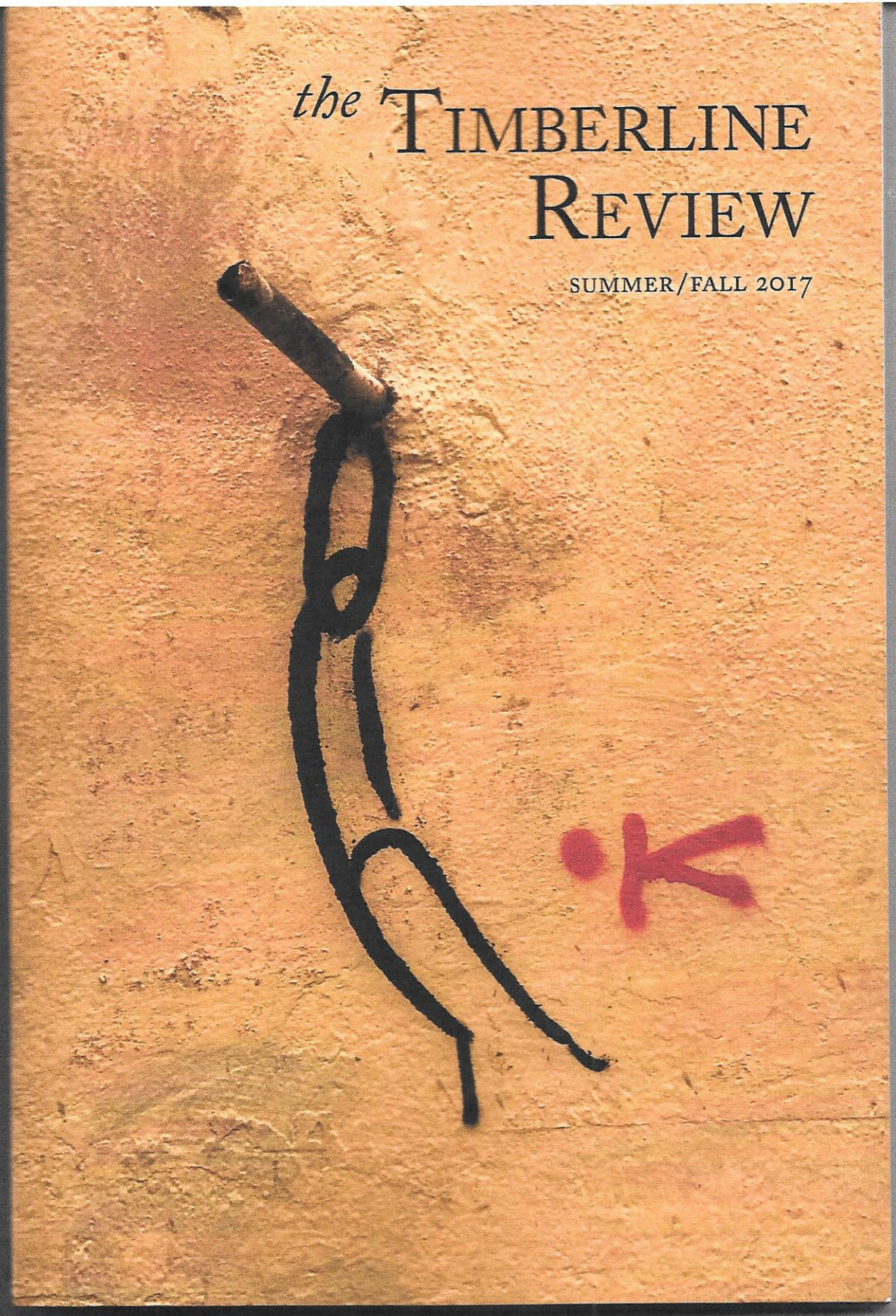

the TIMBERLINE REVIEW

SUMMER/FALL 2017

the TIMBERLINE REVIEW

No. 5

SUMMER/FALL
2017

A publication of Willamette Writers

the TIMBERLINE REVIEW

The Timberline Review is published twice a year by Willamette Writers, Inc., a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization founded in 1965.

