

SILENCED

Kevin C. Stewart

On US 19, I look at things, take in the scenery. I try to get a feel for each part of the road. Wait for a vibe. I'm looking for our role in this. I need to know our role.

I can't do it in a car. I have to walk so I can feel the road under my shoes. I have to sniff the air and simultaneously smell, say, ragweed or mowed ramps or bean trees.

I have to study the crushed bones of a flattened possum. I have to think about this, about what it means. I have to have the right song in my head, "Mansion on the Hill" or "Lost Highway" or the earliest known recorded version of "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain."

You see, Hank Williams may have died on this road. On December 31, 1952, he was driven through here, to a concert in Canton, Ohio, by a college student named Charles Carr. Around Blaine, Tennessee, they'd been pulled over for almost sideswiping a passing cop car. The cop U-turned and pulled them over for driving left of center, joking that the man in the back looked dead. Carr thought he could see Hank was breathing, and he'd heard him hiccup a few times. He followed the cop to the magistrate's office in Rutledge, paid his ticket and drove on. He was worried about Hank, though.

In Knoxville, he had to be carried from the Andrew Johnson Hotel to the car and shoved inside. Carr didn't know that Hank was so wasted he'd forgotten about a WROL radio show he was supposed to have done earlier that day. Once, somewhere along the dark rise and falls of US 11 in east Tennessee—or was it before they'd even gotten to Knoxville?—just to check whether Hank was okay, Carr asked him to sing a song. Hank asked what he wanted to hear. Anything, Carr said. Hank laughed and said they should sing one for "old Red," and they sang a Red Foley song together. Carr laughed too, knew Hank didn't like "old Red" much, said he was too slick. Carr felt a little better after they sang, and soon they were in Bristol, Virginia, and they hit US 19, which served as the state line between Tennessee and Virginia.

On the Tennessee side, Carr stopped at a cab station to piss and get coffee. He heard a man asking the dispatcher was he sure no busses were going to West Virginia until later tomorrow. Carr said, "We're headed to West Virginia."

"We?"

Carr paused a moment. "My passenger and myself."

The man considered this and peered through the grimy window. "That your Cadillac?"

"My passenger's."

The back door on the driver's side opened, Hank emerged, swayed, his back to them. Hank stood in Tennessee and pissed on Virginia. The man in the cab stand asked, "Mind if I ride in the front seat?"

"You do any driving?"

"You offering me a job or a ride?"

Carr shrugged. "Whichever."

They left. The man was Donald Surface.

I walk on, trying to feel something along the road under my steps, but I am exasperated at not feeling anything and for wanting, really wanting, to feel something, to know something. To be sure. I need for it to have happened here. I go maybe a hundred yards, searching, the sun slipping behind the ridges, the sky streaked with pink, Venus on the rise, the first light of night.

Hank was inspired to write "I Saw the Light" when he was drunk and woke up in a back seat in north Alabama. A bright light was in his face. He wondered if they'd wrecked and died, and he was seeing the lights of heaven. The light passed, and he saw an airport in the valley. He was a little pissed, but he took out his notepad and wrote, "I saw the light."

That's one version of the story, of how the song came about. The best one. I always choose the best version, even if it isn't true.

I saw the light, I saw the light
No more darkness, no more night
Now I'm so happy, no sorrow in sight
Praise the Lord, I saw the light.

No matter how optimistic it might sound, you have to figure he still somehow meant it to be sad. After all, God created light out of darkness, and not vice-versa. The dark came first.

East of Summit, West Virginia, several hours after leaving Bristol, Carr pulled up to Nebakanezer's, a long squat Quonset hut of a roadhouse run by a Lebanese man named Wehby Jabour. The bar was still open. Carr parked and asked Surface whether he was going in or wanted anything. Surface said, no, he was all right. Inside, all of three men in coats were hunched over the bar, the sorry remnants of a depressing New Year's Eve, no doubt. Jimmie Rodgers' "A Drunkard's Child" scratched away on the jukebox. Carr bought himself a cup of coffee and Hank a fifth of bourbon from the gracious Middle Eastern man, who kept repeating, "Thank you. Thank you," nodding with each "Thank you." Carr answered, "You're welcome," each time, growing weary of it after the second. He was tired, having driven from Alabama to Knoxville, and now up these curvy mountain roads in snowy Bumfuck, Virginia, and, God, he'd just gotten to West Virginia, the worst yet to come. He wanted to let Surface drive now, but when he got back to the car, Surface was gone. He looked both ways up and down US 19, a rare straightaway that lay along Oak Mountain River like a length of bone at the base of a deep gash. Carr didn't see his new passenger, so he climbed back in the Cadillac, tried to hand the fifth to Hank, who was still asleep, slumping but sitting up. He dropped the bottle into the singer's lap, started the car and drove on, through Triple Oaks, the tires singing across the steel-grated bridge deckings as US 19 snaked the Bluestone Valley.

