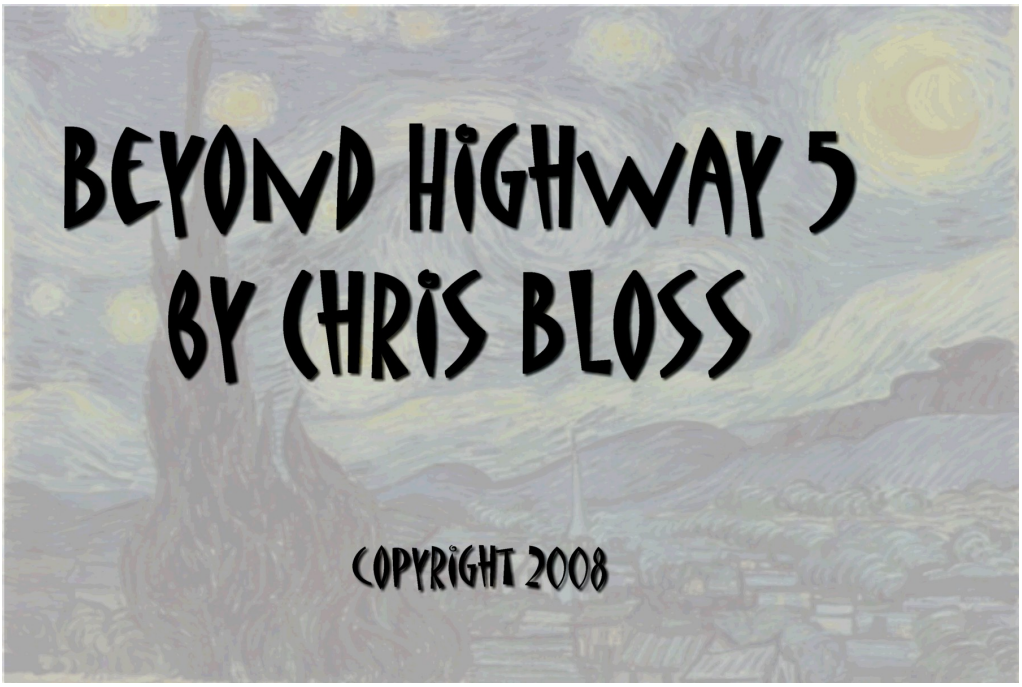

It's been five years since I've been home. Five years ago I told my mother, Frieda, that I had accepted a position outside Missouri. She became completely quiet, a characteristic usually unfamiliar to her. It was almost as if she were shoring all her resources in order to articulate a response. She pushed her coffee cup, rim-stained with bright red lipstick, to the center of the kitchen table. She rose and walked to the window overlooking a field—filled with ancient dogwoods and an old pond—in our backyard. Her silence was frightening.

While Frieda gazed into the field I was overwhelmed by a cacophony of boyhood scents I've carried with me across the years: honeysuckle, lilac, and overripe peaches. I tried to explain to her that taking the job in Chicago was the best position I could get at this stage of life. Slowly, talking almost through a dream, Frieda said, "Well, then you'll need to go then."

I should've known that nothing with Frieda comes that easily.

"But I have one question for you, and I want you to think about it before you answer me. The answer is important to me. Are you a *good man*?" Her gaze remained fixed on the field in back of our house, her back to me, as if she were afraid that the entire field, including the pond, would magically disappear.

At the time, I recall thinking it would be easier digging another pond and planting new dogwoods than answering Frieda's question. I felt I had somehow betrayed her trust. Grief seized me because I was afraid Frieda would forever keep her back turned on me: The son who left home. It was almost as if I had committed some incomprehensible sin against human nature. I was also uncertain whether her question was a trick or if she could actually read my mind. Who really knows about a mother's intuition?

Without making a conscious effort, I looked over the scope of my life while she stood watch over the field, the pond, and the dogwoods, all with her back to me, while tendrils of smoke rose from her cigarette, the ashes dangerously close to dropping on the floor. I remember wondering if she could possibly know that during a night of drinking, after a losing football game at the University of Missouri, I somehow caught the homecoming banner on fire.

The entire affair was based on a juvenile dare gone wrong. The banner, once burning, reminded me of the thudding and haunting Dies Irae in Berlioz's "Symphonie Fantatique," and to this day I smell burning canvas whenever I hear a Berlioz composition.

Could Frieda possibly know that I once made my younger brother, Ryan, walk the miserable two blocks to the house of a neighbor to reclaim his stolen bike? A neighbor kid took Ryan's bike for fun, I suppose,

so I walked Ryan down the street, despite his requests to leave the bike where it was; he was afraid and disliked confrontation—a sweet characteristic I like most about him.

