

Joshua Tyrone Sanderson is a passably old, homeless black alcoholic in Indianapolis. A loner by choice, minute by minute and day by day he survives on the near downtown streets as valorously as any Agamemnon or Odysseus brandishing raw valor in battle in classical Greece or Troy. His life is a barbed poem ever as epic as theirs.

STREET EPIC

by R. Michael Pyle

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R. MICHAEL PYLE

Street epic



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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-64718-191-8

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-64718-192-5

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2020

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Pyle, R. Michael
STREET EPIC by R. Michael Pyle
Library of Congress Control Number: 2019921088



"The Wagon"

JOSHUA Tyrone Sanderson
woke, tugged his gloves, pulling them on –
fingerless, frayed cotton, about
ready for the fire, all worn out,
but needed for pushing that cold
and battered, warped and bent-wheeled, old
metal-basket wagon he kept
for everything he had. He slept
chained to it, part of it and it
10 him, partner of his sleeping fit;
awake, like customary trim,
the wagon seemed the crux of him.
Because of this, and what he hauled,
THE WAGON was what he was called.

The Wagon's home (a word he'd say
and then spit) was where his bed lay,
and his bed (equally droll) – bed
was where he lay or put his head.
Hard, fast sleep, though, at least the kind
20 that softens, numbs, soothes, lulling mind,
was not the sleep The Wagon slept.
Sweet dreams, nightmares – neither one crept
into that half-alert intrigue
which suffered peace to his fatigue
and which ordinary men define
as something short of sleep. A line
was threadbare.

He awoke now wide
awake, but cautiously, one side
at a time, an eye opened, then

30 the other, and then once again –
closed, opened – all as if he winked
to rag, tease, or laugh at instinct.

And now, this moment, lodged between
dark and dawn like a mezzanine,
the last nip of The Wagon's sleep
sipped – a sharp-toothed wind playing leap-
frog with his sweatshirt and long coat –
it was time to stir bones.

His throat
was sore, but he was used to that.
40 He honked some phlegm up, and he spat.
With his old, frayed gloves pulled tight, he
wobbled himself half-upwardly,
bent his frame like stiff, dense rods, bent
it like steel held fast in cement
underneath him, craned and growled, arched
like a shirt that's heavily starched,
then pitched back down for a moment's
teeter, distilling sense from sense.
Cold – writhing – licked at, mocked him, slithered
50 about him like a snake, and withered
his body's gathered, stored-up heat.
Alertness plagued him, head to feet.

He rose, feeling snaps, clicks through points
of atrophied, old cartilage joints
exacerbated by the cold,
movement symphonically told,
staccato the full, pudgy length
of his limbs. He stretched the great strength
of his arms, his legs. And he felt,
60 unthinking, this day he'd been dealt.
He coughed, and he spat again. Chain
clanked back a jangling, shrill refrain
to every movement that he made,
half anchoring some mind which paid

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an homage to the life he owed
to both the wagon and its load;
he was still fastened to it.

70 Lone,
uncrouched, an island, The Wagon
remembered again why he'd placed
himself amid this scrub and waste,
piles, hordes of giant, incomplete
slabs astride each other, concrete
monoliths amorphously cut,
formerly an interstate, but
excavated, moved here, left, and
dead-ended, athwart, second-hand,
piled-up street to nowhere, quiet,
a night's deep end, place to pay debt
80 to sleep in any form it might
occur, at the cost of some slight
discomfort, though The Wagon would
tickle to think *that* thought – a good
loud laugh to himself. Besides, he
preferred his single company
to shelters full of lack of choices
and fuller still with lonely voices
while his sought only solace. Here,
in this off-road field, a sphere
90 unto itself – left to stray dogs
and rodents and the epilogues
and ghosts of disposable needs –
blocked in by fence, along which weeds
ran amok and thrived in the rust –
here, in the shreds, heaps, junk, the dust,
The Wagon groped with angels. Here
any echo girdled the ear
without meaning or sense of mind,
no reasoning of any kind,
only literal noise. And he

100 was alone, but was not lonely,
though all were sheer desolation.

Joshua Tyrone Sanderson
fingered the white stubble, the grace
of six days or so on his face,
and, with barely a wit, caressed
his deeply-etched black wrinkles, pressed
mindless fingers across each wen
and pock, fingers like headless men
who moved, but for no reason, dressed
110 up in glove-smocks worn to shreds. “Best
be a-goin’ now, Man,” he thought,
musing slowly – a motion caught
like frames of film, some missing, spliced,
the perforated edges sliced
and slippery, so the vision sticks
or moves unequally, and kicks
in randomly the way it ought.

