A Place to Burn

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Departmental Honors in Creative Writing

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Honors Committee
A Place to Burn

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Garrett Williams
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Michael & Rosanne Williams
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I

“Blues is easy to play, but hard to feel.”
~ Jimi Hendrix
Blues Talks

Blues says she’s the sweetest thing I ever saw,

*smokehouse woman with a heart like the river.*

Blues says you got to let that boy boogie-woogie,

*loose love to the streets, turn the child free.*

Blues says awww girl I like it like that,

*red hair bright eyes under the sycamores.*

Blues says I’ve been workin, workin night and day,

*bring you flowers, pearls, dirty shoes and sky.*

Blues says she’s not coming back,

*killing floor night watch phone call moon.*

Blues says I’m down, down on my hands and knees.

*wait for a savior or a sunrise.*

Blues says you may be high, you may be low,

*but when the good Lord calls, child, you gotta move.*
Vega Blues

Twenty years of black night and us, huddled around fire and a 12-string Martin. Carolina in the wind, knobby birch logs beneath our torn jeans. My friend played like Skip James, coaxing, calling. He played the way a baker crafts bread, slowly working in new elements, letting the dough thicken and rise and become something rich.

I looked up. Remnants of fire were still in my eyes, phosphorescent scars against the heavy cobalt sky. Slowly, pure light faded to inky velour, until four stars bloomed between the cool oaks.

We’d found that instrument years before – among the few luminaries left untouched by New York’s light and smog. From our wrought-iron fire escape we’d listen to the city’s steel-edged symphony: sirens and street performers, Rosa’s static radio three balconies down. Some nights we’d sit up until six or seven, me jotting half-formed lyrics in a scuffed moleskin notebook, Laura leaning against the cold brick, knees pulled up to her chest, silent, sinking into a borough’s worth of stories and prayers.
Years later, they barely seemed the same stars that held court over our tired rooms and poorly-conceived plans. But after the blues, after the heavens became quiet and still as a backwater bayou, I watched Vega make its tiny waterwheel rotation against the oak leaves, a turn no bigger than the spinning label of an LP. Laura whispered *Are you still awake?*, found my hand in the weeds and twigs, didn’t ask what I was thinking about.
Son House, Himself

This is not the Son House of the morning,  
the sharp, genial, well-dressed preacher,  
lighthouse of the dawn and a good word.

This is not the Son House of the night,  
bourbon-sated back-alley troubadour,  
guilt-struck desperate ruby brothel prince.

This is Son House himself, alone in  
a breezy June afternoon, playing, for once,  
not for believers or pimps or girls or God.

This is Son House outside, reassembled  
under a poplar tree, perhaps, or beside a tool  
shed, fingerpicking softly, humming nonsense

syllables on the one and three. He shuts his  
eyes, sinks into the Mississippi drone, feels earth  
beneath his slacks, wind in his fingers, thanks

the day for grasshoppers and corn whiskey,  
for the sun’s daily struggle with the hills: whole,  
then split, then made whole again, somewhere.
I Want You to Clap Your Hands

and I’ll try to tell you

about the wooden drum,
the windy, knifing flute,
the midnight shout and thump.

Years of backbreaking prayers,
this sound that echoes through churches,
clutches at old love, slips through years,
wanders, like summer twilight searches

for these blue notes your blood
desired: this wild planetary sound,
born of heaven and river mud.

Now all the words you never found
sing in soil, in the ancient drum,
pure, earthy as brown-red plums.
Variations on “Child Ballad Number 95”

“The Prickilie Bush,” “Hangman
Hangman” – the tune’s been called
dozens of titles, sung in small towns
from Finland to Jamaica. Francis Child
discovers a mournful Scottish song-story
version in 1877, catalogues it as “The Maid Freed
From the Gallows” (Ballad #95), a freedom
song, a twilight plea to the hangman:

Ailsie’s got muddy red hair and a story –
tangled alibis from men she calls
friends, a calico dress and her child
lost in the stony streets of a cold town.
Her lover will ride from Campbeltown,
loosen her ropes with silver, set her free
from the yew tree she climbed as a child.