Print subscription $25/year (2 issues) or $48/two years (4 issues). Please visit timberlinereview.com to order a subscription.

Submissions generally will be accepted during two reading periods, July 1 to October 31 for the Winter/Spring issue, and January 1 to April 30 for the Summer/Fall issue. Electronic submissions only. See timberlinereview.com for guidelines.

ISBN: 978-0-9964618-4-9

Typeset in Caslon Pro and Imperial T
Printed in Centralia, Washington, USA

ON THE COVER: A graffito on via dei Magalotti, Florence, Italy. Photo by Lyle T. Roebuck.

Road Trip | KATHLEEN STONE

When my son James was five years old I overheard him talking with a friend. "I'm really eighteen," he said. "People just think I'm five." Four-and-a-half herself, she must have been amazed.

"I'm going to drive a big rig across the country and meet up in California with a bunch of people. My mom and dad and Uncle Larry and my grandmother Ilse. They'll all be there."

She merely said: "Are you thinking clearly?"

In a way, he was. He was fixated on trucks, as little boys often are, but more than that, he was already formulating a plan for his grown-up life. Nearly twenty years later, I went for a ride with him.

James works for Brink's Auto Transport, a car hauling company in St. Johnsbury, Vermont. He drives a Western Star truck outfitted with a head rack and a Cottrell AZ-loader trailer. More than twenty-one tons of steel, seventy-five feet long and loaded with vehicles, it's that thing you dread passing on the highway.

We left St. Johnsbury on a Monday morning in April with slate clouds overhead, temperatures under forty and green shoots, if there were any, still hidden under damp dirt. We were to pick up used vehicles at dealerships throughout Vermont and deliver them to a detailing shop near Albany where they would be prepped for auction. At the end of the day I would catch the Greyhound bus from Albany home to Boston while James continued his route for the rest of the week, picking up and delivering.

We arrived at the lot shortly before seven. This was my first time inside a big rig and I was surprised to find the cab interior as comfortable as it was. In front of me, fourteen dials and twenty-one switches splayed across the dashboard. A complicated gear pattern gleamed from the bulb end of the shift shaft and large buttons, octagonal red for the trailer's air supply and square yellow for the truck's parking brake, protruded from the right edge of the dash. Near the top of the windshield hung a CB radio and on the floor, within easy reach of the driver's seat, lay a Blue Tooth ear piece.

Behind me were the living quarters. The bunk, which James swore

was comfortable, stretched from one side of the cab to the other, next to a refrigerator and a microwave oven. Dark blue curtains, snapped shut over the windows, were for keeping out the all-night lights of truck stops. In the locker hung working man's clothes: neon green waterproof jackets; zippered sweatshirt of the same color; mesh vest, also neon; yellow rubber rain suit; brown canvas jacket – all Carhartt or Cabela's. James climbed into the driver's seat, threw a bag of laundered clothes and a clean bed roll onto the bunk and started her up. The engine, a Detroit Series 60, rumbled and shook the silver "W" attached to the far end of the hood.

My mother had a terrible singing voice but she sang "You Are My Sunshine" to me and when I thought about becoming a mother I knew I would sing it to my child, just as terribly. I remembered certain books from my childhood, illustrations even more clearly than words, and I wanted my child to be just as thrilled to see Sal and Jane, Robert McCloskey's daughters in *One Morning in Maine*, take the motor boat to the mainland as I had been. When my child was older, I was sure we would discuss news of the day over dinner and I would save money for college. My life as a mother would echo my parents' lives and I would influence my child, as my parents influenced me.

The external particulars of my life were different, though. When I became a mother, I was forty and back in Boston after a sudden, unhappy end to my marriage. With my first husband I had tried to conceive, but no amount of sex, surgery, hormones or IVF had produced a pregnancy. Now divorced, I was getting ready to adopt as a single mother. I would continue working as a lawyer and raise my child in the city; this would not be the two parent family in the suburbs, with a stay-at-home mom, of my childhood.