Now, too, above the fence, he caught
sight of morning’s grey threshold, dawn
120 of lifting darkness, slanting upon
Morris Street, heading east; stray lights
along the road a haze of whites
and blues and blur of sky and street;
a darkling morning-rise whose feet
weren’t planted anywhere.

His breath
was hued between pallor of death
and the shadow of a shadow
as he watched its wraiths shrink and grow
while they ghosted cold daybreak.

130 perfunctorily he turned again,
looked opposite, trying to shore
up his bearings, seeing before
Then

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him, between that concrete wasteland's
piles and still more barbed-wire fence bands,
Interstate 70. And in
incessant surging rolls, a thin
but constant, articulate drum
droning the highway surface hum
rose, resonating in the air,
140 and he suddenly noticed it there
almost without realizing it,
but just naturally sizing it
up and finding locus, a point
to begin from, where he'd anoint
new birth, absolved from each old day
in his past.

Wind chortled in play
and bounced about him like a child,
tickling his bones with a mild
chill which feathered up and down inside
150 his shirt under his coat. A thin hide,
though – less than a winter wolf, less
than the wind which ployed to caress
him – his wasn't; but play and games
were not the substance of his aims
or driving impetus that shaped
that vacuous being which he aped.
He stretched again to move some blood,
find some fire, but instead, the mud
that plugged his lungs up came undone,
160 cracked, cocking his throat like a gun,
and he coughed wildly, hacked – and sweat.
That gave the heat he'd hoped to get.

He licked his dry lips. Cold and wind
had textured them potato-skinned,
and he licked again, but instead
of soothing places chapped, they bled.
An arch, involuntary sneer,

followed by the ugly veneer
of a smile wry to the core, screwed
170 his mouth and pinched his eyes down, glued
his features taut with hollowness
and seeded anger and distress.
Unnumbered years, memory, past
flickered and came back. Now, at last,
he stared into nothing and saw
nothing – big, blank, cold, bitter, raw –
and his eyes – eyes were points of pins,
though vapid as a mannequin’s.
180 Harshly gulping, he fixed to coat
the rasped, raw soreness in his throat,
and tensing his jaw, stretched goose-necked,
swallowed again – to no effect.

“Okay, Wagon, y’all son’fabitch!
Afore tha’ demon pu’ his pitch-
fork t’rough you, move i’, Man, ge’ on;
grease a day, Man; move tha’ wagon!” –
thoughts – or not – pellets in the day’s-
ear – food for motivation, plays
190 on action, but in passive words
that simply went like flitting birds –
a grazing at morning – reflexive
crap more like it, though – a take and give
of new-once-more and old, of living
in pastures wholly unforgiving,
of still, still going on...

“Ge’ on,
dammit! Time a move tha’ wagon!”
But his thoughts were cars of the train,
not locomotive thrust, his brain
not an engine, but a reaction
200 of habit, barely satisfaction
to vitality which drove him
like a vengeful motor, hard, grim,

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and unrelenting. But the noise
of chain-link sabotaged the poise
of absentmindedness and lapse,
so here, just as suddenly, scraps
and pieces of mind, more knee-jerk-
like, habitual-like, than work
of premeditation, made him
210 reach down deep, down the inside trim
of his coat where a rip that led
to a place finessed for use hid
the key that he kept to undo
the chain that shackled him fast to
his wagon when he slept at night.
Carefully, holding it just right,
squeezing his hard-focused eyes, pinched
against the essential key he clinched,
he turned it till the heavy padlock
220 opened, letting the full, dull shock
of two-inch link crash down about
his ankles in a heavy rout,
simultaneously taking stock
not only of the key, the lock,
the umbilical chain, but all
those contents which he had to haul.
He lifted the chain which he'd let
loose into the metal basket.

230 Here were things, cathedral of things,
a wagon full of angel wings
and broken angel parts, the roots
of all of eternity's fruits,
though rarely a blossom. But there
The Wagon always sifted prayer
from each of those things – things, each giving
to The Wagon his needful living.
Here things were not really things, though,

but a learning – spontaneous, so
keen, inherent, whetted by use
240 and the need never to be loose,
but coiled and cocked like animals;
and here a second sense – ‘which pulls
a’ the neck hairs of us all,’ he’d
say, ‘der in anybo’y’s need’ –
a self, something, The Wagon’s friend,
a seeming specter which he’d tend
250 to talk to like a man half-possessed,
caught in a witch-spell, while the rest
of the current of the world flowed
past him; he, there all-entranced, toed
to this other reality
which only he was blessed to see.
“Mercy, Man,” he said even now,
“they’s some dayligh’ breakin’, and how
is all dis livin’ gonna take
when I ain’ go’ ta livin’ ache?
Ya betta be a rich’n today,
260 cause I’s a-needin’ stuff, and dey
’ats go’ i’ need a wonda trade,
sompin’ trump-like call’ out’n’played.”
Still, this was simple reflex, lick
against the living’s morning kick,
true thought being shuffled to the middle
of the deck. He found it a riddle
past answer, beyond all instinct,
to add a thought, or something linked
to thinking for the sake of thought,
270 when, for him, reason was never sought
to cure hard, living needs of living;
and there was something unforgiving
in moments lost to thoughts that hurt:
those withered sense, left not alert,
left open, like a door. He shut

