

Quotes from *The Road*, with annotation

"Just remember that the things you put into your head are there forever, he said. You might want to think about that. You forget some things, don't you?
Yes. You forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget."

- *The hurt and betrayal of memory*

"He lay listening to the water drip in the woods. Bedrock, this. The cold and the silence. The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief. If only my heart were stone."

- *The terrible emptiness of this new world*

"He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it."

- *Blind, meaningless cycles*

"The soft black talc blew through the streets like squid ink uncoiling along a sea floor and the cold crept down and the dark came early and the scavengers passing down the steep canyons with their torches trod silky holes in the drifted ash that closed behind them silently as eyes. Out on the roads the pilgrims sank down and fell over and died and the bleak and shrouded earth went trundling past the sun and returned again as trackless and as unremarked as the path of any nameless sisterworld in the ancient dark beyond."

- *A life-erasing wasteland of cosmic totality*

"The silence. The salitter drying from the earth. The mudstained shapes of flooded cities burned to the waterline. At a crossroads a ground set with dolmen stones where the spoken bones of oracles lay moldering. No sound but the wind. What will you say? A living man spoke these lines? He sharpened a quill with his small pen knife to scribe these things in sloe or lampblack? At some reckonable and entabled moment? He is coming to steal my eyes. To seal my mouth with dirt."

- *McCarthy's apocalyptic description and at once novel and timeless diction regularly achieves prophetic, Biblical resonance*

"Perhaps in the world's destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence"

- *The irony of learning how it was made as it is unmade*

"Query: How does the never to be differ from what never was?"

- *The dream-like surrealism of the ghastly now of the world*

"There is no later. This is later."

- *No future*

"By day the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp."

- *The impotence of the sun*

“No lists of things to be done. The day providential to itself. The hour. There is no later. This is later. All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one’s heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes.”

Grace and beauty go hand in hand with pain – even create it.

“There is no God and we are his prophets.”

A potentially profound, nonsensical statement. A resonant paradox.

“When you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them.”

The human need to make something – something worth looking up to or forward to – out of nothing

“You talk about taking a stand but there is no stand to take. My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born so don’t ask for sorrow now. There is none. Maybe you’ll be good at this. I doubt it, but who knows. The one thing I can tell you is that you won’t survive for yourself. I know because I would have never have come this far. A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body. As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart.”

We need someone to live for, to keep going for.

“When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of night he’d reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him”
[first line of the novel]

Despite it all, there is not nothing, because there is the boy – and, for the man, the boy is everything

“You have my whole heart. You always did. You’re the best guy. You always were.”

Simple and whole, unqualified affirmation of love

“What would you do if I died?
If you died I would want to die too.
So you could be with me?
Yes. So I could be with you.
Okay.”

The extent of the man’s devotion to his son

“He knew only that his child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke.”

For the man, the child is the word of God (in Christian tradition the beginning, the origin of all created things)

“That the boy was all that stood between him and death.”

The boy is his reason for living in this hopeless godforsaken world

“Then they set out along the blacktop in the gunmetal light, shuffling through the ash, each the other’s world entire.”

In the violence and the waste, they have each other

“You have to carry the fire.”
I don’t know how to.”
Yes, you do.”
Is the fire real? The fire?”

Yes it is."

Where is it? I don't know where it is."

Yes you do. It's inside you. It always was there. I can see it."

What does the fire symbolize? Goodness, compassion, warmth, hope, soul, life?

"Keep a little fire burning; however small, however hidden."

Hope and persistence, even in the void, must not be extinguished

"He was just hungry, Papa. He's going to die.

He's going to die anyway.

He's so scared, Papa.

The man squatted and looked at him. I'm scared, he said. Do you understand? I'm scared.

The boy didn't answer. He just sat there with his head down, sobbing.

You're not the one who has to worry about everything.

The boy said something but he couldn't understand him. What? He said.

He looked up, his wet and grimy face. Yes I am, he said. I am the one."

The boy is sensitive; he worries consistently about the pain and suffering of others. It upsets him.

"Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery."

The life that was but now is not. Also, though, the great mystery: that which is older than us, that which we do not know...

"From daydreams on the road there was no waking. He plodded on. He could remember everything of her save her scent. Seated in a theatre with her beside him leaning forward listening to the music. Gold scrollwork and sconces and the tall columnar folds of the drapes at either side of the stage. She held his hand in her lap and he could feel the tops of her stockings through the thin stuff of her summer dress. Freeze this frame. Now call down your dark and your cold and be damned."

The pleasure and pain of remembering the world that was

"Listen to me, he said, when your dreams are of some world that never was or some world that never will be, and you're happy again, then you'll have given up. Do you understand? And you can't give up, I won't let you."

Survival: make any sacrifice to keep going