

Excerpt from *What Days Are Like When There Are Only Nights*

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***What Days Are Like When There Are Only Nights* (pp. 49-60)**

Ben Miller

Artist's Statement

The Road: A Shared Plight

I employ varying approaches to developing texts, but one element unites each effort: the aim of offering a reader a transformational experience, just as each piece of writing makes me, in a real sense, a new kind of writer. By “new” I do not mean shiny and flawless. I mean possessing the piquant freshness of having been altered intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually by immersion in a creative process.

And when I work, however I choose to work, I strive to be embracing of accidents that occur along the way. They must be part of the plan! As, too, is sensitivity to how much a writer's process can benefit from communication with other art forms—music to ceramics to dance to painting. This cross-pollination is the very definition of the Black Mountain College tradition. Close I hold these sentences from Anni Albers' essay “Material as Metaphor”—

Most of our lives we live closed up in ourselves, with a longing not to be alone, to include others in that life that is invisible and intangible. To make it visible and tangible we need light and material, any material. And any material can take on the burden of what had been brewing in our consciousness or subconsciousness, in our awareness or in our dreams.

The first question I inevitably struggle with is shape, my word for form. If the shape dilemma can be resolved, answers to a myriad of smaller textual questions will be there, not necessarily located with ease, but *somewhere* available in the heaps of options. And theme is key to shape. In this case a theme of oblivion inflicted by displacement—the loss of the family circle, of routines of neighborhood, of lawful institutions—in sum the shattering of a pre-existing arc of a history that had pointed in directions at least partially perceivable.

This topic was not abstract to me. It was central to how I formed as a person and it had a texture and color. The pebbled black stretch of vacant asphalt around me when I was the lone kid in a mall or school or public pool parking lot awaiting a ride not arriving. Had the driver died? Driven to another state? My mentally ill parent often struggled to recall who she was, where she should be. The solid emptiness of the asphalt made me feel smaller, smaller...eventually to the point where I had a terror I would not be seen in the headlights, an indistinguishable molecule of night.

Disorientation afflicts those jettisoned and abandoned—be it for five hours or five years. I had to find a method of placing my readers shoulder-to-shoulder with the confusion of being stripped of bearings and having to pick from a whirring detritus of thoughts and feelings bits which would amount to enough hope or energy to abet, rather than debilitate, a fight for survival. And, too, a shape depicting the usurpation of identity by the momentum of a disaster. Finally I settled on the notion that only a whole woven of fragments would fulfill this mission of addressing the complexity of the pure dream of freedom married to the nightmare of a journey with no givens: isolation and comradeship, good luck and bad, vagaries of subsistence and weather, and other contradictory states arising from steps (or pages) of inspired endurance.

In most cases the shape of a work results from a series of incremental discoveries that shake out of messy early drafts. But here something different happened.

At the time I was employed at a youth center in the urban Midwest that served the children of immigrants from war-torn areas of Africa. There were not enough staff members, and the leaky facility stank of mildew and garbage. After a five-hour shift I'd start homeward full of sadness at the chaos of this place advertised as a haven, but incapable of addressing serious needs of its vulnerable clientele. In the pining of Sudanese kids I heard echoes of my childhood voice crying: *Where? When? Why?*

I trudged beside a busy street in the old center of the city. One night traffic briefly cleared. The moon was out. The centerlines were glowing like glossy strips of paper and I had it. The black page intercut with centerlines of text.

I knew what to do first. It was not write. It was to design the grid of my main character. I sketched centerlines on 120 lengths of road—centerlines that multiplied and veered from page-to-page as choices and decisions multiply under pressure of relentless circumstances. Then I cut the centerlines out. Then I took the text blocks I had generated and slid each block behind a page, up, down, sideways...until I had what I felt to be the right excerpt trapped in a given center-line slot. Then I taped.

The backs of these pages are wildly striped with beige artist's tape. That part of the writing isn't seen, nor are obliterated sections of text blocks. The process included spates of straight writing, but at other times was akin to sculpture, collage, and even photography, words framed like snapshots in an old-fashioned album. I like how the touch affixes figures inhaled by this road to all human beings—whenever, wherever—who have found themselves in darkness, far from home, scanning the distance for the direction that will lead them to water, food, shelter, dignity, justice.

(On pages 1-40, the command "Go!" reappears in different languages—handwritten. On pages 41-80, the command "Leave!" is repeated in different languages. On pages 81-120, the command "Out!" appears—again scrawled in many languages. This layer of the novel speaks to the ubiquitous global phenomenon of displaced peoples.)

what days are like

when there are only

nights

a novel by Ben Miller

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in your house come from?
"Which markets did you frequent?"
"Where did you work and for how long?"
"Where did you go to school and for how long?"

fondue.
the cultists

And even when that date finally came around there was no guarantee that the flesh would hit the pan. Dates were often changed two or three times. Paperwork was sometimes lost completely due to under staffing at regional Pan Offices and thousands of designated fryees were paralyzed for years, unsure just how to proceed with their

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leave behind leaving behind

forgo Journey for Progress forgo
reject concept of pilgrimage in f

don't believe any worry that you

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your
eyes

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... A flattened black van. A rusting Patto.
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aintain the Billboard Jungle. Trucks rush back and
ense stash of signage you've just left behind. In the rearview
smirking members of Vicious Sign Posters Union local 332 alreac.
a new **DIDN'T** for the next unlucky traveler to suddenly confront.

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AVU!

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"Tell us three reasons why we should let you
"Tell us again where you are from!"

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turn right at below

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ABANDONER!
PUH KUSEL!
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ble the oil
red pipes.