Because the adoption agency required an essay, I had to commit my vision of motherhood to paper. I described an urbane and utopian life, with summer days at the beach, books and education, my own childhood the reference point. No one in my family earned a living with blue collar work, and truck driving appeared nowhere in my essay. Writing the essay was easy and it sounded good and, more importantly, it let me avoid saying what was really on my mind.

When I was married, we both worked hard at our law firms. In our

free time we kept busy with home renovation, cooking, seeing friends and traveling. Despite, or maybe because of the busyness, I came to feel that I was floating on the surface of something that should be deeper and greater. If I were a mother, I thought, I would have to respond to another human being in ways that would test me and force me to tap into profound emotional places – places where, I feared, I had become complacent. Adoption would push me into new territory, I hoped. None of this made its way into my essay.

The company dispatcher had called James the night before with the list of trade-ins to be picked up and now inside the cab he reviewed the paperwork. After two years on the job he knew all the locations but wanted to review the route and plan how to load the vehicles – what should face forward or backward, what would fit on the upper deck or the lower. He had to construct a mental jigsaw puzzle of different sized cars and trucks.

James was always better at spatial relations than I am. As a little boy he could build a complicated Lego edifice in a flash, and when he took flying lessons at summer camp he had no trouble deciphering the aeronautical charts. Recently I read that men tend to be better at spatial relationships than women due to ancient patterns imprinted when men had to visualize large scale hunting territory and women gathered food stuffs with focus on close-in detail. I don't know about the validity of this theory, but I do know that an educational consultant who tested James when he was in grade school concluded he was superior in spatial organization and visualization.

James also checked his log book. The trucking industry is heavily regulated and the log is the principal device for authorities to monitor a driver's compliance with rules like not driving more than eleven hours without rest, and spending thirty-four hours off duty between eight day spells of work. When you see trucks lined up at a weigh station by the side of the highway, the DOT police are indeed weighing vehicles but they are also checking safety equipment and inspecting log books. The daily log contains a series of blocks for the driver to code his time: driving, on duty but not driving, off duty, in the sleeper berth. Filled out, with lines running up and down the page to record the minutes in each category, the form looks like a complicated version of an echocardiogram.

"Did you feel that?" James said as we pulled out of the lot. "I had to add air so the trailer would make it over the dip at the end of the driveway. Normally we're lower to the ground so now I'll let air out. That was just a temporary boost." Yes, I had felt a little something but mainly I was getting used to being up so high.

My seat was an air ride, designed to glide up and down, forward and back, to smooth out the bumps; I was perched on a lumbering camel, nine feet in the air. As we began to head west on state Route 2, a tiny blip of a black Jeep Cherokee cut in front of us. "Stupid. He has no idea what it takes to slow this thing down."

To refer to a car hauler simply as a truck, or even as a big rig, is imprecise, even naïve, but here's a way to think of it. Imagine the car hauler as a caterpillar: the cab with its attached head rack is the thorax, and the trailer is the abdomen. The fifth wheel joins the two and when the truck turns it rotates, allowing the entire vehicle to articulate and pivot.

I was impressed with the heft of the hauler, of course, but the shift pattern on the knob of the stick shift was just as impressive. It looked impossibly complicated but James tried to reassure me. "Really, this is just like your Subaru at home, only there are more gears." To me, it was nothing like my Subaru. "Synchromesh will mesh the gears for you, but I don't have that so I mesh in how I shift. My foot on the throttle is the synchronizer. In school, I learned to double clutch but once you're good you don't do that much. What I pay attention to is speed and RPMs. I can just feel it." The complexity of the shift pattern with thirteen forward gears, one for reverse, and a lever for switching between high and low mesmerized me. "Five low is five, five high is really six, six low means seven, and so on. You get that, don't you?" No, I did not.

When James was little he amassed huge collections of toys: Matchbox cars, Brio trains, Legos, Tonka equipment. He would occupy himself for hours, orchestrating collisions and making explosive sounds, but just as often running the vehicles along a track, carefully observing their performance.

