

## Prologue.

THESE ARE micro-stories and events, tiny tales, written to be read or heard. The worst stories, of course, are not read, heard or ever written. They happen without witnesses. Or witnesses never testify. These stories, though, are their own witnesses, testimonies to an earlier time, mostly circa 1980 in the Cass Corridor of Detroit, Michigan.

Tennessee Williams wrote in *The Glass Menagerie* that “in memory everything seems to happen to music.” Indeed, a number of these little fictions happen to music. One song in particular, the Cars’ droll hit “Good Times Roll,” could play like an anthem for all of these stories: *“Let the stories be told/they can say what they want.”*

This prologue will introduce the stories through the conventions of literature - voice, characters, setting (including Detroit, its cars, its music and its sports), symbolism, plot and meaning.



Cass Avenue, Detroit 1976

Photo courtesy of the Walter P. Reuther Library  
Wayne State University

The voice in these fictions is the narrator’s, not the author’s, which is one reason why the author has written under a pseudonym: you’re less likely to think that the author and the narrator are the same person. The narrator’s voice is apt for the characters, not effusive. It’s understated. There’s little emotional excrement. The diction is dense, terse, truncated, like the word “apt” instead of “appropriate.” The narration is third person past tense, with the exception of one first person story and one in present tense. Second person is rare, but occasionally the narrator looks at you the way the subject of a portrait follows you with her eyes and addresses you, like this sentence does now.

Most of these fictions can stand alone, but many are connected, a polylogy, like *The Arabian Nights* in which Scheherazade improvised for the sultan so that she would live to see another day. Or like Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, told on a spring pilgrimage. The font in these tales, Book Antiqua, is an homage to Chaucer’s Middle English text.

The main character in these fictions is usually Codell, a wandering urban pilgrim far from urbane. Codell is his first name, and almost everyone says it wrong. It’s co-DELL. His mother, a character mostly *in absentia*, had her reasons for naming him Codell. We

never learn his last name. He called himself one other name, Dr. Blood, a private name that he outgrew. Street names in these fictions are real, as are most of the places. Names matter as much in fiction as they do outside of fiction. They often have meanings hidden within. Names can survive death, for a time, and then names, too, die.

Codell is not easy to like. He's got issues that aren't visible. For example, gastric disturbances, intestinal concerns, we'll say. He doesn't always smell good. He spends time in bars. He fails with women - something comes along to thwart a relationship or he thwarts it himself. He's as likely to not do anything when he should as he is to do something when he shouldn't. He's a dynamic character, changing from an impassive tourist in his own life to a participant in the world around him and the people in it. At times he could be a kindred spirit with Prince Myshkin in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* or with Meursault in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, estranged. Codell might be *The Stranger Idiot* or *The Idiot Stranger*. At other times things happen not because of Codell but to or around him, without explanation or apparent reason, like they happen to Josef K. in Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. At times, Codell's life is fantastic like Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* or the stories and novels of Gabriel García Márquez.

Codell walks a lot and rides city busses, and as a kid he painted them. Painted on them. Tagged them in red with his name. On the busses and off, Codell doesn't always know where he wants to go, but he gets somewhere. Not that it matters where. Sanguine becomes him. It's a quick journey, unended. Before you know it, the stories are over, but they may not let you go. Your mind keeps going. At least that's the intent.

There are a couple of regular inhabitants in Codell's world, Michael Blumenthal (MB) and Victor. They're your casts and they're outcasts. Codell and MB live in the same tenement across the hall from each other. Victor sleeps next door in a building as abandoned as he is. Victor drinks; MB doesn't. MB has to remember to take his meds; Victor's medication is alcohol. Victor's heart, to quote William Butler Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium," is "sick with desire/ And fastened to a dying animal." Victor and MB shape Codell in ways they don't plan or realize. They're the closest thing Codell has to friends. Probably not your friends, though. They're people whom the vast majority don't want to see, smell, hear or touch: vagrants, drunks, the mentally unsound, wanderers, the unemployable. Residents without residences. Imagine that.

There are a host of minor personas as well: barflies and bartenders, Detroit Tiger fans, beggars, aliens, Black Elk, blue collar workers, a Bohemian artist, a bookie, bus drivers and bus riders, a Chimera, civil rights activists, a petty drug dealer, at least two ghosts, Hecate, a shiny lawyer named Buckholdtz, a man of letters, Mark "The Bird" Fidrych, the Rolling Stones, Mitch Ryder, Charley Pride and other musicians, Cupid, three FBI agents, prostitutes, a rabbit, a rat, and a three-legged dog named Jesus.

In fiction, in life, you can't understand people if you don't understand the setting, just like you can't understand Russia if you don't know about the Russian climate, and you can't understand America if you don't know about slavery and the Civil War. The setting here is Detroit, Michigan, the Motor City - Motown - or, once upon a time, the

City of Churches. There are foundational excursions to the 1960s. After that, most of the stories are set in 1980, give or take a year or two. Not every story has a time marker.

