

THROUGH A BLUE FIELD

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I was waiting for you in a bar
when I became unusually aware
of how everything around me was changing.
It was on Spring Street
and I could remember having been there before
on many occasions, none of them important.

This was the year the country was signed over to the ghosts
of Father Coughlin and Henry Clay Frick.
I was waiting for my first book to appear.
You were coming to the end of your Pollock/Krasner grant.
We were still marveling at how, cinque anni fa,
our lives had been saved
by a kiss in May, on the shores of a mountain lake.
Perched on my bar stool, I was still in the endless
present of that day.

In front of me was a long mound of ice rising from
a metal well
set into the bar. Pint and half-pint beer glasses
and mugs were jammed, upside down, into the ice,
which seemed as stable as crystal.
Then, at the edges of its cubist hills,
I noticed water clustered like spilled mercury.

I shifted my attention to two guys on my right
finishing off their second or third round of martinis.
I could almost hear the alcohol level
mounting steadily in their metabolisms,
like excited chatter at a crowded opening.
Here and there, cigarettes were being ritualistically
transformed into ash.

All around me, men and women were devouring their cold drinks
like ogres snatching up pretty children.
Columns of smoke were disintegrating into the intimate lighting.
Every one of us patrons was consuming this portion
of our lives
and, as if on some mild hallucinogen, I had started to perceive
existence at a molecular level. I could now see the ice melting.

I could picture the microscopic pattern on the spools of tape
in the cassette player behind the bar and was able to connect them
to the furious electric blues infiltrating the particles
of smoke and shadow.

I couldn't recognize the musician, though the style seemed
very familiar
and I knew that at one point in my life
I had listened to this record many times,

probably trying to reproduce its sound
on the six strings of some banged-up, roughly tuned guitar.
I asked the bartender who was playing: Elmore James.
Elmore James? How did I not recognize him?
I still remember perfectly a high school friend's double album
and how much I coveted it. Even if, truth be told,
I was more familiar

with Fleetwood Mac's devout imitations of James
than with the original. Before my question to the bartender
I'd been thinking about M.B.,
which is what usually happens when I hear Chicago blues.
I can count the times we met on one hand,
but I still can never separate that music from my memories
of him,

dead 14 years that Friday, give or take some days or months,
when I was waiting
for you on Spring Street. I think his image, called up by
Elmore James,
was especially vivid because I'd just read a book about him,
12 years after it had been published.
The book filled me with a kind of sadness
a little too complex to describe just now.

Between the evening I sat waiting for you
and the week before, during which I'd managed to read,
12 years late, that biography of M., I got a call,
out of the blue, from my friend C.S.
who was maybe or maybe not going to marry M. the year he died.
(It was through C.S. that I met M.)
She was in town to give one performance, that same day.

It was held in a large and probably deconsecrated church.
The sizeable audience that Monday night
was seated on folding chairs arranged in a semi-circle,
several rows deep,
that surrounded the big open center of the room.
When the lights went off, C. came down from the organ loft
to the performance area
but as she descended the stairs a baby began to cry

from somewhere in the upper darkness of the church.
I knew it was her daughter, born in Amsterdam, six months before.
My first thought was: what lousy luck.
But it wasn't. "That's my baby," she said in a stage whisper
and called up into the air above our heads
until the plaintive voice fell into an audibly content silence.

She then began, I think, by telling a story
about an encounter with Bob Dylan, moving while she spoke
in a series of distinct gestures that were
like rest stops on the road to a dance.
I'm no longer sure exactly what she was wearing,
but in a dress red as lipstick or an orange jump suit
she started to sing

a song I didn't recognize, a sad standard from another time.
She threw herself into battle with the song and her own
rough-edged voice
winning, by the last note, a tattered musical victory.
I remembered many performances I'd seen her give before
and how they'd always included a moment like this,
in which she courted embarrassment. Maybe it was her medium.

The next thing I knew, she had two glasses in her hands,
one full of water, the other empty. She gave them both
to the woman
seated at one end of the front row and asked her to hand
the empty glass to the person in the next seat. The woman
was then to carefully pour the water from the full glass
into her neighbor's
empty one. This process, C. explained, was to be repeated until

the two glasses reached the other end of the row.
As the glasses and their exchanged water started to travel

around the room with a chain of soft splashes,
C. came back to the center of the space, talking, moving, dancing.
I have no idea how long it took for the glasses to pass
from one side of the church to the other.

Our attention ping-ponged between their liquid heartbeat
and the urgent things C. was telling us
about a guru in Nepal and child slavery in Pakistan.
What strange circumstances to be recounting such things,
we were all probably thinking, as the moving glasses
neared the end of the semi-circle.

C. wound up her wandering sermon. She dropped to the floor
and began rolling slowly towards the last person in the row.
Her body curled along the shins and feet of the spectators
like a wave or some kind of aquatic mammal.
Just as the two glasses reached the last person, a man,
she was there to take them from him.

