

# Somerset

Daniel Donaghy

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Set in New Baskerville

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(Please note that this painting has been augmented from the original with permission. It has been slightly trimmed on the left side and top to make room for the titling.)

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## Somerset

*It is summer-gone that I see, it is summer-gone.*

*The sweet flowers indrying and dying down,*

*The grasses forgetting their blaze and consenting to brown.*

—Gwendolyn Brooks, “A Sunset of the City”

An El train squeals into Somerset like it doesn't want to stop, like it knows what is

wilting in its shadows—summer-gone  
corner boys, women tricking in bars that  
peddle *rock* and *dope*, *weed* and *wet* to guys I

might have known as a child. Somerset, see,  
is Zombieland: abandominiums, speedballs to the neck. It

is storefront ministries, pawnshops, no cops. Is  
a father's fist, a daughter's scream. Is summer-gone  
as the smokestacks and textile mills that spilled the

street's first darkness. Gone as a huckster's sweet  
corn, as a widow's flowers

flaming in a window box, as a junkie indrying  
in a burned-out car, lost to meth mouth and  
swallowed by chest-high weeds. The El knows dying,

knows when to shut its doors. Down  
on Somerset, they're dispensing free samples of the

day's best. They're kneeling in alley grasses  
denying their sponsors, forgetting  
the missionaries who nodded all morning through their

heartbreak and new-start promises. Blaze.  
Spoon sizzle. Time screeches still as an El train and

they curl up in God's blanket, consenting  
to a ride that will get them only back to  
Somerset and their next round of brown.

## What Cement Is Made of

The cement plant—where all day wind spirals  
aggregate around scaffolds and storage  
bins tall as steeples—has only three walls,

so it opens to Route 1 like a stage.  
Five o'clock: dump trucks and conveyer belts  
stiffen like workers on washroom stools

who stare into their brown or black hands,  
or who close their eyes, savoring already  
that first lager's cold burn against their throats.

Inside locker doors: pictures of wives, kids,  
strippers, stenciled numbers. Crusted cement  
on toilet tanks, across the line of sinks.

In shower stalls, concrete mix washes off  
like limestone loosened by hard summer rain  
under a single, shared fluorescent bulb.

The young supervisor slips off waders  
and safety goggles and dreams of softballs  
arcing toward the rusted steel of the sun.

Diesel and dust turn to soap and cologne,  
the day's heavy falling to rap music,  
phone calls, texts, doors opening and closing.

Tomorrow's flatbeds glare from loading docks.  
Sea gulls stalk the drum-gray air overhead.  
Men ease their wasting bodies into jeans,

T-shirts, ball caps. They wait for each other  
to pull on clean socks, lace their boots, then rise  
together, laughing, toward their evenings.

## Elegy for My Mother

She liked most couches in sunny rooms,  
game shows and soap operas, her dog,  
glasses of iced tea sweating on end tables

like candles at a dinner party, or else  
calls with news she could tell and retell,  
hours on the front stoop watching life

keep happening to everyone but herself.  
It should not have surprised us, then,  
when she kept silent and hoped

what was wrong would go away.  
Or when she became the good patient,  
early for appointments, taking her pills

and keeping to her diet, sleeping  
in the cleansing chair each Monday,  
Wednesday, and Friday morning while

the machine filtered her blood.  
Or when she made all of the final plans,  
left the paperwork like love letters

on her dresser, which we found after  
she couldn't talk or even breathe  
without the other machine that sat

over her right shoulder, that she, on one  
good day, didn't need, and could say  
she loved us and they could turn it off,

so they did.

## Girl on a Playground Swing

Bored of the turning bars and monkey bars,  
the walking bridge and spring rides  
and see-saw far too tall for her,  
she slides her fingers through links  
in the swing's metal chains and jumps,  
pulls up her knees,  
plops herself onto the creased rubber seat,  
straightening her legs and sandaled toes,  
smiling beyond the sandbox  
and ball field, beyond anyone who is not three,  
who did not just, on her own, trade  
the earth for dreams of rock  
and sway, of arcing higher, then higher still,  
bending her neck and body back,  
inviting gravity to somehow  
swing her, a supplicant with arms raised,  
a pendulum at rest,  
toward an orbit all her own.

## Teaching My Daughter to Ride Her Bike, I Recall the One My Father Stole for Me from a Black Child

On the flat sidewalk  
    our four-year-old  
stands on her pedals,  
  
pushing and grunting  
    but getting nowhere,  
and something in how  
  
she cries and looks back  
    and tries again  
and looks back and how  
  
she screams when her shin  
    slams the pedal  
and how she falls sideways  
  
and takes the bike with her  
    takes me back  
to my seventh summer.

My father, home from work,  
    calls me from the yard.  
*Got you a bike*, he says,

holding one handlebar  
    until I take the other,  
which is black like the seat

and the tires and the race  
    of the kid from whom  
he took it at a stop sign

after third shift.

*You should have seen  
how wide his eyes got,*

my father tells me, laughing.

He says *Smell the seat.  
I bet it still smells like nigger.*

I bend down like he tells me  
and don't smell anything  
but his truck's exhaust

and a neighbor's barbecue,  
but I tell him  
*Yeah, yeah, it does,*

and he smiles,  
heads into the house.  
Help me lift my fork

at dinner that night  
when he recounts  
how the kid stopped riding

*right in the middle of the street*  
and my father  
couldn't get around,

how my father jumped  
from his truck  
and yelled at the kid

and the kid yelled back  
and my father said  
*What did you just say?*

and the kid didn't answer  
so my father asked again  
while the kid tried to ride away,

*not so tough all of a sudden,*  
but couldn't get anywhere,  
*too weak to pedal uphill—*

that kid, who had to be crying  
as my father closed in,  
had to be clenching those handlebars

because he didn't want  
to give up his bike or to die  
at the hands of a man he feared,

I know, had murder in him.  
I've seen those eyes.  
I pulled those hands back

from my mother's neck  
like he pulled that boy's  
one by one from that bike

while someone waited for him  
in a park or a school  
or a church or a house

like our house, which the bank  
would claim before long.  
Before long, my daughter

will ask  
what my father was like,  
and, since I can't go back

to my seventh year and lock him  
    in his truck, after I tell her  
that most nights he read in a chair

by the front window and after  
    I tell her about his pompadour  
and pocket T-shirts, his Pall Malls,

his cans of Schaefer, his whistle  
    when he drove,  
his stubble when he kissed me,

I'll tell her I loved him very much  
    and I'll begin to tell her  
the stories within this story.