The weather in Detroit that summer of 1980 started mild. June was wet. By mid July, heat and humidity pushed in from the south. On the morning of July 16, 1980, intense storms and a derecho ripped through southeast Michigan. Winds in Detroit blew harder than 100 miles per hour. The derecho foreshadowed a political storm in national politics from which there was no break, no escape, and no turning back.

The specific setting for most of these fictions is Detroit's Cass Corridor. Codell lived at the north end of the Corridor near Wayne State University, a couple of miles north of downtown. The Corridor was bounded on the east by Woodward Avenue. Cass Avenue bisected and ran parallel to that thoroughfare. In Detroit, you were East side or West side, but the south end of the Cass Corridor was so close to downtown that the East-West distinction didn't matter much. Almost all of the characters in these stories are pickled in the brine of the Corridor. Some of the stories are set in bars, a pickling of another kind.

On its western flank, the Corridor was bordered by the north-south John C. Lodge Freeway, a snake of concrete and traffic through Southfield, a city of glass boxes. The snake went underground near Greenfield in a sub-surface canal where drivers with death wishes hauled through at a hundred miles per hour. If you were outbound from Detroit, when you got to Telegraph and Lahser - is it "LASH-er" or "LAH-sher" or "LAH-ser"? - the Lodge opened up and felt suburban, the Lodge felt suburban. It's LAH-ser.

Detroit had a reputation, and within Detroit the Cass Corridor had its own reputation. Again quoting from "Sailing to Byzantium," the Corridor was "no country for old men" for reasons that Yeats never imagined. It was reputed to be a place you didn't go especially at night. That was the view from the outside. These fictions are a view from the inside.

Settings sometimes take on certain colors, and the colors of these fictions are black, white and red. Is any American city more Black than Detroit? Yes, if you only counted heads in Detroit's dwindling population, but no if you look at the percentage of residents. Overheard: "Black people run that city."

Detroit's history of black and white is anything but black and white. It was before "black" was capitalized. The characters see their shares of red, the richest of colors in symbol and meaning. The contronym "carbuncle" - meaning both the red gem and a severe skin abscess - serves both the lovers and the haters of Detroit and the Cass Corridor.

Detroit was, and remains, more than a setting. It's an identity. Detroit was a synonym for the American auto industry, a source of Detroit pride. The Motor City was home to the Big Three auto makers, Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors (GM). But by 1980,

Detroit had a lot of rattles under its hood. The glory days of the 1960s and the Ford Mustang were gone. The new American cars in 1980, cars like the AMC Eagle, the Dodge Miranda, and Plymouth's K-cars, no one remembers. The only car Detroit offered that year with any longevity was the Ford Escort - not exactly a car that made you say, "WOW!" What Detroit made rolled against a pack of international competition. Detroit pushed for tariffs on the imports that American drivers increasingly preferred. The city endured public shaming and mocking on account of the Ford Pinto, a car with an unfortunate penchant for the gas tank to explode in rear-end collisions.

Car culture was not only the car itself; it was the Interstate highway system. Detroit and the Interstate highway system began in symbiosis. The freeways were touted as progress. But they were definitely not free. They were a juggernaut of urban destruction:

(1) The freeways eradicated and separated communities. Detroit threw itself under its own wheels, razing the Black Bottom and Paradise Valley neighborhoods, at the time called "the Negro community." Housing projects were built for displaced residents, and how did that work out? It didn't.

(2) Freeways and the Projects exacerbated racial conflict and the city's decline. "Urban renewal" became known as "Negro removal." The highway system that roped around Detroit was a noose. Detroit garroted itself with the ribbons of white concrete. When riots exploded in 1968, highways facilitated and expedited abandonment of the city, the "white flight." The Interstate paved an escape to new suburbs with shopping malls and parking lots. It's no small irony that Detroit lived by the car, by making them, and almost died by the car as the city bled population. Codell stayed in the city. As much as cars meant to Detroit, the characters in these fictions don't own cars. They didn't have the money to buy them, and they couldn't afford to insure them, maintain them, or buy gas.

As integral as cars and expressways are to Detroit, so is music. Detroit blues, soul, gospel and jazz laid the foundation for Motown. Bluesman John Lee Hooker came from Mississippi to Detroit in 1943. Della Reese signed her first record contract in 1953. Dinah Washington, a presence in Detroit through her marriage to the Detroit Lions' star "Night Train" Lane, and the dynamic Jackie Wilson sang in multiple musical genres. They performed big and lived bigger. Aretha Franklin, the Queen of Soul, transcended time, releasing her twenty-sixth album in 1980.