By the time he was in high school, a commercial driver's license was all he wanted. He pleaded with us to send him to CDL school and we pleaded for the homework to be done. Some parents might have had the

stomach for bargaining, trading good grades for a driving course, but James refused to bargain on any terms. He took the position that it was unfair for parents to impose any desires or any values on a child. Plus, I had remarried and now it was two against one, an inherently unfair situation, as he invariably pointed out in our many spats. He knew what he wanted, he didn't care what we thought, but he wanted us to bankroll him.

We finally gave in when he was a student at Vermont Technical College, getting an associate's degree in diesel power, and we paid $5,000 to Giroux Transport in Barre, Vermont for him to learn to double clutch and back a semi into a loading dock. He passed the licensing test on his first try and landed a job with Brink's, an almost impossible feat for someone with no commercial driving experience.

Route 2 is a narrow two lane road that passes through small farm towns and open countryside. In West Danville, where spongy looking ice covered the pond, two shiny tankers turned off. "Milk haulers, probably on their way to Cabot Creamery."

Almost forty percent of Vermont's farm land is used for dairy production and it is easy to conjure the bucolic image of cows grazing in the fields. Less common is to think of trucks as part of the picture, but they are. "Hauling milk is tough, particularly when you're picking up from small farms, the kind they have around here. For a good part of the day you're not fully loaded and the milk just sloshes around inside. Your tanker is really unsteady. Usually the farms are in the middle of nowhere and you're on very small roads. And then there's the weather." By this time, wet white splotches were hitting our windshield.

"I met a guy this past winter who told me about a day when he was only partially full, driving through snow so bad he had to stop and put chains on. Then he came to a downed tree and had to back up through the snow. And this was all on a narrow, windy road."

In Montpelier, we snaked past a holistic health center and a notary's office in our approach to Formula Nissan. "It's a tricky location. I'm going to have to pull into traffic in order to back into the dealer's lot. But don't worry. When the cars see me, they stop." They did stop, we parked and I went inside to use the restroom.

"Are you here to pick up your car?" The service manager's question

seemed so normal, but today it was so out of place. I was traveling in a different world. "No thanks. I'm with that car hauler out there."

Outside, James was loading vehicles, putting into place the first pieces of the day's puzzle. The blue Honda Pilot belonged on top, rear end facing forward, and the red Ridgeline truck went on the lower deck, front end first. He positioned them this way, by size and shape, to leave room for the SUVs and cars still on his list. He moved quickly, hustling across the lot to retrieve each vehicle. Even backing the Pilot onto the top deck he was fast but he had to be careful, too, and not let the wheels slip off the treads. One of the trickiest cars to load, it turns out, is a Smart Car: the wheels are so close together they can easily slip off the ramp and leave the car suspended in air. At the other end of the spectrum, a big pickup truck with an extended bed is its own challenge; the ramps have to be set just so to create enough flat space.

James was quick with loading because he had to be. There were two more dealerships to visit before lunch and by mid-afternoon he was supposed to finish the delivery and be on his way to a rail depot for nine new cars. At night he would have to pull into a truck stop before maxing out on driving hours for the day.

The first time James slept in a truck stop, I worried. He called me from the road that day, his first training run with the owner of the company, elated his dream was finally real. When he told me they would be stopping for the night, I began to worry. I had read about the prostitutes, drugs and weapons that circulate at some truck stops and I silently ran through alternative arrangements – maybe he could make it back home, or go to a hotel – before dismissing them as crazy and unworkable (too far away, no room in a hotel parking lot for a seventy-five foot trailer). Riding with James, though, seeing the dark blue curtains and the comforter on his bunk, ordering a sandwich at a truck stop when we stopped for lunch, chatting with the woman behind the counter, made me feel better. A truck stop can be benign, just a place where guys at work can eat, shower and sleep. "Yes, Mom," James said. "I lock my doors at night."

As we left Formula Nissan, James explained the next segment of the route. "We have to go through Bethel, though I'd rather not. I'd like to stay on Interstate 89 and head west on Route 4, since those are bigger

roads, but that would take me through the town of Woodstock, and the people of Woodstock passed a length restriction and I'm too long. I have to take smaller roads through Bethel where I have to go under a bridge that is thirteen feet, seven inches high. I'm thirteen six."