Did she know that the kid's father ran off the porch, red-faced from drinking and actually raised a hand as Ryan took possession of his bike? I picked up a discarded aluminum baseball bat in the yard and said, "You really don't want to make this worse than it needs to be, do you?" The old man stopped, looking at me to see if I was serious, quickly coming to the conclusion that I was indeed serious and willing to pay the price of violence for my little brother.

For some reason, perhaps fear, I held onto the bat with all of the carefree confidence of John Wayne with a six-shooter, even though I'd never been in a fight in my life. Ryan took his bike and we walked home holding hands, somewhat strange for two brothers separated by eleven years. Could she possibly know that Ryan's stolen bike was a secret we kept to ourselves, only speaking about it as a joke in life over the telephone?

All of this went through my mind as I tried to answer Frieda's question. I think Frieda would still be waiting in front of the kitchen window, her back to me today if I hadn't managed to articulate an answer. She was waiting for me to say something, anything. Our lives aren't shaped by the questions posed, but by our answers; sometimes we know the answers before the questions are even asked. But I felt alone, nonetheless, in the quiet period before I could answer.

"Yeah, Frieda, I'm a good person," I said, hoping to placate her mood. At the time I remember wishing she had encouraged me to call her "mother" at an early age, rather she insisted that I call her what I wanted. I was too young to make the choice of calling her by her first name or "mother." It took years for me to realize that she wears the title of "mother" with such ease and dignity—long suffering combined with the uncanny ability to remind others of her long suffering.

Frieda turned from the kitchen window—the field, the dogwoods, and the pond—with the slowness of someone who has seen too much trouble in life, and after my response, she patted my cheek. "Then I won't need to worry about you, will I? I've tried to give you things I thought were important—a special regard for women, an easygoing gentlemanly dignity that precedes your words, and an appreciation for tradition. That's really all I have to give you. Take your job in Chicago and come back home to me when you can."

That was the last time I spoke with her in person, although she's maintained a somewhat odd calling pattern since I moved to Chicago.

She called last week, asking me to come home; she said that she wasn't feeling well and was going to the hospital. No matter how many questions about her illness I asked, she would only answer by telling me to come home: "It's time to come home, Logan."

Traveling in Missouri, especially in late July, is a miserable experience. The drive is more than hot, it's *damned* hot, uncomfortable, and disillusioning. The farther south in Missouri I drive, the higher the temperature climbs.

Occasionally I roll down the window to toss out a cigarette butt, and the windshield fogs from the sluggish air-conditioning inside the car and the humidity outside. There's steam rising off the highway ahead like an oasis.

Gusts of hot wind rise violently from the northwest over the summer-green hills and push my small Pinto too close to the highway's centerline. Frieda must really want me to come home, considering the driving conditions, or she's making me pay for some past juvenile infraction that I can't recall.

On the other hand, I love driving the Pinto and being away from classes I teach. The Pinto handles well as I nudge it back to the centerline after the sudden gusts guide it too close to the wrong side of the

highway.

The blue paint on the Pinto has seen better days; primer is showing from oxidation and extreme weather conditions—none of the Midwestern states offer great conditions for automobile paint. I could certainly afford a newer, larger car with my current salary at Northwestern, but this is the first call I bought with my own money—I still possess a sense of pride in driving something I paid cash for.

In more philosophical terms, I have a certain moral and ethical obligation to the Pinto, as much as I have an obligation to my students. The car is really an extension of who I am and how I perceive myself—simple, slow, reliable.

Right now I wish the wind wouldn't rise over those big goddamn mountains with such vengeance. I'm not worried about my driving abilities, or the Pinto's maneuverability, as much as I'm concerned with everyone else on the road. Big semi-trucks with huge lug nuts sticking out of the tires easily pass me at over 90 miles per hour like white-hot bolts of lightning.

The wind makes the diesel trailers swerve far too close to the Pinto for my comfort. I worry that a sudden gust of wind will make the trailers swerve and those big lug nuts will pierce the Pinto's small tires, so I pass with extreme caution, if I pass at all. Patience is clearly one of my strongest character traits.

I've driven Highway 5 literally hundreds, if not thousands, of times. Before I left for Chicago, Highway 5 was a major road connecting small farm towns with larger cities. With each trip, though, I have always had to come to terms with "coming home."

Each trip down Highway 5 is unique because the geography always seems different, or perhaps I only notice simple details now that I'm traveling home as an adult and I don't really want to go home. I can't help but notice that the big yellow barn behind the Miller house is missing. I've never met the Millers, but I knew them from the big block letters on their mailbox I saw while cruising Highway 5 as a teenager.

Driving past the farm now I notice that the big yellow bar is simply gone. There's no burnt grass or refuse offering a reason why or how the barn met its demise. The last time I drove home, five years ago, the bright yellow barn—the same color of golden Missouri dandelions—stood bright and ostentatious like dime-store jewelry, but it's gone now.

