

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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*"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.

60           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,  
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

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.

110 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  
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.

120                    Now, too, above the fence, he caught  
sight of morning's grey threshold, dawn  
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.

Then

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

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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,

170 followed by the ugly veneer  
of a smile wry to the core, screwed  
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,

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,

240 but a learning – spontaneous, so  
keen, inherent, whetted by use  
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

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

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  
slapped at dawn, and with crooked glee  
shook himself right back – not so much  
360 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.

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

“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.  
There was a looming, eerie sense  
470 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

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 –

the clock upon a building loomed  
with snow and time, and drained its doomed  
allotments by the second, pinching  
The Wagon's regard of things, inching  
70 his life by moments like a text  
of pages, next, next, next, next, next.  
The Wagon looked, yawped, stared, a glare  
at tick, at tock, piqued with an air  
of sheer corrosive bitterness  
that tick-tocks were both more and less  
the drumming jazz of "is!", "am!", "be!",  
and dirge of "was", their elegy.

A low-pitched, mantra-like moan, hoarse  
and, at its best, off-key and coarse,  
80 he rather attempted than made  
to soothe the never-ending blade  
that havocked within and behind  
his eyes. Sharp and ruthlessly blind,  
it cut a river through his head;  
and the moaning, like fever, fed  
the sum of his pain with heat, twisted  
it until it simply existed  
with the rest of his ashes.

Though  
he looked half insane, and some snow  
on his clothes made him look ghoulish –  
90 what with his noises, and the foolish  
half-talk he intermittently  
uttered – people were caught, they'd see  
this pledge to existence so played,  
become startled, even afraid,  
would dart off, put out, eyes askance,  
averting, avoiding his glance –  
yet The Wagon just barely saw  
outlines, and his according law  
to himself assuaged any stress

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.

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

the room, but didn't smell the heat  
that hung there fixed – and could compete  
with any smell – nor anything  
else, neither the disinfecting  
210 scents that hinted themselves sometimes,  
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.

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?”

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  
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.”

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,

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,

280 of all the sorriest of men –  
of all the crazy sons-o’-bitches  
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  
290 by torturing syndrome that wracked  
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!”

300 “Bow-wow!” he barked, the tenor fit  
and stark delivery of a child,  
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.

340           Goddammit, Bow-Wow! Screw off, go!  
Don’ nee’ no pencil, white man, none!”  
Snubbing those near him, The Wagon  
cold-shouldered all, typically frowned  
upon nearness to any, found  
ways to spurn the Bow-Wows who pestered  
him; but they sought him, it seemed, festered  
like cinders that wouldn’t be done.

              “Bow-wow!” he countered The Wagon,  
then shoved a pencil toward his face,  
350           eyes aflame, bugged out, fit to trace  
a keen frustration.

360                   Verged in there  
and breathing like a threatened bear,  
The Wagon suddenly began  
to hack, spit blood – wreck of a man –  
cough unremittingly; then grabbed  
at Bow-Wow's fingers, gripped and nabbed  
the pencil being thrust in front  
of him like a flail. With a brunt  
that banged him up against the wall,  
The Wagon strong-armed Bow-Wow, all  
the pencils falling to the floor  
in stray, small tinklings, but the more  
than raw, debilitating hacking  
as quickly nullified attacking  
him, and both slumped down like grain sacks  
lacking brace, support, bones for backs;  
the hacking sticking to the room  
like the sickness it was, its doom  
wrought in it.

370 From out of no-where,  
it seemed, at least four men were there  
where both the scuffle had gone lame  
and two half-lives held on the same,

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

One man, the volunteer who'd gone  
for soup to bring to The Wagon –  
as if little had taken place –  
380 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.

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;  
390 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

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

410                   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'.”

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.

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.

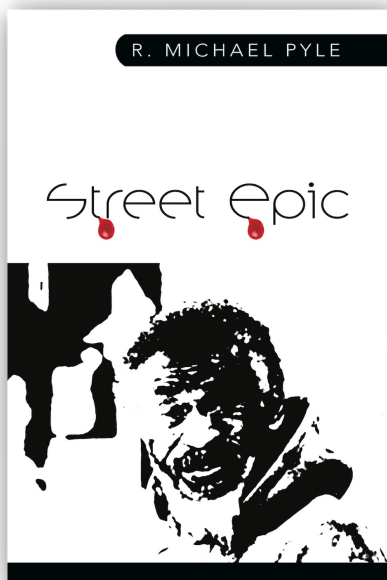
Right now, The Wagon's push was rooted  
in a certain hope, convoluted  
surmising, wishing, twistings, whim  
and arbitrary drive in him,  
a mix of past and present matter,  
500 wreath around hope – a wildcatter –  
though the finish, were nothing there –  
quite simply – one of those days, bare  
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:  
The Wagon knew a place...a sort-  
510 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.

Two blocks away,  
530 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,

*STREET EPIC*

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  
550 and bled his mind into a stone.



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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