Soul and the blues were real and jazz was hip, but in the 1960s, pop music meant Motown. Motown was the city, a recording label, and the music itself. The founder Berry Gordy's self-proclaimed "Hitsville U.S.A." was no exaggeration. Motown had no rival in its reach, saturation, and its superstars. Diana Ross and the Supremes had hit after hit. In musical genius, there were the prodigious Stevie Wonder, Smokey Robinson and Marvin Gaye. Along with many others - Martha and the Vandellas, The Four Tops, The Temptations, The Jackson Five, The Commodores, The Miracles, Gladys

Knight and the Pips, The Spinners - they took your breath away. But by 1980, notwithstanding Michael Jackson's album *Thriller* and Diana Ross's single "Upside Down," Motown was done in Detroit. The label and the artists were gone to Los Angeles and elsewhere. The Hitsville U.S.A. building would become a museum.

Motown was far from Detroit's only claim to pop music. In 1980, rocker Bob Seger and The Silver Bullet Band released the album *Against the Wind*. The same year, Seger's Detroit-born friend Glenn Frey broke up with the Eagles, and hard rock guitar hero Ted Nugent, the Motor City Madman, released his sixth and most successful album, *Scream Dream*. Mitch Ryder, after the Detroit Wheels had fallen off, attempted a comeback with "Ain't Nobody White (can sing the blues)." Alice Cooper, the proto-punk godfather of shock rock, hailed from Detroit, left it, and returned to it from Los Angeles in the mid-1970s. "[L.A. was] on the wrong kind of drug for us," Cooper said. "They were on acid and we were basically drinking beer. We fit much more in Detroit than we did anywhere else." Inspired by Alice Cooper, the Detroit band Death in the 1970s became the first all African American punk band. Wendy O. Williams (WOW) brought the Plasmatics and her chaotic, sexualized antics to a Detroit club on September 20, 1980.

Shock-rock and punk rock took root in Detroit. The Motor City 5 (MC5) had "kicked out the jams" in 1969, having earlier inspired the Ann Arbor group Iggy and the Stooges. In 1980, Fred "Sonic" Smith of MC5 married Patti Smith, who five years earlier had ridden *Horses* to punk rock posterity. Smith and Smith settled in St. Clair Shores, north of Detroit.

Less subversive, less direct and more melodic than the punkers and the shockers was New Wave. The mostly-British music could be twitchy, coy, not always what it seemed to be. David Byrne and The Talking Heads, Elvis Costello and the Attractions, Blondie, and The Human League white-washed American pop sensibilities. Detroit contributed The Romantics. In matching monochromatic suits, they looked like shiny versions of the Temptations and the Four Tops. Their single "What I Like About You" was only moderately popular at the time. A year before Wendy O's Detroit shock-rock show, the Cars played Detroit: *let the good times roll*.

By 1980, Disco - the word, the music and the dance all imported from European discotheques - had fallen as fast and precipitously as it had risen. The mainstream initially embraced Disco, but the mainstream was fickle. Public sentiment turned so badly on Disco that on July 12, 1979, baseball's Chicago White Sox sponsored a Disco Demolition Night at a double-header with the Detroit Tigers. Between games, a crate of vinyl Disco records was exploded on the field. Thousands of fans chanting "disco sucks" cascaded out of the stands. The damage to the field was so bad that the White Sox had to forfeit game two.

Disco was declared dead, but the death pronouncement was premature because Disco survived in various forms and ways. In The Spinners' cover of "Working My Way Back To You," Motown met disco and morphed into a smooth amalgam of mirrors, lights,

choreography, vocals, and color-coordinated outfits with bell bottoms and wide collars. Incongruously, the Rolling Stones contributed their disco-like song “Emotional Rescue.”

Disco also survived in house bands and house music. Funk, soul and R&B meshed with Disco in dozens of dance clubs. They could draw a few thousand partiers and go all night. The DJs were the stars. Disco was giving birth to Techno and electronic dance music (EDM). In the mid 1980s, a trio of Bellevue, Michigan teens founded Techno EDM.

Perhaps the music least expected in the Motor City was country-western. Yet country, blue-grass, honky-tonk and rockabilly were vibrant on WJR radio and in live shows, notably one by Charley Pride. Night transformed Alvin’s Finer Delicatessen near Wayne State University into the Twilight Bar where the Rockabilly Cats frequently played in 1980.

Like cars and music, Detroit’s professional sports play in these stories. The Detroit Pistons (basketball) and Lions (football), however, were absent from the city because both teams had left for the Pontiac, Michigan, Silverdome, the Lions in 1975 and the Pistons in 1978, *de facto* making them the Pontiac Pistons and the Pontiac Lions. Detroit’s new downtown venue, the Joe Louis Arena, was hockey home to the Redwings, known in 1980 as the Deadwings due to their 26-43-11 record. The Joe was also home to boxer Thomas Hearns, AKA The Hitman AKA the Motor City Cobra. Hearns fought four times at the Joe in 1980, tallying two knock-outs and two TKOs. His 30 and 0 record earned him Fighter of the Year.

