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A Parallel Press Chapbook

THE
Mississippi
Book of the
Dead

BY

Timothy Young

A Parallel Press Chapbook

The Mississippi Book of the Dead

Poetry by
Timothy Young

Parallel Press

University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries

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Dedicated to the memory of my father, Jerome Young

This long poem began as a shorter poem, *Pilgrimage*, for the CD, *Snow Has Fallen*, in 2008, with music composed by the Wisconsin singer/songwriter, Yata Peinovich, and performed by Yata, Bruce Hecksel and Dalyce Elliott Young.

Dr. Robert Roberts worked diligently and intimately to help individual Louisiana Corrections prisoners make their transition back into the wider, social culture. After prison officials threatened him and removed him from his work inside the prison, he established *Project Return* in New Orleans to assist men and women find jobs, continue educations, find renewed self-worth, and live healthy, soulful lives.

1

It's still dark on the road
after forty years of work.
What do I have? Curiosity, fear?
Camping gear and a big car?
Let me call it Emptiness.

2

For months I've been rutabaga broth,
stewing in retirement's kettle.
I'll drive the Great River Road,
which snakes beside the Mississippi,
through swamps and drizzle and red pines.

3

When I trekked Nepal in '81,
after visiting Katmandu temples,
I met a man who walked all India
from the tip to the Chinese border.
He carried but a bedroll and a book.

4

He walked the Himalayas, surefooted and spry,
past the Mountain of The Sleeping Elephant,
past The Fishtail, The Tent, under The Providing Goddess,
along the river in Earth's deepest slit,
the Kali Gandaki Gorge.

5

At fifty he wanted to learn his new path.
He longed to pray at holy Muktinath,
where a flame burns above the water in a cave.
He prayed, and turned around for home.
A seed fell into my soul.

6

When I wade the Mississippi's first shallows,
my rolled-up jeans become sodden.
The water is clean and I drink by hand.
Tall white pines dot the distance.
Tourists are coming bringing their laughing children.

7

But I'm alone for a moment
at the Mississippi headwater,
in the parking lot called Cemetery Circle.
My car won't start. The battery's dead.
Tomorrow seems as thick as a spruce swamp.

8

At the Deerwood Motel an old woman smoker,
in a too-tight bra and lipstick job,
flips on "No Vacancy" as I arrive.
All the rooms are empty—except one with a trucker.
I smell his Old Spice in the lobby.

9

The big river slides beneath Brainerd's bridge,
where meth-head painters sign their names.
They tattoo pentagrams on the pylons,
pick their scabs and give up on choice.
They're following the long, long road like ghosts.

10

The ground is trembling from nighttime explosions
at Fort Ripley's artillery range.
I never went to Nam, but Roger,
Steve and Dennis came back,
and blew themselves away, one way or another.

11

Pig's Eye is a riverside waste plant.
Prisons hunker up and down this River.
I'm not really a pilgrim
like Parsifal or Quixote,
but a rosary of sorrow twists in my head.

12

Treasure Island Casino rises on the rez,
beside the nuclear plant,
the storage ponds, stainless steel silos
and Mdewakanton sweat lodges.
The Dakota raise their bison in bright lights.

13

Old paddlefish feel the river with their lips.
They never see more than the dark current.
Their scales hum the world's oldest songs.
Their skeletons wash up on the sands.
Eight vultures wobble upon the updraft.

14

The Qawwali singers of the birds
are chanting in the woods.
Who are you, you wild song birds
whistling above poison ivy?
Why are you singing those sweet songs for me?

15

Old timers told me, "It's OK.
Enjoy the fruits of your labor.
It's OK. Even a sparrow builds a sloppy nest.
It's OK. We all watch our fantasies,
slide off a log like turtles."

16

In La Crosse in '68, after hitching rides all day,
Dennis and I slept on headstones
until the caretaker drove home at 2 a.m.
and threatened his wife's life,
through her locked window.

17

Then Dennis laid out on a bar's front stoop.
I watched the sun roll over a bakery.
The lottery draft changed our lives.
Now a bargirl talks with NASCAR speed,
at the same Thirsty Turtle Tavern.

18

It's 5 a.m. A coyote's in the road.
A 'possum stands still in the cornfield.
As a 'coon climbs out of the state park trash,
the campground host waves goodbye.
At the window his wife washes her underarms.

19

Effigy Mounds look down on the river—
the Great Bear, Little Bear and effigy graves.
I look up. I can't see the stars in daylight,
but I can examine pot shards behind glass.
Maybe I feel the spirits of their dead.

