

SAMPLER

Strange Country

Also by Jon Thompson

POETRY

The Book of the Floating World

Landscape with Light

ESSAYS

Fiction, Crime and Empire

After Paradise: Essays on the Fate of American Writing

SAMPLER

Jon Thompson

*Strange
Country*

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For my mother, Claire Thompson,
who taught me to read.

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“Poetry can repair no loss but it defies the space that separates. And it does this by its continual labor of reassembling what has been scattered.”

—John Berger, *The Sense of Sight*

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What They Believed

Some believed in a god that died for them.
Some believed that every day you need to
kill the god lodged in your heart.
Some believed god is an open window.
Some believed a storm is coming, that is why it is dark.

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Some believed the stars' flickering in the cold night sky is
an argument for a better self.
Some believed that love is older than the stars.
Some believed we are nothing but star dust.
Some believed dust is nothing but infinity made present.

Some believed the self is something you become, like a sculpture
that finally finds its form.
Some believed the self is an unfinished sentence.
Some believed it was never more than a vanishing moon.
Some believed the self is one nation killing another.

•

Some believed that the anger against the poor is a tide rising
that'll drown us all.
Some believed anger of the poor is a rising tide that'll drown us all.
Some believed justice is a riderless horse.
Some believed that the world is everything outside the house at
night with the TV on.

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Some believed violence is the mother we need to embrace.
Some believed it can be mined & refined, like a rare-earth metal.
Some believed it's a religion, to be honored with candles &
votive prayers.
Some believed there's a darkness in our hearts that demands the
death of those we hold most dear.

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Some believed that trees secretly communicate with the wind.
Some believed that the polar caps are melting of their own accord.
Some believed that colors on a warm February day indicate
catastrophe.
Some believed, with sadness, that the world is all that is the case.

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Some believed that dreams augur the future.
Some believed dreams are the ghosts of the past.
Some believed dreams are the stories you cannot bear to tell yourself
in the here-and-now.
Some believed that they must be murdered in their beds.

•

Some believed that the sun dreams of a different life, less
cataclysmic, less nuclear, less volatile.
Some believed that the sun is a sojourner, condemned to wander
in the silvery woods.
Some believed the sun is simply the sum of all of our desires.
Some believed the sun is a life-force whose life is half spent.

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Some believed that you have to die to live.
Some believed that you have to live to die.
Some believed that living is dying, moment by moment.
Some believed that the only way to live is by distracting
yourself from the thought of dying.

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Some believed poetry died a long time ago,
like epics, or astrolabes.
Some never thought of it at all.
Some heard in it voices that sang in their head.
Some believed it could awaken the dead.

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Letter to Peter

As I write, it's summer & the spear-shaped leaves of the Japanese maple are tender with sunlight, which makes them luminous & almost transparent! Poetry, I believe, offers a language of apparition such that the Japanese maple in the poem can always be itself, but also betoken a pilgrimage on the way to something else, even if you're not sure where, or even, if you feel like going there. I like your eye, the way you use the knickknacks of Americana—like snow globes, for example—to register our strange childlike nature. In your poetry I hear a language alive to the white noise of our time, the vertigo of now. Your poems get lost in the bigness of the land & don't really try to find their way back. Peter, this is such a strange land, it needs a wide-open polyphony to capture it. Even artificial flowers possess a rare beauty, fake though they may be. Plastic bouquets on a white coffin are one of the saddest laments I know.

I like the way that trailer parks make their way into your poems, not as things, not even as places per se, but as zones of experience in which the TV is always on in front of couches that are worn out & scratched up, & hope isn't dead, but it's getting near the end. Hope that lives despite the non-transmission—or is it the non-reception?—of a snowy TV screen at 3.22 a.m. Because I find highways fascinating (they bring us past the banal & the sublime with such indifference!), I've been interested to see that you, too, are interested in them, especially signs by the side of the road, which are plainly declarative, but also misleading. They stand in your poems in all kinds of weather, except for snow. For some reason, road signs in your poems rarely have to contend with high drifts, or snow of any kind, which is a blessing, I suppose, but also mysterious as your poems are full of rain; rain that drenches, or at times, rain that falls softly like a blurred emotion, or rain heard from the warm inside of a house, with the musical patter of outsideness reminding one that while there is refuge, it's never complete.