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all doors. The Wagon closed all, cut
off his head, though it sat upon
his shoulders without hope of dawn,
the void of blankness snaked and wound
280 through every part, the perfect sound
of nothing, nothing at all. This
to The Wagon equaled a kiss,
and he crawled, groped, groveled, by fits
suckled earth, and lived by his wits.

The Wagon knew things, though. He knew –
things – sorts, varieties, kinds, too;
the benefit's behoof of things,
for utility, bargainings,
and, doubtless, for what was valued
290 more than the clothes on his back, food.

He'd close his eyes, then raise one hand
over them, visored, prayer-like, and,
gone in time, he'd ponder, regard.
Then, as though he'd pulled a wild card
from the center of an untampered
deck, he ciphered meaning and pampered
it like a child; opened his eyes,
having seen – as in every guise
of his visions – something more than
300 could be seen by another man
inside that wagon's known-by-heart
load, where, charmed life festering, part
cog, part gear-box, it made the whole
world rumble; for him it reached soul,
dogged steps in its track, and could borrow
time and clinch another tomorrow.

Joshua Tyrone Sanderson,
responding as he'd always done,
had noted those things in his stash

310 with a look, one quick mental flash,
and stored the assay in his head.
Never, as such, collected, instead
these were simply...things – junk, a heap,
the kind of stuff you just don't keep.
So, all those things stayed little more
than thirty days, perhaps, before
The Wagon turned his wagon's load
into another lot; escrowed
his sanity by clearing some
320 jack, should an emergency come.
The Wagon seemed, nevertheless,
always to have a skewed excess
of what could be called 'commodities',
though they'd be thought stillborn oddities
to a mind unknowing about
such things.
And, too, without a doubt,
unless they'd strictly scrutinize
his havings, his things, to all eyes
but his they always seemed the same
330 old havings, things, as though a game,
day in and day out and month after
month; and, too, subject of some laughter
to those who thought The Wagon mad.
Because of that, he rarely bade
such laughter entrance to his thought,
for it was almost always bought
with stored-up emotional riches,
was proffered by the likes of bitches
and street hags, mean bastards, or worse,
340 who'd rag him just to hear him curse
and hack, yet do it anyway;
and he'd incline his head some, play
along, stupid-like, aghast, lock
into bug-eyed wonder, then cock

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his chin and listen while they spoke,
though he was the butt of the joke
and he knew it. Always, his ire
reached the point it burst into fire,
350 and then he'd choke, coughing and spitting,
cussing a storm's wrath, never quitting
while they all got their bellies' full,
primed, a flock of hysterical
comics.

The Wagon shivered – chill,
frosty morning bidding him ill
greeting, a grey-blue countenance
sulking with winter's hard romance
doubled round it shrewishly.

He
360 slapped at dawn, and with crooked glee
shook himself right back – not so much
a response to the nip as crutch
to shake it off before it got
to him for real – a ploy, a plot
to twist the meaning of cold. He
arched his back, hearing the wiry
pop of bones, and he looked upward
towards the sky – not with disregard,
for he loved a colored sunrise,
loved the palette of endless dyes
370 which, even in The Wagon, gnawed
at rougher edges, and which awed
him in spite of himself. His eyes,
though, this morning saw neither skies
nor the sun, only clouds and their
grey-billowed, belligerent stare.
He shook himself again – to steal
some heartbeats from what could be real.

Now, to vex the morning, The Wagon
decided there to tie a rag on
his pate, a white-polka-dotted red
380 cloth, plumb on The Wagon's wagon-bed,
to put under the brown fedora
already on his head which, for a
guard against weather and its teeth,
was right at worthless, or beneath.

With his no-fingered gloves he grabbed
a rusting muffler pipe which stabbed,
sword-like, at a small, liting angle,
half-way through things, though didn't mangle
anything under or around it.