We entered Bethel by a downhill stretch followed by a sharp left turn and a tight squeeze under the railroad bridge in the shadow of towers by the river full of animal feed. At the bridge I held my breath, waiting for the crash that seemed inevitable, but James was right – we did have an inch to spare. "Sometimes I talk to the other guys about what our companies pay in federal fuel taxes and we wonder how Woodstock can keep us off a federal road. No one has a good answer."

About seventeen million new cars and light trucks are sold in the United States in a year. Car haulers, essential fibers in the fabric of the American economy, crisscross highways, state roads and city streets every day, delivering the new and taking away trade-ins and repossessions, but most of us are oblivious unless we are on a highway, about to pass. Outside the Bikram Yoga studio in the town of Mendon, a young woman, mat slung over her shoulder, did not even glance up from her phone as we passed.

Our next stop was at the Chevy and Ford dealerships on opposite sides of Route 4 in Rutland. James ran back and forth between the lots to retrieve cars and he worked the trailer's levers hard, raising the decks and lowering them, angling them forward and back as he fit in the last pieces of the puzzle, and wrapped heavy chains around the tires and cranked them down. Most older cars have holes in the undercarriage for affixing chains but newer cars don't and require heavy straps, ratcheted around the tires. "BMW, Audi and Volkswagen haven't had holes for years. Pretty soon I won't be able to use chains at all, at least when I'm carrying new cars. It will all be straps." Chains are cumbersome, particularly on the lower deck where there is not much clearance, but they have a certain panache among drivers.

Like any human endeavor, trucking has a hierarchy. The driver's ease in using chains is just a small indicator of where he fits in the pecking order but the big thing is the type of truck he drives. The size and heft of a car hauler give it status, and then there's the loading – backing up and not slipping off the ramp, even when the wheel track is tiny and the weather

is foul – but at the top of the heap is a hazmat truck. A collision can mean disaster and the extra endorsements on the license are required: H to carry hazardous cargo and X to drive a tanker. Here, James expanded on our earlier conversation about milk tankers. "A hazmat tanker will have baffles, and that will stifle the effect of the contents moving inside. A milk tanker, or any food grade tanker, won't have baffles and the liquid will slosh around and make it even more unsteady." Score another point for the guys who were heading to Cabot Creamery.

Once nine vehicles were loaded, the forward most car on the head rack extended out over the top of the windshield. With its shadow and the condensed view, I found myself craning my neck and hunching my shoulders, as though that might give me a better view. "If a pickup truck were up there, it would stick out farther and I'd have to lower the platform to get under some bridges. The sight lines would be even more narrow but right now it's okay. My visibility is equal to the height of my forearm, from my elbow to the top of my fist. That's enough."

We headed to the truck stop in Fort Ann, New York for lunch and then to the detailing shop. In less than fifteen minutes, James had emptied the truck and asked the owner to call a cab to take me to the bus stop in Albany. "Bye, Mom. Sorry I have to leave but I'll see you soon. Love ya."

*

We have all seen the "No Jake break" sign at the side of the road, but I asked James what it meant. "Jake comes from Jacobs Vehicle Systems. It's a kind of brake that uses the compression within the engine to slow down. Releasing the air makes noise, which is why you see the sign in residential areas, but drivers prefer the Jake to the foot brake. Less wear and tear. You know that hill in Vergennes?"

I did know Vergennes, a small town in northern Vermont. I had once stopped when I was in the area because someone told me it had a good French bakery on the main street.

"The sign in Vergennes says to limit use of the Jake break because there are houses nearby. But if I'm going through, even if it's three in the morning, I'm going to use the Jake because of that hill. It's at least ten percent, and that's pretty steep when you're in a semi."

I knew exactly what he meant. On the day I stopped at the bakery, a

big truck was making its way up the short, very steep hill. The guy was shifting gears and I knew he wouldn't want to stop for a pedestrian. I had already started to cross but I stepped back onto the sidewalk, with a conspicuous step so he would know I was waiting and not just dithering. All he could see was a woman in her sixties, carrying a bag from a fancy French bakery. How could he know I was the mother of a truck driver?