I love the mountains when they're green and look like broccoli bunches. The trees will soon be afire though, the leaves red, yellow, orange—the kind of thing people take Sunday afternoons to drive the back roads and gawk at. Then, however, once it gets to be winter, the mountains look like they need a shave. Gravel crunches under my shoes. I kick a partially flattened Rolling Rock can into the dried weeds, the aluminum pinging and the stalks whispering after it. On Flat Top Mountain to the north, the folds of the hollows start near the top and flare toward the base. Shadows paint the western slopes.

I like to start with the tops of hills, take in as much as I can see. Overhead, steel towers carry sagging power lines from Glen Lynn, Virginia, down through the valley below me and then up and over Flat Top. A swath was cut through the trees beneath the lines and had re-grown with pines, laurels, locusts, and blackberry brambles, around the rock outcroppings. It looks like a scar. It is a scar. It wasn't here when Hank passed through, though, so it is of no concern. Nor are the mines to the west, surface or deep, the gouged-out Wal Mart lots.

The senses I feel are hard to explain. I've felt things before, here and there. Not enough to make me think I was on the spot, but I know something happened there. It's like a divining rod. Something pulls at me. It's as if there are spots where gravity gets stronger and I can feel it pull at my guts. I think these are places where something happened, like when he wrote his last lyrics. But the pull of these spots doesn't seem strong enough to be *the* place. It will grip, and when it lets go, my insides will feel like my leg does when it goes to sleep.

I spy something in the gravel and pick it up, hefting a cool penny in my hand, Abraham Lincoln's profile staring back toward home. I turn it over, a wheatie, 1949. It could've been there since then, or someone could've lost it just yesterday.

In Oak Hill, West Virginia, Carr pulled into a gas station. He glanced over his shoulder at Hank. He said, "Mr. Williams?" When Hank didn't answer, Carr got out of the Cadillac and opened the rear driver-side door. Hank was slumped against the passenger-side. Carr slowly reached his gloved hand forward and touched Hank on the elbow. Hank Williams was still. Carr noticed a piece of paper clutched in Hank's dead hand and pulled it from the cooling fingers. The wind whipped snow all around him and into the open car door, the flakes not even melting on Hank. Carr read the note: "We met, we lived and dear we loved, then comes that fatal day, the love that felt so dear fades far away." He jerked back out of the car and slammed the door, breathing hard, his throat tightening, his hands and feet numbing.

Whether Carr, at that moment, pondered the significance of holding the most influential country music songwriter and singer's last written words, I don't know. He was likely mostly scared. A dead man was in the back seat of his own Cadillac, and Carr was driving

it. A friend of Hank's, Carr was eighteen, a college student alone on Christmas break before he was hired. There were a couple of more weeks to go before the spring semester started, so Carr thought, "Sure. Easy money. Free concerts. Why not?" Now his emaciated boss was dead. Carr wanted to run, but he was stuck smack dab in the middle of West Virginia. He didn't know anyone. He considered driving back to Knoxville, just park the car in the hotel parking lot, and leave this dead drunk in the back seat. Goddamned Hank Williams, and his I-am-bound-to-die depressing hillbilly shit.

Carr could just leave Hank to be found in the Andrew Johnson's parking lot and go back to his Montgomery home and read his history books and continue with his dream of being a history teacher. He wanted to teach it, not necessarily be a part of it, but now he was, he was finally realizing. He was forever. Eventually, when Carr'd turn on the radio, Hank would come on and Carr would change the station. A little while later, Hank would come on there. Carr would tune in to the black station. Surely Hank couldn't come on there. But even in those old blues and R&B songs, Carr would hear chords and notes and phrasings that echoed Hank or that Hank echoed. He'd have to turn off the radio. Maybe even break it.

Carr finally decided to call the police in Oak Hill. The patrol car pulled alongside the Cadillac and the cops got out. One cop opened the rear driver-side door and craned his neck inside and said that it was Hank Williams, all right. The other cop said that he wasn't no bigger than nothing. He shook his head. Carr wasn't sure, but he thought he saw the first cop slip something into his coat pocket. While they waited on the ambulance, Carr peeked inside a last time and saw that Hank's watch and fifth were gone, but what could he say? At the hospital, several doctors examined Hank and pronounced him dead on arrival.

Hank's Cadillac had been at the gas station, where, once word got out Hank was dead right there in Oak Hill, it was stripped of anything that might be valuable or might make a good souvenir. Maybe this is our legacy in the death of Hank Williams. We weren't thieves, per se, but his songs weren't enough. Nothing is that can't be held in hand. We took his shit and gave nothing back until the old truss bridges were replaced on US 19, the one closest to Frenchburg, West Virginia,

in Oak County, was named the Hank Williams, Sr., Memorial Bridge. Some replacement: a sleek non-descript bridge.