390 Those who'd seen his cache always found it
senseless to rate what he called 'treasure',
for only he could roundly measure
worth and price, as his gold was such
that few could find the Midas-touch
outside The Wagon – who, for instance,
bartered such pipe for metal cans,
then took the cans and traded them
for cash, or maybe drink to stem
checkmated being; each trade range
400 better, from exchange to exchange.

He stood the pipe up; reached some wood,
nearly eight good pieces which could
be used for fire – a heat which might
brook, delay, or prevent frost-bite –
though that had smudged his ear tips, fingered
his fingers' butt-ends – and now lingered
like a tensed and perching cat
just waiting to pounce on a rat.

410 Just the thought of heat made him prod
his hand a little too slip-shod
through the pieces of wood and past
sharp edges. He'd burrowed too fast.

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“Damn son’fabitch!” suddenly screaming,
he wormed his hand out quickly, streaming
with blood which soaked into his glove,
under a nail a splinter of
no mean-shivered length deeply jabbed
into the quick. Snarling, he grabbed
it, pinched with dirty nails, pulled it
420 out, watched it bleed, sucked the blood, spit.
“You mis’rable mutha’!” he muttered
with a venom, and quickly uttered
more crap talk under his breath; then
shook his hand; then sucked blood again.

Skittish now, dog-mean, and cowed, less
man than child, and with cautiousness
more driven by pain, by the sight
of blood at a cold day’s daylight
430 breaking grey with a wind, than by
sound common sense, maturity,
eyes watering, making vision blur,
which only made him angrier –
again into his treasure trove
punching his glove, blood wet, he wove
his hand through chain, rags, rods, and cans;
over a chipped bowl and two pans
next to an old car battery;
past these, beneath a stack of three
old hubcaps fallen off of cars;
440 through more rags, a couple of jars;
along three telescoping poles
bound tightly by two shortened rolls
of twenty-pound test, lots of string,
and several kinds of tethering
ropes; over things he called ‘his stuff’
which, should he need it, was enough
to barter with, in his design,
for gallons of watered-down wine;

450 and into a box where he kept
canvas cloth under which he slept
in really nasty weather; and
underneath that canvas his hand,
just like it had eyes, found the red
cloth which he wanted for his head,
and he brought it up in a hurry.

His mood now the edge of a burr, he
coughed and he spat, and through a groan
and that sneer across his lips, lone
460 in the face of morning, he tied
the rag to his head. Then he sighed,
or grunted really, made thoughts dim
so time could haze away from him.
So much for vexing *this* morning!

He read clouds to reckon a warning:
it wasn't snowing, but it could.
If impish bedevilment would
only poke at, prick one billow,
air would dissolve itself in snow.
470 There was a looming, eerie sense
foreboding something, leering, tense,
and milling slowly like molasses,
light and grey-dark, dirty clouds, masses
of wind-blown warriors, thick as pitch,
waiting for a war to end which
had not yet begun.

“So much for
sunrise, damn i’, sunrise, this or
any other day,” he thought, a child,
sacrificial martyr, heart of wild
inconsequence, non-necessity...

480 Ahead, he saw the fence. The city
beckoning outside it was sprawling
and spread like an octopus, crawling

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with arteries and veins to cleanse
and air itself with citizens;
or, equally, disgorge the lees
in endless, twisting vortices
into far suburbs or beyond.
Although it called, though he'd respond
from sheer necessity, its grace
490 today was grey, a leaden face
wide-visaged, cheerless, blank, and grim,
and weighing heavily on him.

He momentarily looked down,
hesitant, halting, but a frown
and pause were not enough to make
him stop, now that he was awake.

“Okay, wagon, bof you'n'me
has gotta ge', a movin' be,
500 else time'n all dem devils git
us, sure as hell be full o' shit!
An' since i' you'n'me, I guess
I's 'bout as ready, more a less,
as ever I's gonna be. Lit's
ge' on afore mawnin' t'rows fits!”

To the fence the ground was hard. He
grabbed, wrapped meaty fingers tightly
on the wagon's bar, then pushed it
resolutely so he'd commit
510 himself to the day. But then, at
the fence he stopped. He coughed and spat,
rubbed nonchalantly eyes, mouth, nose
with the back of his hand; to those
few cars or trucks that passed nearby
no notice given – each a fly
of silly consequence, an ounce
or so of bother which amounts
for little in the scheme of things
but traffic, horns, encounterings

520 with noise and nuisance. And now, at
a crushed down part of the fence that
he'd crossed over last night at dark,
bounding wagon, all, to this stark
and little-known altar, he peed
his might freely on wire and weed
with not a semblance of a care
of recognition, look, or stare.
He backed away; zipped up his pants;
readied his wagon for advance.