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g. The cranes, as you can see, are built
ies they scoot from one corner of the

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ce someone else give
isn't it?
It was not uncommon
ths after the day the F

placed so thoughtfully

under your new seat.

little children who ha

issy. Remember her?

an eternity between each red letter.

VERLASSEN!
N O
HTARRHKAEPAR!!!

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a grape at the

green helmet a

a direct hit.

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men and women

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spurt of that fresh.

highway during the day

Burned

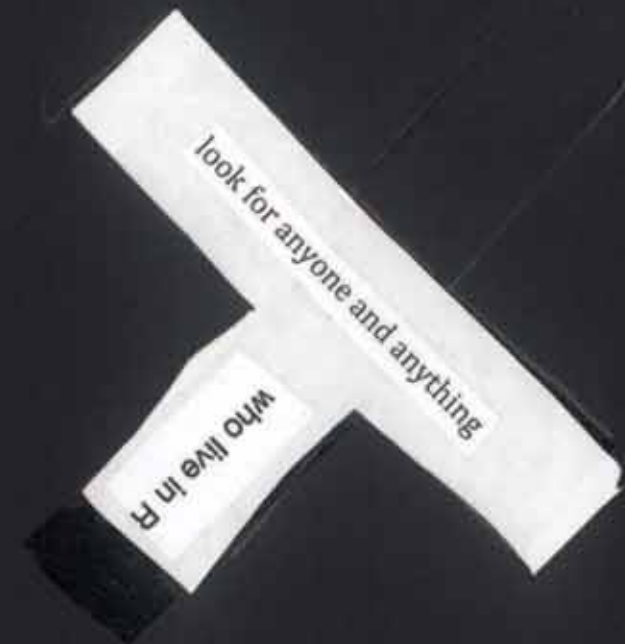
\$4.00 for a pack

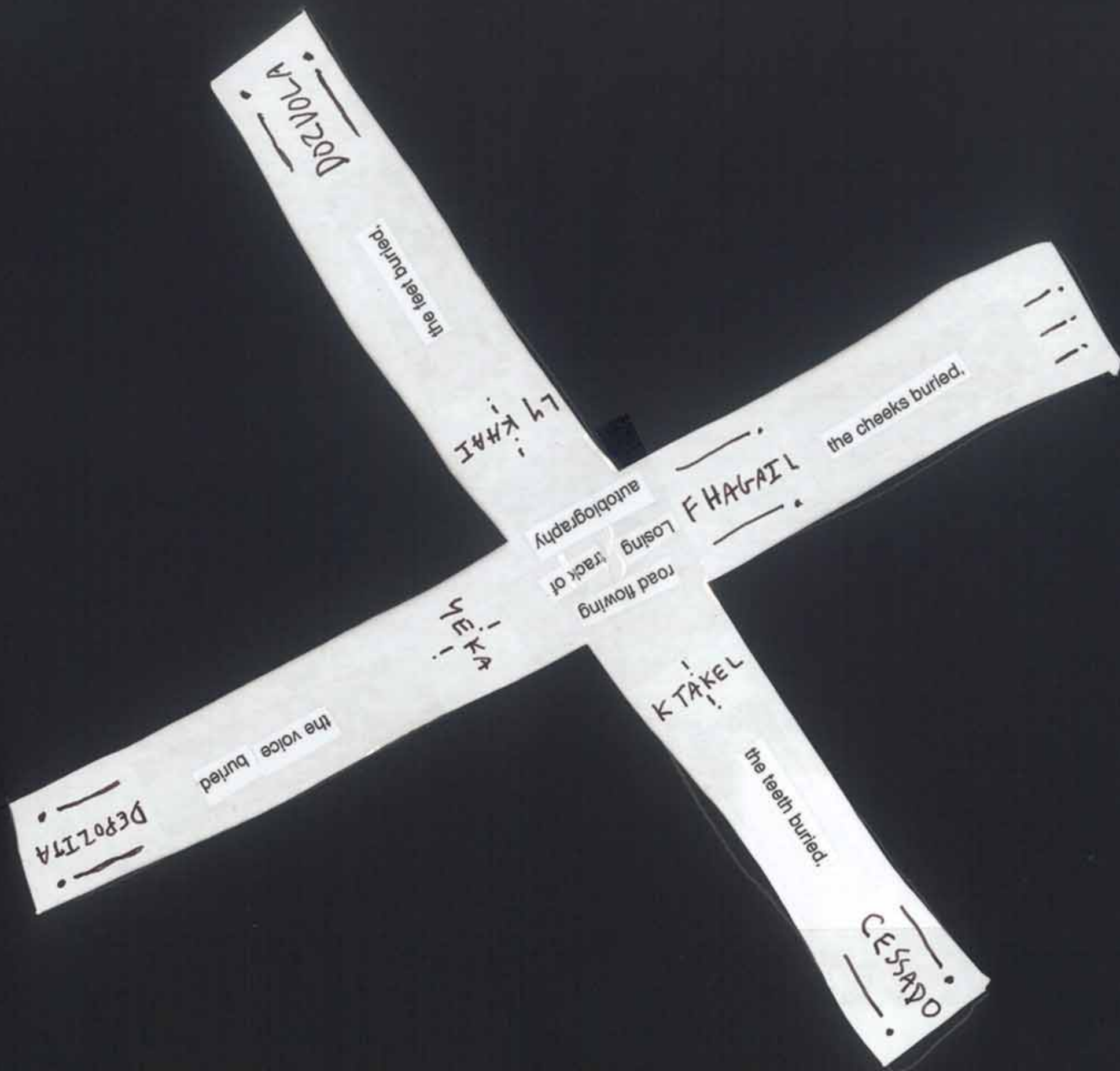
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the mountain

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coke bottle pale gums.
 seagull organ girlfriend
 silk scarf White lips malaria
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coffee, dark and swirling.