Detroit’s baseball team, the Tigers, played at The Corner, the local shorthand for Tiger Stadium at Michigan and Trumbull. They were frustratingly mediocre in 1980 (84 wins, 78 losses), but their roster included the phenomenal pitcher Mark “The Bird” Fidrych, a national sensation who, on the field, talked to himself and the ball, hand-manicured the pitcher’s mound, won games, and drew capacity crowds. In August 1980, nagged by injury, the Bird pitched his last game in Detroit before over 48,000 “Bird watchers.”

Beyond Detroit’s sports, cars and music, there was, of course, a broad background for these fictions. An economic recession was underway. The federal deficit was nearly double the 1979 deficit. Inflation and unemployment were up. “Trickle down” economics was the catch-phrase of the day. Nineteen-eighty was a presidential election year, and the Republican National Convention was at the Joe Louis Arena. On July 17, the day after the derecho, the Republican Party nominated Ronald Reagan for President.

Of politics and economics, the characters in these fictions knew little and cared less. They were getting by each day, and that was enough. Codell could count the population of his world on his hands. His world, ever so small, loomed larger to him than everything else.

What characters do in their worlds leads to questions of plot or, more accurately, of structure. "More accurately" because although these stories are structured, they don't always conform to the conventional plot form of rising action, conflict, climax, falling action and resolution. In that conventional plot, events are points on a time line. Leo Tolstoy was a master, weaving multiple plot lines (*Anna Karenina*, *War and Peace*) and plot lines that cross like the letter X (*The Death of Ivan Ilych*).

Problematical for literary convention, however, is that not all events occur sequentially and knitted smoothly together. They don't always fit together easily or well. Instead, they occur dynamically, randomly, haphazardly; they occur simultaneously at different locations, *i.e. concurrently, i.e. "with current,"* with now, their arms open to be random or haphazard. Then plots are *current* in an existentialist sense of *here* and *now*. **Plot = here + now.**

Surely we've opened a door to metaphysics. When events are contemporaneous, all happening at the same time, all time is contemporary and, in a sense, time stands still in that moment. When multiple events happen at the same moment, that moment is infinitely crowded with infinitely different events. The iridescent beauty of fiction is that it can free itself of time and bring any moments to life via any structure. It can imagine past and future moments. As Codell imagines in "The woman in the dumpster 2," "the sun reverses course in the sky and we remember our future. As we can plan our past."

Whatever the structure of these fictions, you may find symbols. Like clothes hangers in a closet and paperclips in an office, in literature symbols are ubiquitous. Every little thing means something - well, maybe. A rose is a rose, a weed is a weed, a window is a window, a praying mantis is a praying mantis - until it whispers that it is not.

Characters, setting, plot, symbols; put them together and you might have a theme. What does each story mean? Taken together, do they mean anything at all? Meaning grows in an inductive process. Said Sylvia Plath: "[t]he artist's life nourishes itself on the particular, the concrete: . . . that's where the magic mountains begin." The magic mountains can differ from person to person. For that alone, I leave the meaning of these fictions to you.

Are these fictions true? It is self-evident truth, wrote Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, that all men are created equal. But surely that's bootstrapping, a circular argument. It's self-evident because it's true; it's true because it's self-evident.

What truth is, is that it's fraught with difficulties. If all men are created equal (a debatable premise), they don't stay equal for very long. And what about people of color and women? No, far from self-evident, truth can be inconstant, hamstrung in hindsight by subjectivity, and debated endlessly. Today's truth will not be tomorrow's; or tomorrow's, or tomorrow's. Time will have its corrosive way. As for me, I emulate the great essayist Michel de Montaigne: "I speak the truth, not to the full, but as much as I

dare." My reward has been the intoxication of creativity. I'm a happy prisoner of my own imagination.

Last, an apology and a prayer. I pray for your patience and pardon when you encounter in my imaginings some roughness, sordidness, crass sentiments or words that offend. They belong to the events, the city, and the time, all of which are my duty to set forth plainly, remaining as faithful to the characters as a good editor remains faithful to the voice of a writer. Literature and the Holy Books themselves are rife with foul characters and barbarous events. They stretch across cultures and generations, not buried by the sands of time but boiling to the surface for anyone to see. They provide an escape into life for those willing to face it.

So, dear reader, rise above the dulling, numbing hum of life's profanities, indignities and atrocities. My stories are imperfect. Their defects are solely the result of my deficits. For what they lack in perfection, may they make up in entertainment. For what they lack in entertainment, I beg your empathy and forgiveness.

/s/ your most humble servant, K.G. Jones