530 His torn, old gloves upon the bar
of the wagon, he pushed; insular
his thoughts, fragmented, all the pieces
of his thinking folded at creases
scored to halt forward thrust, to be
incomplete, corrupt, two and three
short circuits streaking to nothing.
What festered, cold would quickly bring
down, so that mind, an empty tank,
was nothing, nothing but a blank.

540 On Morris Street he headed east
to where West, Missouri each ceased
to be separate, but there converged
or fed into a single-merged
road which went south, away from town.
Then, without looking up or down
the intersection's complex ways,
as a loose, flying hubcap plays
havoc with direction, The Wagon,
off of the sidewalk, and now on
the busy roadway, in the face
550 of early morning's quickening pace
headed north on West, neither cared
that he seemed to look like he dared
on-coming traffic in a game

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of chicken, nor shored up his aim,
but moved like a man made of stone;
always onward, aloof, alone.



"Food For The Living"

JOSHUA Tyrone Sanderson,
slop-eyed, but vigilant, saw one
o'clock on the opposite side
of noon – five hours having played hide-
and-seek between his last full draught
of thought and now – saw one and laughed
out loud a cruel, ironic sound,
leaving his flaw-lipped rictus round
with awe as he filliped his scull
10 and wondered wildly just how full
his morning really must have been.
After all, now he stood between
Pennsylvania and Delaware
Street on South, a distance from where
he last remembered pushing on
of close to a mile. His wagon,
too, was there, and he wondered how
he'd pushed it to where it was now
with scarcely a brain and his soul
20 in the lap of devils. Its whole
array, too, he saw was a mess,
disorderly; nevertheless,
it all seemed there.

But his body,
surfacing from deep, unholy
scending, was sore, was sick and sore,
marshaled by disrespect it wore
like a badge.

Nonetheless, competing
year upon year with shadows, beating
himself with that self's own dark side,

30 had inured him to the high tide
of full-mooned pain, spread throughout him
inseparably in each limb.

His deep eyes harbored deep tales. They
sold his soul like devils at play
just for the looking, depth and breath
and all the life or living death
and laughter at the lack of laughter,
pained, sharp, black. Days, nights, mornings-after
rimmed their entrances, slouched there wide
40 and bulgy, vein-streaked, dead-of-pride,
no single hue affording spark
of color, just a shifting dark
which layered portions like a dye
of smoky paste, blurring each eye.
No scintillation hinted laughter.

Awareness pestered now, chased after
The Wagon, and he, like a mate,
courted with consciousness the late
and soon of what was what, the tall
50 and short of general things: “Man, y’all
a gen’us when yo’ brain unscrewed!
Y’only a couple blocks fro’ food!”
he thought, and, perhaps, thought out loud
with his stomach, turned like a plowed
field, inside-out, groaning a lack
of harvest. He tried to think back,
dusty-brained, pondering his last
substantial meal, but found it past
injunctive force to light a flare
60 of memory worth being there.

Now there in front of him, the truth
of all things mortal – age and youth,
flesh, even thought, utter essence
of past, present, and future tense –

100 anyway: he couldn't care less.

 Joshua Tyrone Sanderson,
 aching hunger's gnaw, had begun
 rote-like to move toward Delaware
 Street where he'd turn north, push from there
 two blocks to where the mission faced
 the street – subtly, quietly placed –
 though it seemed a red-painted stray
 among monochromatic grey
110 for all those gathered – all those that
 stood, fell down, leaned, idled, or sat
 outside its doors. The Wagon pushed
 and spat and hummed and coughed and slushed
 through snow and wet and people walking,
 bullied onward, and sometimes talking
 to listening nothings, sometimes
 divining, too, hearing faint chimes
 of bells in his steeple, yet feeling
 and hearing the message appealing
 from his gut for sustenance, too,
120 an old adlibber, nothing new.

 The sidewalk here became his road:
 a bus lane stole the tar his load
 would normally proceed on, so
 he sloshed his way through friend or foe,
 though neither was, for there were none
 he saw, or looked at, knew, not one
 at all, and he moved as he did
 at all times – jeopardy amid
 the normal slice of things, a wing
130 that's unattached to anything.

 Wind was a risible one, blew
 with a cynical hullabaloo
 and smirked with pointed horns turned out,
 tagged, needled every soul about.

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Nuzzling like a snuggling cat,
cold became, was all things, whereat
the glib arm of its formless frame
encompassed everything that came
within reach; and now The Wagon,
140 crimped in fate, an automaton,
moved with a non-habitual gait
to check this rival, congregate
with bodies for divided heat,
and, more than all these triflings, eat.

