

Backdrop addresses cowboy

By Margaret Atwood

Starspangled cowboy
sauntering out of the almost-
silly West, on your face
a porcelain grin,
tugging a papier-mâché cactus
on wheels behind you with a string,

you are innocent as a bathtub
full of bullets.

Your righteous eyes, your laconic
trigger-fingers
people the streets with villains:
as you move, the air in front of you
blossoms with targets


and you leave behind you a heroic
trail of desolation:
beer bottles
slaughtered by the side
of the road, bird-
skulls bleaching in the sunset.

I ought to be watching
from behind a cliff or a cardboard storefront
when the shooting starts, hands clasped
in admiration,
but I am elsewhere.

Then what about me

what about the I
confronting you on that border,
you are always trying to cross?

I am the horizon
you ride towards, the thing you can never lasso



I am also what surrounds you:
my brain
scattered with your
tincans, bones, empty shells,
the litter of your invasions.

I am the space you desecrate
as you pass through.

Margaret Atwood, "Backdrop addresses cowboy" from *Selected Poems 1965-1975*. Copyright © 1974, 1976 by Margaret Atwood. Used by permission of Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.

Source: *Selected Poems* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976)