20

Once in Pepin beside fish factory waste,
I watched eighty bald eagles eat dinner.
When I stood to greet them,
they fled like a carnival of cyclones.
In Cassville on the sand I find a feather.

21

I studied Latin and the periodic tables
and history and the classics at the U.
This Galena is on the National Register.
Granted, her Ulysses made it to the top—
with bullets, brass and politics.

22

Rain dribbles on my windshield.
Vintage tractors parade to Camanche.
I can't swat the memories, as if they were the flies
pestering me while I inspected cattle sale barns,
at Sleepy Eye, Blue Earth and Truman.

23

A riverside boatman offers me a ride
to Port Byron, named for the Lord.
My heart's a peony crawling with ants.
My world is cracking, but I won't,
cross the river to the land of a dead poet.

24

Twenty years ago, I told the barber from Macomb
that I'd visit for a shave and haircut.
But he's not in the phone book.
His neighbors don't know where he's at,
and I'm late and bearded and bald.

25

Sam Clemens fled Hannibal's bluff,
but barkers keep his bed behind glass,
and the white-washed fence-scum
continues today, an All-American,
money- making scheme.

26

A Christian woman, who once owned a motel,
serves lunch with checkered napkins.
This is Grafton, Gravetown, with something added—
a Youth Prison nudging the bluff.
It's like Red Wing where I taught boys last year.

27

The Piasa Bird's back on the bluff, (Pie-a-saw)
a spray-painted, panther-snake with wings.
Everyone thought it'd flown with the natives.
But a scrapped admiral from the Pacific Fleet says,
"It's the perfect school mascot and parade float."

28

Cahokia has pyramids and Woodhenge.
Retired teachers narrate the slide show,
tell me what's known through the diggings.
Scholars keep guessing and their funding is low.
This site has a speculative label.

29

The Gateway Arch is a man-made rainbow.
My half-breed ancestor passed through Missouri
as a wagon train scout with Forty-Niners.
My great-great gramps never found his pot-o-gold.
His petty wife abandoned him and her children.

30

It could say "Pompeii," but it's Herculaneum,
a Civil War city with lead smelters.
Even today the green leaves are heavy.
Every empire feeds on poison and lead,
civil wars, bullets and death.

31

Razorwire cuddles the Menard Prison
near the coffin carrier's town of Chester.
I watch the sun die on Missouri flats,
where a pioneer town drowned in the river.
An otter sprawls dead-ahead on the road.

32

Rush Limbaugh comes from Cape Girardeau,
our country's only inland cape.
It has the conservative gyre off-kilter.
I want to go home. I want to go North,
to the ice states, the wilds and family.

33

Then through Thebes and onto Cairo,
where the rivers meet, all Kairos and currents.
A crackhead speaks like a black-faced Sphinx.
Downtown looks bombed, except that Corvette,
parked in front of a boarded-up bank.

34

Across one river—The Old West.
Across the Ohio—The South.
Barges and freight trains stretch to the East.
To the North—only trees and water.
Here is a whirlpool of choices.

35

I'm headed somewhere but lost among places
called Alma, Pike's Peak, Guttenberg, Savanna,
Louisiana, Mexico, Hannibal and Canton—
all on one long road.
Where in Hell am I?

36

I rush for Memphis to walk on Beale Street,
and buy photos of my favorite blues men.
I listen to street singers and sampled horns
on glittering walks decked-out with people,
river fog, rib shack smoke and ganja.

37

The Pyramid Arena reflects on the water.
Lonely nights return to swim in my soul.
I flip the motel's cable TV
from James Bond to The Three Stooges,
to Francis the Army Mule.

38

The Heartbreak Hotel, and a grounded 747
stare across crowds to Graceland.
Tour buses park nose-to-rear, hang like bracelets
in a souvenir shop or inch ahead like the pilgrims,
at Mecca, Guadalupe or The Ganges.

39

The miracle of Sun Records and Las Vegas
twinkles on television and the cinema,
in curved reflections on whiskey bottles,
above platters of restaurant food,
and into Maiá's bubbles.

40

I'm achingly sad among unfamiliar fields,
where last year's cotton drifts like dirty snow.
I'm speeding past cruddy mobile homes,
like the one I owned by a lake, the one,
my wife hated and I gave away.

41

The eroded earth of Porter Gap's mounds
reminds me of a new-age, cracking pot theory—
Earth's two magma cores
spin slower than the crust,
so time's going faster and faster.