He reached the mission soon enough;
and ‘soon enough’ between each cough,
between each stab of lack-of-food,
was perfectly the interlude
before one-thirty’s kidney punch
150 was thrown – with no exceptions: lunch
was done for that specific day
and dinner still four hours away.
Luckily, he’d ten minutes more
as he reached the entrance.

The door,
ajar, but to for wind and cold,
invited both the young and old
whose harbors, like windiness – mired
in the reaches of undesired
oblivion – straggled and gadded
160 about without footing, no added
anchor to support them. Inside
behind the door, inviting, wide
with arms spread, a natural code
that nurtured all who came was ode
and epic, and The Wagon now
unconsciously savvied, could vow
that food was no moot poetry –
was source, held hallowed sovereignty,
was seed to build the earth grain by

170 grain, one by one revivify
it.

His hands toughed fast, wrapped upon
the handle bar of his wagon,
his being fundamentally
tied to all its elements, he
pushed it roughly on the open
door, jostling, forcing it, then
pushed it forward, going inside,
quite unconcerned, quite satisfied
that he and all his things were one –
180 wagon, wagon's load, The Wagon;
that now within he'd find a seat,
scour his spirit of ghosts, he'd eat,
he'd clean his hands, he'd wash his face,
he'd feel the favors born in grace.

Not cool inside, yet a dull heat
was flat, muted, stale, a heart-beat
old but steady, certainly old,
anciently warm, a thought of bold
only, tepid like sitting water,
190 not an owner, only a squatter,
but welcome like a single penny
when, penniless, there aren't any.
Too, the staleness smelled, smelled like old
men living still, old curtains rolled
up, sitting in a dusty attic,
constant, unchangeably fixed, static.

The Wagon, squeezed and coiled for years
into instinctual states, his spheres
of sense honed sharp, fine-tuned, and spent
200 but little, each an instrument
to test, then know – enter the veins
and claim the blood that feeds the brains –
The Wagon closed his eyes now, held
his head, nose-first, up high and smelled

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the room, but didn't smell the heat
that hung there fixed – and could compete
with any smell – nor anything
else, neither the disinfecting
scents that hinted themselves sometimes,
210 nor fragrances, tangs, aged things, grimes –
not but one thing, one that could loop
his nose with its quintessence – soup.

A volunteer, half-smiling, came
shuffling – aged, wrinkled, a tame
former something – towards The Wagon,
and from his feet half-whispered one
word, “Welcome.”

The Wagon, without
a moment's pause or whereabouts,
220 said simply, hoarsely, “White man, I
needs eats!” then in a chair nearby
sat down and looked ahead, looked at
nothing there, as if that was that,
that's all there is. Then quietly,
an afterthought, politely, he
added, “Soup.”

“Well, Sir, may I say
a prayer with you so we can pay
respect to God almighty who
gives His holy blessing to you –
food – perhaps rest, also? Cold out
230 isn't it? And snowy!”

A stout,
“Naw! Jus' soup's enough! Well, might'n I
coffee – ahm – too?”, added with sly
texture in the question. He scanned
his wagon's load, and with one hand
pulled on the side close to him there,
for him assurance more than prayer.

240 The volunteer, whose squinty eyes
seemed slits, but, too, concealed a wise
and knowing substance of the man
which intermittently began
to show, but halted equally –
turned up his two thin lips till he
had nearly made a smile, but bit
his lip and closed account of it.
“Coffee’s in the corner, Sir. I’ll
bring you soup.” Then twisting a smile,
“A sandwich with some cold-cuts, too,
perhaps? Or soup enough for you?”

250 The Wagon, eyes facing out front,
absent elsewhere, rumbled a grunt
which parroted an animal
that balks at bothering at all
to be near humans; but rightly,
knowing the pith of his core, he
frankly saw the past play back
its dark, unsightly almanac
of staunch experience, and knew
that soup would have to be a true
“enough”. He looked the volunteer

260 right in his eyes, and with a clear
retort declared, “White man – hey – I’s
only hope soup stays down there, buys
time, makes peace – don’t no fight me none!”
The Wagon’d upstaged The Wagon.
“Soup, white man, nuff now – yeah, that’s nuff
for now, jus’ little o’ the stuff.”

270 With that The Wagon stood, then made
his way to where large pots were laid
out, brewing on cinder block piles,
cups sidling them like birds in files
behind a leader, neat and clean.
The condiments beside were lean,

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an inkling that their seeming lack
meant most who drank it took it black,
or were encouraged to. Not much
remained, it seemed, but time was such
that lunch was near its end.

