1998

In a Country Cemetery

David Wagoner

Follow this and additional works at: http://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.5056

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.
David Wagoner

IN A COUNTRY CEMETERY

I had been reading tombstones and drinking in
Their verses with my beer—the heavenly comforts
In heavenly homes and the folly
Of earthly pleasures. I thought I had been
Thoughtful while putting my feet down
Among resting places, knee-high in timothy,
Going from plot to plot, avoiding
The plastic flowers and daffodils
Still in their jam jars. I had touched
The names and the odd numbers of men,
Women, and infants who had been lying there
So long, the who’s and when’s of what they’d been
Were flaking away to nothing. I was taking them
And myself as seriously as my six-pack,
Had memorized epitaphs
With every bottle, had counted on them,
Had given them the attention we deserved,
Had given them pride of place
In my mind and stomach, and felt well
Under their influence. The final drafts,
Now grown nearly as warm as I was,
Had rendered me fully capable
Of understanding the positions of these companions
Composed of earth, truly composed
At last, so I lay down among them
To share their gray-blue afternoon, their words
And mind intermingled. I had just begun
To know the stretches of heaven
That appeared and reappeared and disappeared
Between my eyelids and the even stiffer
Stretches of firmament
   Under me, when a voice—as distinct from the wind
   As lightning from dim daylight—called me
From the barely audible edge
   Of silence. Daaavid. Daaaaavid. It spoke
   To the back of my mind or the bottom
Or whatever part of it was still willing
   And able to listen, and though I didn’t think
   This was the Voice That Breathed O’er Eden
Or the judgment call of Gabriel, that name
   Came all the way from my dead mother and father
   And my dream children, all the way
From the brim of the untranslatable, unknown
   Tongue of love, and bewildered, I gathered
   The little that seemed left
Of my spilled body and stood it up
   And blundered it to the brow of a long slope
   Downhill and heard again
In a woman’s voice the name of that dead poet
   From a farm on the lower field. She wanted someone
   Far away, but not so far
He couldn’t be called back. She needed him
   And expected him to hear her.
   She wanted him to come home now,
Please, maybe to do something
   Important to her, because it was getting late,
   Before it was too late.