It's a big goddamn mystery to me, and for a moment I even consider stopping at the farm to ask, "What the hell happened to the piss-yellow barn?" Maybe the Miller family finally realized that no one paints a barn golden yellow and got rid of it. I remember Frieda would even make fun of the barn when we would drive by: "That barn is like a preacher in a whorehouse. It just don't belong," she once quipped when I was a teenager.

I haven't traveled Highway 5 for five years now. Despite admonitions from the majority of my family, and particularly Frieda, I took a job teaching in Chicago mainly because I wanted to experience independence. I needed to get out of River Bend. At Northwestern, I'm a professor jack-shit, sitting in a small office in the English department, teaching required undergraduate courses that everyone dislikes, including me. As a junior professor I teach all of the classes no one else wants to teach; more specifically, I teach all the classes no one wants to take.

Last semester I even stopped giving final exams because I found grading them physically painful for all involved. Now I only require two simple papers for each of these core classes, which is more a requirement for the administration than it is for a grade in the class.

My office is dark, off-white that was popular in the 1950s. Rather than scraping the paint, the campus management simply lathers another coat of paint over the walls every few years, which means paint constantly peels away from the walls in thick strips.

The bookcase in my office, obviously constructed from leftover scraps of woods, is what I like most about my small office in the corner of academia. I can fill it with books I've not yet read. I've also come to the conclusion that most of the working world will never find nirvana on the job, so I harbor no misconceived notions to the contrary. The workforce is simply a support mechanism for the rest of life and nothing

more.

Highway 5 curls around some old farms I remember as a boy. The old fox-trotter farm, I notice, is gone. The place is completely empty when just a few short years ago it was bustling with activity.

No farm hands are working the horses, nor are there any horses for that matter. I remember years ago a famous horse from the fox-trotter farm, Mystic Miracle, winning a national competition and bringing a little fame to southwest Missouri. Like many of my students during a normal semester, the whole farm seems to have disappeared.

I remember Frieda telling me that the elder President Bush once had dinner at the old fox-trotter farm. There's something to be said about the elegance and grace of horses.

It occurs to me as I'm driving that Highway 5 actually twists and turns into history. Far South into Missouri it eventually curves into a narrow two-lane road without a shoulder. Traveling a highway without a safety shoulder is yet another reason I dislike coming home, or traveling for that matter.

There are big goddamn farms on the east and west of the highway, some I remember and others have either slipped from memory or are recently built. I remember fresh paint on houses and barns, men driving dark green John Deere equipment in the fields, the tractors moving across rows of hay with the slow elegance of an Alabama country gentleman going to church.

These large farms are monoliths that won't go away, nor will I ever forget about them, like good ideas gone bad, they grow out of the ground, a slice of history that begs to be remembered.

I worked on the farm off to the east as a teenager. Pulling weeds, driving tractor loads, and hauling hay bales were my primary duties, which now seem infinitely more rewarding than my teaching job at Northwestern.

During the noon hour, Margaret, the farmer's wife, would make a big meal of chicken, corn, potatoes for the farm hands. She was proud of providing noon meals consisting of items that were grown solely on the farm, even if it meant whacking a chicken I had fed earlier in the day. Nothing she cooked for us was bought from the grocery store, rather her hobby was providing terrific meals from the farm. I miss the farm at times. There is something therapeutic about working with one's hands.

Up ahead is an old farm that I scarcely remember from previous trips, or perhaps the years have simply faded the image of the farm from my memory. There are old, fat dogwoods standing tall in the front yard. The lawn is freshly mowed, but there is an overturned mower in the ditch just beside the highway, the metal handle bars lying dangerously close to the highway's white safety line.

Clearly, the lawnmower is distinctly out of place against the manicured yard, and I can smell freshly trimmed lilacs from the car as I slow the Pinto. The overturned lawnmower is an artifact, a historical statement from the last person who manicured the lawn, I assume: "I'm not going to mow this goddamn thing again. No, sir! Take this job and shove it up your ass because *I'm getting out*!"

And as I pass the farm I can only wonder if the overturned lawnmower will remain there until I return to Chicago in a few days. Will it be there a year from now? Ten years? Will the goddamn thing remain in the ditch until "chickens meet the hoot owls," an expression Frieda often used. I'm inclined to believe that the human dilemma is closely related to the evolutionary development of daily chaos: once we figure out how best to deal with a problematic situation, the problem mutates into something even more perverse and substantial. I'm always a little more philosophical when I'm driving the Pinto.