She walked back to the center of the room and
set the glasses on the floor. I took another swallow of beer
and looked at my watch. You were late.
I was still on Spring Street listening to Elmore James.
I was slowly forgetting details of a performance at Judson Church.
On the first page of the book I'd just finally read,

a book subtitled *The Rise and Fall of an American Guitar Hero*,
the author told of buying, as a young man, a record
and trying to copy what he heard. "I sat there," he wrote,
"with my very good acoustic guitar, and I listened to those
lightning attacks on the fingerboard, and I felt a tiny glow
of triumph when I finally figured out, and could play,

the Elmore James lick on 'Shake Your Moneymaker.'
Several weeks later, when that was still the only lick I'd learned
I began to get disillusioned. Slowly, it dawned on me
that the typewriter was more my instrument than the guitar."
As I finished the book one evening at home,
I looked across at you, reading *Novelle per un anno*

and I despaired at explaining my despair over that book.
I'd never be able to paint the American place I came from
where M. was the focus of every boy's dream,

where a guitar solo and a shouted verse
were all the lyrics and epics necessary
for 14-year-old Californian males,

where the fact that “blues” rhymed with “lose” and “choose”
was an intimation of the authentic life,
where the audible scar-tissue of slavery
was carried by vocal chords and guitar strings
and the fact that a Jewish kid from the suburbs
could win acceptance into this brotherhood of cadenced pain

was a source of hope for the country in those nerve-wracked
years circa 1969.

But, as the book told me, by the time I had started
listening to M.B.

his best days were over. He would never make a record
like those two or three masterpieces of the mid-‘60s.

Ahead lay trust-fund-cushioned years of junk and
half-hearted comebacks,

diminuendo choruses of “what ever happened to...” and
the occasional porno soundtrack.

I go over to the payphone and call to see why you’re so late.
No answer. I come back to my place at the bar
with the facile resolution to buy an Elmore James CD and
play it for you.

I start to think about this poem. Standing in the middle
of the church, C. set down the two glasses and asked
for six volunteers.

After a minute of hesitation, three women and three men
came forward.

She separated them into two trios, male and female.

Each trio, she explained, to them and us, would have a leader
and the other two dancers would attempt to follow every movement
the leader made. She then went to stand on the raised stage

and began to sing a gospel hymn,

or was it a Buddhist prayer? I forget. The two trios began moving.

When M. died, in 1981, he was younger than I am now,

which seems hard to believe, hard in the sense that he seemed
to have already lived an epic life (as I knew from the pages
of *Rolling Stone*)

and the liner notes and session photos of some classic LPs).
Yet, as I read his biography, I saw that life turn pitifully
 short, inconclusive, botched.
The trajectory from the well-to-do Chicago home
to one February morning in San Francisco 37 years later

where someone found an unidentified overdose victim
locked in ten-year-old Ford Mercury is the jagged scrawl
of a drunken geometer. The song came to an end,
 the dancers stopped.
It was at this point, I think, that C. asked everyone
 in the audience
to take the pencil and paper they'd been handed at the
 entrance (I'd somehow missed this)
and write some lines in response to the performance.

I resisted for a moment and then wrote, on a pale blue page
 torn from a small notebook I had in my pocket,
"The power of the word is the sound of the body being played
 like a tambourine."
She had a few people (not me, thank god) read what they'd written.
Then, suddenly, the event was over and it came to me that
 her medium isn't "embarrassment":
it's inviting her spectators to watch the big heart of the blues
transplanted live into the disjunctive body of postmodern dance.

C. and I haven't exchanged a word about M. for years.
The role of the past is to stay past, just as it's
 the role of music
to puncture the sea wall of a moment
that thought it was concerned only with itself.
And sometimes I think role of poetry is to mop up after music.
It was only the other day that I realized M.B.'s last name started

with a homonym of the very word around which he had structured
 his life: blue.
I was in the office kitchen waiting for the coffee maker to
 spit out a fresh pot of lousy brew.
Looking at the machine for the hundredth time, I finally noticed
 the brand name
emblazoned on its stainless-steel front: Bloomfield.
I remembered that his family was prominent in the restaurant
 supply business.

As bookkeepers, receptionists and editors clattered by

I imagined a "blue field," so called by astrophysicists
because objects passing through it
acquire a distinctive blue aura of electromagnetic energy.
Was there such a thing? Then I pictured a field of azure flowers
along a canal or quiet road in a country like Holland,
a carpet of irises or tulips floating several feet off
the earth. A breeze bent them.
I came back to this poem; in this poem, I come back
to Spring Street

where I sit with a head full of dying notes
waiting for my gal who just walked through the door.
Your loving eyes tell me it's time to go
but I'd like to linger here just a little while,
long enough to let Elmore play one last bar
and drink to Michael B. and his blue guitar.

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