable.
If the EPA collected the proper soil samples. If you feel itchy.
If you see bugs where they don't live. If no one talks about it.
If you're not interesting. If the name of your town sounds
like a resort for the rich and the living. If you are a poor farmer.
If you swear the walls of your new home are sometimes damp
and sometimes sweat. If the bugs crawl beneath your skin.
If you don't see them but you can feel them. If this. Then what?

*

*Another man told how he had called the St. Louis Health Department
to tell them about the dead birds*

*he kept finding. The department recommended that he freeze the dead birds
and said they would be out to pick them up. No one ever came.*

So the birds kept frozen, as if asleep or playing pretend.
Maybe soon they would wake, fly out of the cold

and into the Superfund and into the night—but it's a gamble in this life
to depend on things like hope, prayer, pretending

that the birds don't keep you up at night with their incessant cawing.
Maybe you got it wrong, then, when you thought God,

having given Noah the rainbow sign, meant anything
other than what it was—a sign you wouldn't be returning,

that home belongs to the dead and the burning.

Notes

"Another man told...":

Leistner, Marilyn. "The Times Beach Story." *S/R 7-8: The Times Beach Story*, Green Social Thought, 1995, www.greens.org/s-r/078/07-09.html.