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

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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
"Which markets did you frequent?"

"Where did you go to school and for how long?"

"You could record the screams of their children!"

"Fondue, the cultists would sit at the pan. Dates were often changed two or three times. Paperwork is sometimes lost completely due to understaffing at regional pan offices and thousands of designated fyers were paralyzed for years, unsure just how to proceed with their cases."

"I didn't. Grover's upper middle house of a light assaulted by a gang of"
I put it out of my mind but I can't. Those phrases:

Farlozn! Deru!

Her eyes suddenly those first few months, lying on the side of the road, staccato hits, active while men be endless and.

good on his promise to make this the state.

looking and stucco
Put up for sale and quickly went arrived not far from where you ... 

Poropora KE!!! ten tons of metal scrap and a ... 

Preceded by lava light a pamphlet diet consisting only of dairy pro ... 

Left at loss turn right leave behind leaving behind for ... 

Don't believe any worry that you ...
Tell us your real name.
Tell us again where you are from.
Tell us three reasons why we should let you go.

And much better than this.

Don't swear.
Don't shout.

AMID THE PIPES,
PARKKUSSEL!

LON

Turn left at right.

Turn right at extra.

Turn left at cumba.

Turn right at below.

And so did the Army.

And so did the Army.

Rising more two etc.

I'm made like so stiff and powerful that the

Tower and monsen

and powerful that the

Tower and morning

and powerful that the

Tower and morning

and powerful that the

Tower and morning

and powerful that the

Tower and morning
A half mile later you’ll see

to this area of the country contents, a stick impaling the
The rest finally saw the dark
Id be damned if he’d cede
each one a psychologically
How to make jewelry from

an eternity between each red letter.

VERLASSEN!

HTARRHKAEPAR!!!