Just then,

of all the sorriest of men –
of all the crazy sons-o’-bitches
280 who ever crawled out from the ditches,
gutters, hovels, corners of hiding
for those discarded, unabiding,
undefended, who find those spaces
because who live in such have faces
no one wishes to see again –
here came Bow-Wow, clown among men,
hopelessly, mercilessly stripped
of dignity, defined and whipped
by torturing syndrome that wracked
290 him. “Bow-wow! Bow-wow!” he yipped, cracked
against the room.

The Wagon winced
while Bow-Wow weaved, arced, curved, evinced
close meaning of ambling nearly
in circles, pencils out, and clearly
making his way towards him. “Bow-Wow,
leave me ’lone, go ’way, jus’ allow
me now t’ave my soup, goddammit!”

“Bow-wow!” he barked, the tenor fit
and stark delivery of a child,
300 its meaning meaningless and wild.
By then Bow-Wow was up to where
The Wagon was, who, standing there,
had not poured out his coffee yet.
This steamed his anger, made him fret.

Joshua Tyrone Sanderson,
for whom a plea for, orison,
any kind of prayer was no doubt
singularly scarce, odd, or out
of the question – much like an elf
310 too strange, wild, capricious himself –
himself a man who, like a square
in circles all times anywhere,
just wouldn't fit – nevertheless
at times instinctually could bless
his angels, and he did. Not out
loud or with a voice, still he'd scout
the wisdom down deep in his gut –
pick out the seasoned scuttlebutt
organically picked up within
320 about all people in his spin-
about – what's not there, too – the latter
which The Wagon saw as a matter-
of-fact often enough in those
like Bow-Wow – misdeemed, red-flag crows,
the pigeons and the slops who crept
where nightly he sank down or slept.

Whatever he talked to – whenever
The Wagon blessed fate, though he never
said it out loud or on his knees –
330 he knew the situate degrees
of hell and heaven, knew them well,
and when it seemed certain that hell
percentage-wise wore laurel as his
white elephant, as often this
proved wrong by way of some he'd see
in his days and his nights, and he
grasped – not half-assed – that somehow heaven
had wrapped its arms around him seven
times seven compared to some.

one pitifully whimpering,
the other hacking, hunched, a thing
more pitiful yet, heretic
to health, his own disease – and sick.

380 One man, the volunteer who'd gone
for soup to bring to The Wagon –
as if little had taken place –
quietly, with a strong embrace
pulled Bow-Wow up until he stood
there slightly wavering; then would
have gathered up his pencils, too, yet
Bow-Wow slumped down there again to get
them, slipped, fell prone across a leg
of The Wagon.

390 Though it would beg
the patience of an indulgent
saint, the men there held their tongues, bent
down, pulled on, lugged the two men up;
gathered pencils, a broken cup
that had fallen; then as you please
treated the two as refugees
in need of much sought succoring,
The Wagon coughing still, a ring
of blood smudged on his wool-sleeved coat
discoloring it, and his throat
on fire again. Now, though, his gut,
impatiently clenched in a rut
of emptiness, delivered bile
400 and more red life out in a file
of green and red into the sleeve
of his coat, and the surge, the heave
brought on more hacking still, which bound
three men, wrapped like a sheet around
him, to trudge him, tromp him quickly
to a nearby table where he
slowly rallied, his lungs reminding

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those there of sounds of blunt, coarse grinding
or popping rubber.

410 “Wagon! You
spittin’ blood up, man. Yeah, and, too,
you sick as hell, you hear me, man?”
 “Jus’ gives me my soup!” he began.
 “An’ I needs my wagon here, too;
jus’ those things – jus’ those things’ll do –
jus’ those, and leaves me be!” he said,
attempting a birr, running dead
last in his zeal. “I’s hongry yet,
an’ tiny soup ain’ no none sweat
off’n y’all’s balls!”

420 He had no danger
there of shame, or feeling a stranger,
either, for that matter, for he’d
been there times before when crass need
had looted him – enough to be
at mercy’s door – when charity
translated into life framed feints
that dodged his demon’s bruising saints
and gave his bones defense.

 “Jus’ some
soup. Tha’s all I as’.”

430 A welcome
bowl with little soup was quickly
brought, and, too, a cup of coffee,
steaming hot, put down beside it.

 His manners rough, if any – knit
in roughness, the same as his need,
and not with any stamp or breed
of stripe – he gripped the bowl of soup
in his half-gloved hands – leered – the group
there notwithstanding – then he slurped
it quickly, loudly, down; then burped;
then put the bowl back down; then stroked, rubbed

440 his neck, his throat. Looking stoned, he dubbed
his glove with spit, then dropped his head,
sat quite motionless, looking dead,
his eyes two bulgy lumps of grey-
streaked red. Having nothing to say,
he suddenly picked up the cup
of coffee, put it rashly up
against his lips and slurped again,
noisily taking it down; then
as soon realizing just how
450 hot it was, squealing like a sow
he spit the residue that burned
his mouth into the air and turned
his head to either side, and fussed
child-like, flinging his hands – and cursed –
slamming the cup against the table,
splashing its brew. He wasn't able
there to squelch straightway the heat that
slapped, burned like the swat of a bat.