42

In a flat hamlet beside the levee
that holds back the river's great floods,
two women waddle from a Quick Shoppe
with corn chips and liters of Pepsi.
No work for them in the middle of the Delta.

43

In Clarksdale, Muddy Water's childhood cabin
rests in a million dollar museum.
But I stare at a Duolian with paisley designs—
the guitar I wanted when I was twenty,
when The Blues were my romance and sorrow.

44

Paint flakes off the Leland Blues Museum.
Its sign looks lettered by a broom.
Downtown's vacant. The school needs care.
That scrapyard is really someone's home.
This town's the birthplace of Kermit The Frog.

45

A Hindu man and his wife tend rooms
at the Relax Inn of Greenville.
It's clean, cheap, old and warm.
Their son rides his bike into their office.
A curry cloud floats out the door.

46

I drink a beer at the Lightning Strikes Casino—
a gaudy barge tied to the earthen levee
that was built by prisoners
after the floods of Twenty Seven.
So many died they were buried where they fell.

47

What do the Lords of Death want?
Cigarette smoke, clanking slots, flashing red lights?
My money won't fill this till and they won't take
any beauty I might scrounge,
from my memories, my fears and illusions.

48

There's hub-bub among the grief trees.
Ducks paddle, head down, in a feeding frenzy
around the knees of the cypress.
Egrets wade in the catfish ponds.
Seeds are sprouting in the old river swamps.

49

In a booth behind me, a diner
thanks the Lord for success and “this food.”
His voice is too loud, his head, bald and bowed,
but his wife sits as stiff as a street lamp,
rusting with the bulb gone out.

50

My eyes squint against dull light and drizzle.
Billboards flaunt a Picturesque Plantation.
Road signs point to a new brick prison.
This traffic seems the same as traffic back home—
pickups, sport vans and rust-buckets.

51

At Grand Isle on the Gulf shore
I pitch my tent on the sand.
Katrina used this land as her football.
Wind, rain and darkness were her teammates.
Tonight, I see nature’s backside.

52

I feel something more than chaos.
Is it a fear of boredom? Fear of solitude?
Fear of failure? Fear of fear or Death?
I can’t relax, the darkness is too deep.
The Gulf is black water and Emptiness.

53

I walk to the end of a black dock
and watch a pinhead of light on the water.
A roofless building stands alone behind me,
studs and bare joists.... trash on the sand.
No Trespassing Bath House Closed For Repairs

54

Sitting in the Mercury, the radio's on.
The windows fog because I'm wet.
I can't sing along with the old rock 'n roll.
I'm waiting for my life to unfold.
Was it any different when I was twenty?

55

Is it my soul I want to know better?
Is it a caring heart?
From behind the wheel of this shiny car
there's a mirror everywhere I look.
Tomorrow I return to colder climates.

56

Now I've driven South. The Hindu walked North.
He found the source. I went to the end.
My car has a trunkload of tools.
He repaired his sandals every night.
But we sought ineffable direction.

57

I wanted to wake to a beautiful sunrise.
I didn't. The sky is steely and the breeze is cold.
I tossed all night in my sleeping bag.
Driving the pavement through open bayous,
I pace cormorants, pelicans and eagles.

58

A bleached blonde tops off my coffee.
Her voice is as powdery as her face.
Her lips are red. Her eye-liner's crooked.
She's about forty-five with a special figure,
lonely eyes and a dark, fresh hickey.

59

I hear "Who Dat?" in a New Orleans shrimp market.
Brooklyn nuns taught tough Irish kids
when no one else would go to their slum.
Mix in Cajun, Gaelic, Dixie and Creole,
and I hear what Whitman once heard.

60

I'm in and out of The River's generosity.
Rosie and Robert Roberts feed me
barbequed shrimp and red potatoes.
Their deep quilts and calm, warm home,
help me sleep like a satisfied man.

61

It ain't Mardi Gras, but the characters are out.
The Naked Cowboy serenades at a stoplight.
Between crosswalk lines he plays a white guitar,
wears a white Stetson and white cowboy boots,
and nothing else except clean, white fruit-of-the-looms.

62

Robert buys an extra lunch to deliver
to the homeless in the French Quarter.
“Look at their shoes. You can tell who's hungry.”
They are sandstorms and snowdrifts banking,
against doorways or trash piles in the alleys.

