

TESTIMONY

For R. L. Myrick

The drive from the city to
the county seat is easy,
you take the freeway west and then

the old state road north, it's all
flat farmland, soybeans and corn, it'll
take you two hours. The fields are ripe

with September promise, they shimmer
in the heat and the searing prairie wind,
it's so hot and the road so straight

it seems that time has stopped,
as if the whole world has
suspended time, that this, right here,

is the eternal moment.

* * * * *

You lean into the curve
and enter the town alone.
The courthouse is empty.
You sit in the town square
under the shade of a sycamore.
When the fire house siren goes off
the bank clock tells you it's
104 degrees. You watch the town's
loneliness, how a pick-up truck
rattles over train tracks,
how a woman in a blue dress
carries folders to the courthouse,
how you loosen your tie, already

your shirt is rumpled, you
drowse between centuries,
nothing moves except
the sycamore leaves
heavy with the wind
and the neon sign
that flashes ICE COLD BEER
in frigid blue letters.

* * * * *

The sheriff guarding the courtroom
pats you down for knives and checks
your bag for a bomb

or a gun, the room is cold and
fluorescent, sweat dries to salt
on your skin, you are the

only one, you wait in the room's hum
until a deputy asks if
you're here to testify, he needs

your name and he says *for or against?*
and you say *for* and he blinks
and says *sit up here, you*

stand when the judge comes in
and you stand when he calls your name
okay? He checks your bag

again and says they'll start soon, it
won't be long. Three men
in suits walk in laughing about

something, they smooth their ties
and unbutton their coats and
three deputies lead in the shuffling

defendant, his wrists and ankles
manacled and chained, he's
wearing an orange jumpsuit, he

scuffles across the linoleum in slippers,
his head bowed as if he's some
religious pilgrim,

and then the judge comes in
adjusting his black robe, he's
followed by a woman in a

pink sweater, you wait for
the judge to be seated.

* * * * *

For an hour the judge reads off
papers. He checks the facts with the DA
and the lawyer, there is some talk about
the crime, how he pushed a guard and escaped,
how he stole a pick-up, how he hopped a
freight train, how he hid in his mother's house
until the marshals found him, the statutes
are clear, they call for 30 years
and none of the facts are disputed, his
lawyer says *he hurt no one, he needs to
get his life in order, we ask for
a year on top of time already served*
and the DA says *he escaped, the law
is serious, you can't hit an officer,
you can't commandeer someone's property,
you can't escape it would send a message
to every prisoner, we ask for
18 years including time already served.*

* * * * *

The judge asks if there's
anyone here to testify.
There is no one in the room

except the sleeping deputies.
He calls your name and
asks your relation to

the defendant.

* * * * *

You did not come here
to testify about the truck
or the escape.

You did not come here
to testify to this man's guilt,
he has confessed his crime
and is without a doubt
guilty as charged, he is
pleading no contest.

You did not come here
to testify about this man's history,
his record, the petty crimes
of trespassing, breaking and entering,
and sitting in someone's truck.

You came here to testify the truth.
You came to testify what you know of this man.
You came to testify for this man's soul,
the man in the orange jumpsuit,
the man shackled in the courtroom,
the man hanging his head and crying,
the man who is crying like your son,

the man who said *you must embrace life,*
you must embrace how you live your life,
you must embrace the world you live in.

You came to testify that this man
burns with the stubborn beauty of
stars, that this man speaks

with a passion that you have never found
in any man or woman,

that this man embraces that
which cannot be embraced
in words.

* * * * *

Driving home, the wind washes over the land,
stirring the corn in waves of redemption.
You can hear the leaves scuffling, you can taste

the coming rain, two days off but surely
it is coming to quench the land.
You loosen your tie and feel your sweat

ooze from your skin, your hair--salt stinging
your eyes. You watch the heat ripple off the road.
For the first time in years you find yourself

praying, the words come slowly at first
but you pray that this day will never pass,
you pray that his soul will not be forsaken,

you pray for forgiveness of everything
you've ever loved, everything that's
ever loved you in return, everything

you've ever understood and
everything that remains unexplained.
You drive home in the long and

lovely heat and for the first time
in your life, you think, you
embrace your very soul.