Next morning after Hank died, Carr took a bus back to Knoxville. At the Tennessee line in Bristol, he cried. When he finally got back home in Montgomery, he stared at the radio. Hank Williams was in it, if not right now, he would be soon. Hank Williams would be everywhere on the radio. "I'll never get out of this world alive." The dead son of a bitch would never leave him alone. Carr opened his window and threw the radio out and watched it burst on the pavement of the driveway two stories below. He couldn't do the same with cars, though. The rest of his life, every time he drove, Carr would frequently check the rearview for a slumped, hunched-over body, cold in the back seat.

The autopsy showed Hank Williams died of alcoholic cardiomyopathy, but he'd lived a life of pain from a birth disorder, Spina Bifida Occulta, that gnarled his back. Hank lived with chronic back pain, and the morphine he took to ease it mixed with the booze and killed him after he'd written those lines. And there were the internal injuries from a fight down in Montgomery, two days before he'd hit Knoxville, ending up in the back seat of that Cadillac, a bottle between his legs. He wrote those first two lines, felt the pain in his back and in his gut. He put the pen and paper down on the seat, unscrewed the lid from the bottle and took a long pull. He closed the bottle, picked up the pen and paper and wrote the last two lines. He squeezed the pen in one hand and crumpled the paper in the other hand. He gritted his teeth and grimaced, the pain raging in his spine before moving to his chest. He thought about his last performance. He played his last concert for the Montgomery, Alabama, chapter of the American Federation of Musicians. Mostly jazz musicians. Two nights ago. It was said he blew them away. One guy said the musicians listened like it was Benny Goodman.

After the show, he ended up in his own element, some old honky tonk, and got in a fight. But for part of one night, Hank took that unfamiliar audience of kick-ass jazz musicians, people who may have gone into that show thinking they wouldn't like him or hadn't even paid attention to who the hell he even was, and Hank made them pay attention, alright. He made them his.

In that back seat, his left arm grew numb and his alcohol-soaked heart failed, and he died. The pen and bottle fell to the floorboard, the whiskey sloshing in the bottle for some unknown miles until Carr stopped in Oak Hill and found him dead.

On US 19 in Oak County, I've walked all the way through Barrel, over Barrel Mountain and Black Oak Mountain to Triple Oaks. I've walked almost to Tent Creek, to the top of Cornpone Ridge. The road is exactly the same as it was when Hank Williams died on it, and I've studied it carefully as I've walked, searching for something, anything that might hold a clue to the exact spot where he died. Thinking that maybe Charles Carr knew when Hank Williams had died and wanted to somehow memorialize the spot, I've looked for markers on trees, on the old white guard posts, on rock outcroppings. I have found nothing.

But now, standing on the Hank Williams, Sr., Memorial Bridge, I feel it. Not the bridge. It. Hank's hit when he died was "I'll Never Get Out of this World Alive." These old hollows have trapped a lot of living people. Maybe Hank felt at home here, or like he'd finally made it home. I mean, it was dark, and he was drunk, aching from his back and his insides from that fight in Montgomery. Pumped full of morphine and vitamin B-12. He never saw the scenery that night. I'm sure he'd traveled through here before and seen it, and I'm sure it would've appealed to him—towns and farms cut-off by steep mountains, or perched on them. "Mansion on the Hill" could be literal here. Standing on this bridge, I realize the state got it right, for once, but still screwed things up.

I mean, Hank'd lost control of his body to disease, drugs and booze. He'd lost control of his career to his wife, Audrey, to his mother, to the record companies, to the fucking Grand Ol' Opry. I read once he was asked what his next record would be, he answered that he didn't know, that he hadn't been told, that everyone else always knew before he did. I imagine he said this with more than a hint of bitterness in his voice, and I imagine he knew what it was like to have the one thing that kept him going taken from him. He was now only moving around, a robot, but to get to that next show, he passed through these mountains that demanded nothing of him, mountains that allowed a man to live however he wanted to as long as he left

them alone. Maybe Hank decided if he had one last chance to spring free, this was it. There was only one way out, though. He couldn't do it alive. He'd never get out alive. As his Cadillac's wheels wailed across the steel-grated bridge at Frenchburg, he wailed too, hoping that if there were such things as spirits and ghosts, his would slip from this Cadillac and wander these hills, a place that is about as wild as man could find back in those days, and these.

Hank then grimaced from pain one last time, seeing the light, as if the brightest dome light ever inside a Cadillac had been turned on. It radiated from the windows and he saw the mountains through the swirling snow, the trees, the ridges, the hollows, and he emanated out with the light, and where it gave way to darkness, he slipped away. Then the light went out, the tires hushed on the snowy pavement, and he was gone from his body, and into the hills.

For a long time he roamed these hills. I know for a fact he did. For years, tires on that old truss bridge, on the steel-grating, would absolutely wail. A whippoorwill, a train, a voice. The surface of the new bridge is quiet. He's been silenced, replaced by a flimsy galvanized sign.