63

A backstreet trinity sits on a stoop,
sharing silence and a liter of beer.
One looks beaten, but his cheeks are tattooed
like an insane clown in a hip-hop posse.
“Is that the One where Spirit hides? Let's do it.”

64

With the meal from Picadilly's
I ask the clown, “Sir, could you use a meal?”
“Yes, thank you.” “And could you use some cash?”
His voice becomes real, “God Bless You.”
Robert tells me, “The changing voice proves he's spirit.”

65

Months after the levees failed, the water's gone.
An empty barge dry-docks in the Ninth Ward.
A Christmas reindeer sits at the wheel of a Buick.
The upright homes are making mold.
A speedboat is stalled on a roof.

66

Pet Rescue Tents lean on Port-a-Pottys.
A pink house and a blue house hug in the street.
Bare foundations stretch block after block.
Food rots in thousands of overturned Fridge's.
A cemetery with decay above ground.

67

Too many old folks drowned in their attics.
He wasn't "walking to New Orleans"
but a spray paint message on his balcony reads,
R. I. P. FATS—YOU WILL BE MISSED.
Fats Domino was missed. He still lives.

68

At a bayou pond all the tree-crowns snapped.
Their stubble reflects on smooth water.
Songbirds sing in the backwoods brush.
An egret flies like a blessing through the grotto.
My excess voltage finds a ground.

69

My last 3 a.m. in Louisiana and I'm thirsty.
A log burns in the living room fireplace.
Robert works on a laptop in half-light.
He looks like an African King in a story.
Am I dreaming? Am I awake? Am I living?

70

In a T-shirt and boxers, Robert provides
coffee, breakfast and talk until dawn.
When I finally depart, clouds settle on the bayous.
Ponchartrain does not exist as I drive,
through the fog on a long, long bridge.

71

The sun has hidden from Tuesday to Tuesday to Tuesday.
Sometimes it rained. Sometimes the wind blew.
I touched the ruin of carnival parades.
I saw magic from beggars and bold waiters.
I see more than glitz, illusion and beauty.

72

Between Grenada and Tillatoba
sunlight breaks through the clouds.
I'm going North in the fast lane.
A fat, old woman scowls at a rest stop,
but I smile and she gives me a grin and twinkle.

73

Robert taught me one way to hunt Spirit.
This woman shows me another.
To get Spirit a drop at a time,
to give it a drop at a time, watch for,
the second look. Listen for the second word.

74

The sky's red over Marion, and the moon's out,
and I watch the first bright dawn in weeks.
Parked in Love's Gas Station,
I watch thousands upon thousands,
of snow geese fly into the sunrise.

75

Everything in me is a metaphor.
My way is ritual language.
If an Orleans is a cotton cloth,
and a worsted wrap from the French,
New Orleans gave a new wrap to my story.

76

From Winnebigoosh to Crow Wing, Sartell and Afton,
Diamond Bluff, Pine Creek, Sugar Loaf and Dog Field,
McGregor, LeClaire, Moline and Muscatine,
Warsaw, Keokuk, Quincy and the Palisades,
to Columbia and Lewis and Clark.

77

From Waterloo to Fort Defiance,
to Memphis, Tunica and Winterville Mounds,
to Baton Rouge, Galliano, onto the Palquemine Ferry,
to Algiers, Arabi, and St. Bernards Parish,
Pouchatoula, Tillatoba, Hickahala Creek.

78

From the crossroads of routes 60, 61, 62,
to Farmer's City, Kickapoo Creek, and Bloomington,
through Starved Rock, Rockford, Madison, and Baraboo,
to The Dells, and Tomah, and the real Camp McCoy.
I'm almost home. I'm almost home. I'm home.



Timothy Young is a poet and retired educator in juvenile corrections. His last book of poetry, *Herds of Bears Surround Us*, Red Dragonfly Press 2010, is set along the Mississippi River in western Wisconsin. His book, *Building in Deeper Water*, was introduced by Robert Bly and published by the Thousands Press in 2003. His poetry has appeared in Scribner's *The Best American Poetry of 1999* and in numerous magazines, including Poetry, and has been heard on Garrison Keillor's *The Writer's Almanac*. He has also recorded three CDs of poetry with musical compositions by a jazz guitarist, *Riding a Dark Wind*; a folk singer, *Snow Has Fallen*; and classical violinist; *Perfect Harmony*. In 2009 his poem, *Mississippi Ecstasy*, was set for a big band jazz suite and recorded by composer, Dan Cavanagh, and *The Jazz Emporium Big Band*.

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