Directly to the south is the familiar "Beef-a-Lo" billboard. The sign actually reads, "Beef-a-Lo Born and Bred in Missouri." Truthfully, I've never known what "Beef-a-Lo" was, but the billboard is a mile-marker reminding me that I'm only a few minutes for home. I pull onto an old gravel road just behind the billboard; I'm not ready to go home just yet. I can see that huge strips of paint have peeled away from the billboard exposing worn wood; crabgrass grows high on the stanchions.

Nothing grows quite as well as crabgrass during a typical Missouri summer. It was on this gravel road that I finally made the decision to leave Missouri in the first place. I came to the decision, with little

hesitation, shortly after the city government decided to sell the old Carnegie Library to a Chinese restaurant owner.

It's not as if I ever became an intellectual elitist, as I suppose many at home thought I might be, but I just harbor some allusions of freedom in the pursuit of truth and independence. Selling a free library to a known restaurant chain was more than I could accept in my philosophical world. Even Frieda, who had only taken a few art classes at the community college, agreed that the decision to sell a free library was somehow cracked in logic and appalling. It was a clear act of lunacy that I simply couldn't intellectually accept or assimilate.

Even before I moved to Chicago, former patrons of the old Carnegie could enjoy a cheap lunch buffet with $1.25 draws of beer, as well as free karaoke on Saturday nights. There is even a big goddamn neon sign with flashing blue and red lights advertising happy hour from 6-7 pm Monday through Friday. The obvious rape of the Carnegie Library was simply more than I could handle at the time, and the position at Northwestern offered possibilities that I would never know in Missouri. Leaving home requires constant justification on my part.

I think I'll always miss the peace I find parked behind the "Beef-a-Lo" billboard, but I also know it's time for me to finish my goal: going home.

Of course, I miss Frieda, I miss living closer to my family, and I can't seem to meet friends in Chicago, not close ones anyway. Frieda once explained to me that loneliness was nothing more than a way of thinking, I take issue with her on that matter. She told me no matter where I found myself in the world, I could always look into the night sky and we would always share the same stars, the same blanket of night. She told me to treat a clear night like a heavy quilt; it will keep me warm and connect me with those I love and my past. Frieda has the uncanny knack for poetic sentimentality when she wants. From her telephone calls, I believe Frieda knows things that I'm unable to fathom.

I circle Frieda's house, going around the block twice. Pulling into the parking lot, I'm somewhat confused by all of the activity at the house—children playing in the yard, people chatting on the front porch, mothers chasing children. A young boy I finally recognize as Ryan's son greets me as I get out of the Pinto. Quietly, the boy takes my bag out of the backseat, and I suddenly recall his name, Nathan.

He's grown in five years. My nephew holds my hand and carries by bag to the front porch where Frieda is sitting in an old pink robe I bought her as a teenager—the robe has seen better days. Nathan drops my bags at an empty chair next to Frieda, and then he sits on the porch near me, holding my left leg.

Frieda seems as young as she was when I left five years ago, with light auburn hair and sharp brown eyes. She wears her sixty-one years as lightly as I wear a jacket in the spring.

"I thought you were in the hospital?" I ask.

"I was but I signed myself out this morning. I'm sick of being sick," and she pushes a bottle of whiskey across the table between us. "I've had an inoperable aneurysm for years, I just didn't tell anyone, not even your father. Sometimes it makes me so dizzy I don't know whether to shit or go blind." Frieda has always favored whiskey when she drinks at all.

"I'm unsure if you need to choose between one or the other, you can probably do both," I explain, taking a drink from the bottle.

"You've always been a smart-ass. That's what I like most about you," she says. "I'm glad you're here, Logan; I've missed you. Maybe you can stay for a few days." Nathan hugs my legs, emphasizing Frieda's suggestion to stay for an extended vacation.

"I can stay as long as you need me, Frieda. I need to know you're well before I go back to Chicago."

And Frieda reaches across forever and holds my hand as the sun goes down. The purple-gold horizon with its amber-scented calm and bright stars in the twilight comes as Frieda holds my hand in her mother's grip, and Nathan hugs my legs. Somewhere before I fall asleep on the front porch, I remember Frieda whispering, like the gentle, dry wind during a typical Missouri summer evening, "You're a good

	man," and she throws a blanket over my legs. For a moment, while I am both asleep and awake, I am at home and Chicago is a million miles away.

Christopher Bloss's work has been published in *The Chiron Review* and *Clapboard House*. *Bloss has had the opportunity to read at national and regional conferences, such as the Popular Culture Conference and the Milton Conference in South Dakota. Dr. Bloss finished his doctorate from the University of South Dakota; he lives in Columbus, Georgia with his wife Sherry and his daughter, Crystal. He has taught classes such as World Literature, Screenwriting, and Creative Writing. Dr. Bloss teaches at Georgia Gwinnett College.*