Printz Honor Speech

Adam Rapp

First I’d like to thank the Printz committee for their generosity. I was stunned to receive your call earlier this spring and I’m honored to be here. I also want to thank the staff of Candlewick press for all of their help getting this book out into the world, and in particular Liz Bicknell, my fearless editor, who continues to believe in me and helps me focus the little compulsive messes that eventually become my books.

In the spring of 2004, I was in rehearsals for my play Gompers at the Pittsburgh City Theatre. The theatre was putting me up in downtown Pittsburgh and I had to take a bus to the south side every day. One morning I boarded the bus at Penn Avenue and took a seat across from three teenagers: two girls and a boy. They were maybe fifteen. The girls were white and the boy was African American. One of the girls, who was wearing a puffy Steelers coat, was telling her two friends that she was pregnant. She had just found out and she was excited. She was speaking loud enough for most of the bus to hear her, but not theatrically. It was as if she was somehow steeling herself against the world, emboldening herself for something crueler than what she had known life to be up until now. Her two friends took it in stride. The African American boy asked her who the father was by saying, “Who did you?” The girl replied, “Derek Lemonade,” to which the boy responded, “You let Derek Lemonade do you?” They had a bit of a laugh about Derek Lemonade and then the pregnant girl told her friends that she hoped her baby was a girl because she
wanted to name her Magdalena. “But you white!” the African American boy responded playfully. “You can’t give her no Puerto Rican name!” “I can call her whatever I want,” the girl responded. “Yeah, she can name her baby whatever she wants,” her other friend said in support. They didn’t bring up Derek Lemonade again, and I wondered if he even knew that he would soon be a father. Then the three of them fell quiet and the girl in the Steelers coat was staring out the window and all of her bravado faded. In her silence she looked suddenly lost, afraid, and alone. On the bus you could feel the air thicken. There was a collective collusion among all the adults on board, and my heart broke. The three friends got off at the next stop, joking as they ran down the steps.

That same morning, maybe twenty minutes later, I was at a coffee shop on Pittsburgh’s south side called the Beehive Café and while I was waiting for my order I noticed a boy who was sitting at a corner booth. He was stirring a packet of sugar into a glass of water. He was even younger than the kids I had encountered on the bus, perhaps thirteen. He had red hair and he was very thin and pale and he was wearing a yellow t-shirt with brown iron-on letters that read, “God fucked America.” Three simple words stacked on top of each other. The T-shirt was obviously homemade. The possibility of whether or not the boy had made the shirt himself was less alarming to me than the fact that he wasn’t in school on a Tuesday at roughly ten-thirty in the morning. I looked around the coffee shop and there wasn’t anybody else there, other than the woman who had served me. I approached her and asked her if she knew the kid in the corner booth. “I don’t know him,” she said.
He’s just some kid.” While exiting the coffee shop I tried to make eye contact with him but he was busying himself with another sugar packet.

The theater was a few blocks away from the Beehive Café, but I found myself walking up and down Carson Road for nearly an hour, shaken and haunted by those kids from the bus and that boy in the coffee shop and the bold statement on his T-shirt. I arrived late to rehearsal and although I feigned interest in what suddenly seemed like my very unimportant play, I took a seat in the corner, opened my notebook and starting writing. Something in those four kids set me off on what became the genesis for Punkzilla. It was something in their eyes; something at-once tenacious and vulnerable, something altogether, well... magnificently adolescent.

I rarely begin anything with an idea of where I’m going. I resist outlining or pre-structuring the same way college graduates without dental insurance resist root canal. I’ll admit that at least craft-wise it’s perhaps immature, but I love the discovery of the not-knowing. I’ve always felt that when I know too much about where my protagonist might be headed, then somehow the reader will too, and that’s when the pages stop getting turned with velocity. That’s when the reader starts putting the book down. That’s when it becomes that dreaded coaster or that artifact on a shelf among, well, much more impressive artifacts.

When I started Punkzilla, I had no idea where it was going. I was originally saving it as file on my computer I had clumsily called “LeBaron,” based on the make of car I imagined that Jamie would be traveling in during one of his more important hitchhiking encounters. What I did know is that I had a protagonist for whom I cared
deeply, whose journey would begin in Portland, Oregon. I also knew that somehow I had to get him to his dying brother in Memphis, Tennessee. Beyond this general geography and what his “want” was, I knew that, despite having the moxie of an alley cat, Jamie was pre-pubescent, possessed androgynous features, a chip on his shoulder the size of Mount Rushmore, and a desperate will to connect with strangers only rivaled by his serial ability to leave them in the lurch.