One man there blurted, “Wagon, we’ll
get water – hold on!”

460 “Na-a-aw! Big deal,
goddammit, nuttin’! Leave me be!”
But – down beneath that half-hoarse plea –
the only artist painting there
a gritty masterpiece – a spare
but soothing splatter – peace, pure peace
to everything, a liquid lease
on grip – his brain begged juice, screamed out
wit’s kernel, counseling, a route
within his wagon’s therapy
470 that led to no-where, where now he
pleased to scrabble – blessed, dark, divine,
impolitic, unpeopled: wine.

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Joshua Tyrone Sanderson
by fifteen minutes more was gone:
he'd stood, he'd coughed, walked twenty feet
into the shower room – clean, neat,
old, but practical – gone that way –
his an ambivalent display
of ableness – washed – wild to seek
480 aloneness, silence – took a leak –
grabbed, gripped his wagon and its lot,
and left the place killing all thought.

He now moved like a kid machine
down Delaware, southwards, a mean-
faced man-child of impending...will
occur...imminent...and-yet-still –
though this or any other day
you'd never guess, speculate, say
490 predictions worth their salt for him –
his too measured, run by whim,
he full of, stuffed with disregard
for consequence, he the bard
of proper nothingness, blood bank
of the categorical blank.

Right now, The Wagon's push was rooted
in a certain hope, convoluted
surmising, wishing, twistings, whim
and arbitrary drive in him,
a mix of past and present matter,
500 wreath around hope – a wildcatter –
though the finish, were nothing there –
quite simply – one of those days, bare
cupboard – any saying that's said
for chance-alive-already-dead:
really, it was only a wish...
He slogged on doggedly. He'd fish
without bait, if only to stay

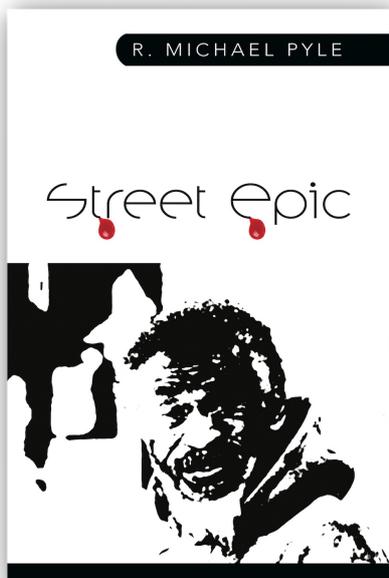
the traction of the present day:
510 The Wagon knew a place... a sort-
of-place to sort-of-stay – a wart
upon the neighborhood by all
report otherwise. He'd try haul
his wagon and his person there,
he thought, and see if this was where
a night would end with a tomorrow
looking forward; that, or he'd borrow
more grace from washout-tinged regret
and ape a gambler – lose the bet
and, shit, just eat the goddamned crow.
520 Couple miles away at least, so
The Wagon pushed on now to South,
turned right, and steered into the mouth
of a cold west wind, icy chips
of snow clipping his eyes, his lips,
his cheeks, making him hum and moan
a body's anthem to the bone
to counteract Dame Nature's whim
that seemed hell-bent to serve him, him
and him alone.

530 Two blocks away,
though, he halted. At right a grey,
old clapboard structure stood, now boarded
up and empty, with signs so worded
that no one was allowed inside.
He knew this place. There was a wide,
roofed spot at back where he could go
if not already seized by snow,
and, in solemn peace for a time,
he'd exit, flee this mountain climb,
exist by slipping in and to
540 rather than eking out; where blue
chimeras clog reality
and stiffen sentience, to-be,

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get on, keep up, let's go, seek, find.
The wine-dark color through his mind
befit the jug in his wagon,
and slogging now to be at one
with all, he pushed, he found. With wine
of substance nothing could refine
he sat and squandered life alone
and bled his mind into a stone.

550



Joshua Tyrone Sanderson is a passably old, homeless black alcoholic in Indianapolis. A loner by choice, minute by minute and day by day he survives on the near downtown streets as valorously as any Agamemnon or Odysseus brandishing raw valor in battle in classical Greece or Troy. His life is a barbed poem ever as epic as theirs.

STREET EPIC

by R. Michael Pyle

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