Like Jamie, I attended a military academy in the Midwest. Unlike Jamie, although I fantasized about it on a daily basis, I never mustered the courage to run away. I stayed. I assimilated. And even though it was perhaps the best thing for me at that stage in my development as I was a certified fourteen-year-old mess.

Adolescence is a terrible, beautiful forest. It’s where we fall in love for the first time. It’s where we wait for our bodies to catch up to our yearning. It’s where we hide from the pressures of achievement and sex and parental expectation. It’s where we smoke our first cigarettes and down our first recreational bottle of Robitussin and masturbate and frolic when we’re supposed to be sleeping and learn how to deepen and raise our voices and question authority. It’s also where we figure out who and what we’re attracted to and who and what we can trust and what about God and why do my armpits suddenly smell funny and man I really love sleeping.

Before he died, I had the great fortune of being invited to dinner by Kurt Vonnegut. He had come to see a play of mine in midtown Manhattan and his wife had gotten a note to me that simply said, “Kurt Vonnegut would like to have dinner with you.” So I met him after the play and we went to a restaurant near the theater.
We were seated way in the back, in a private room, where they allowed Mr. Vonnegut to smoke filterless Pall Malls. He drank three fingers of J.B. on the rocks somewhat continuously and complimented me on my play with a generosity that almost moved me to tears. I’m not sure I actually heard the words. I was simply in awe of this man whose work I had admired as much as any other writer’s since I first read *Slaughterhouse Five*, back at St. John’s Military Academy, when I was fifteen.

When I finally mustered enough composure to actually tune in to our conversation I asked him if he was working on anything. He told me that he wasn’t writing so much anymore. He said that he was occasionally offering up anti-war pieces that were being published on the Internet. He told me he had already said a lot of what he had to say. “You’ll see,” he said. “Someday you will feel this way, too.” It was sad to hear that he was starting to artistically expire, but I accepted the second part as good, old-fashioned, honest encouragement and it feeds me anytime I start to grow bitter or tired, or confused by the world or my place in it.

When I asked Mr. Vonnegut, who had just turned eighty, how he had been spending his days, believe it or not, he said he had been watching a lot of “Judge Judy.” He said he was fascinated by the good-looking women they always planted behind the plaintiff.

He said, “They’re very tricky, those TV people.”

He also told me something about the power of books that I will never forget. He said that the reason books will always be more dangerous than films or
television and yes, even theatre, is because the reader constructs the world of the book with the author; that in essence as a reader you are a performer and because of this collaborative act the words get to your thoughts more powerfully than anything else. “That’s why there are still those people out there who are so afraid of books,” he added.

Eventually his wife met us and I walked him to a cab. His wife trailed behind us and let us walk about five blocks together. Mr. Vonnegut told me that what he liked best about my play was the brother-sister relationship. They were teenagers, and he told me he was very moved by the last scene in which the sister comes to visit the brother in the hospital after he has attempted suicide. We exchanged a few words about writing younger characters. “They’re the ones who matter most,” he told me before I put him in a cab and said good-bye to his wife. It was honestly one of the greatest nights of my life and it awakened a belief in me that I was starting to doubt: the possibility of what stories can do for teenagers.

It would be less than a month later that I would head to Pittsburgh and begin rehearsals for my play Gompers and a few weeks after that when I would encounter those three teenagers on that bus and that boy in that coffee shop. Those kids would rattle me in such a way that I had to write something down that would eventually become Punkzilla. I hope their collective boldness, their longing, their sense of humor, their toughness, and their vulnerability has been honored in Jamie’s trip across this crazy, unbearable, fascinating country of ours. Mr. Vonnegut’s words have been a kind of spiritual sustenance for me, just as this Printz Honor is. I am
encouraged and I see the award as a contract, or a promise to fulfill. I will keep working hard. I will do my best to tell these stories.

In closing I wanted to say how pleased I am to be included among such distinguished company. Deborah, Rick, John, and Libba, it’s an incredible honor to be here among you.

Thank you.