1939. Leadbelly’s facing the hangman
again: two years for what the judge calls
aggravated assault. Days of courtroom stories,
Leadbelly’s left with his guitar and Ailsie’s story.
Scratchy recordings cut in uptown
Manhattan preserve his strained calls:
Save me from the gallis pole, brother, free
me from the gallis pole, yea-ah. Hangman
blues, his voice shakes like a weeping child.
Jimmy’s found a banjo and childlike enthusiasm for Leadbelly’s desperate story, Robert nails the verse: *Hangman, hangman, wait a little while!* 1970, near the Welsh town of Bron-Yr-Aur, Led Zeppelin are free to supercharge the tune – ominous bass, call-and-response dialogue. They’ll call it “Gallows Pole,” stodgy critics label them childish imitators of Crosby, Stills, & Nash. But no freedom awaits their captive, only a cynical story of a helpless man in a lawless town.

Different trees, crimes, but always the hangman. Frayed rope, calls for mercy. Endless stories of “Child Ballad Number 95,” the hill outside town, one chance at freedom, the motionless hangman.
Drainpipe Boogie

Swirl down the gutter and sing, sweet
rainwater, moan blue riff rivers snaking
through black mud, whisper about pure things

lying at the bottom of northern lakes:
mossy stones and anchors and lost sunglasses
reflecting filtered rays like shiny sidewalks

under streetlights where black shoes
patter across puddles, past city blocks
dark and distant as Delta anthems

carried south on Savannah Short Line
boxcars, holy songs, cold notes
ringing like water through drainpipes.
Performance

When we’re tight it’s kaleidoscope circuitry:
delicate electric synapses fusing impulses
into liquid confederacy, the way nations

jostle and nudge against each other within
snug continents. Tonight we’re playing
borders, ill-defined regions where cultures

collide and overlap in merged accents
and bilingual street signs, blended recipes
and families. I’m listening for the new places

that form when tones mingle in smoky
air: shallow aqua salt marshes, cobblestone
staircases spiraling like thumbprints, California

ravines flush with late spring. Cinematic key
change, solo break burnished and fractured
as the Tiffany lamp above the bar. Low-cut

blues, we’ll sing the sound of billiard
chalk and scotch glasses, play a carmine
skirt clinging to the night’s curves.
Memphis Heat

*Memphis Slim Plays with Canned Heat, Autumn 1970*

To him, they’re some tight California kids.

To them, he’s a god and a half, a chilled-out

sage of lost river cities, mystic cat of jet-black

jackknife boogie. He arrives on time in a tired

suit, the edges of his shoulders long worn out

by windmill arms, always reaching, stretching

for a higher octave, a higher point to tumble

from. He plays fierce, then falls away hard –

now with the beat, now against – pitching

dirty pennies into a lake. His fingers slam

keys then dance a barrelhouse percussive

assault: bullfight piano. On “Five Long Years”

he suggests Henry sing. *I just want to be free,*

Slim says. *Free to really do my thing.*
Villaiku: Photographs from October

Cold morning, pale fire
on the ridge, bands
of scarlet gilded grey sky.

Wet hair in wind. You were shy:
bus stop Diana
under elms’ pale dawn fire.

The string pulled higher,
tugged your blurry hand,
red ribbons tingeing grey sky.

Cinnamon flames flashed brighter
than my Canon;
you glowed by bonfire.

Your father was a liar.
Promises, plans,
red jet trails striping sky.

The last one still stops my eye:

You tapped at his grand
piano, hands afire
in streams of scarlet sky.
Invention

Today I am making things:
a second stanza, a small notch
in my microphone stand
so the XLR cable will fit properly,
new excuses for when I know
you’ve caught me with nothing
to say,

tangible things, since so many leave
quickly: paid Visa bills, outdated
promo posters, even lyrics, rhymes,
recorded and sent to unfamiliar
places – Valencia, California;
Leicester, England; somewhere
in Iowa.

Mostly things linger, gather
in drawers, on garage shelves. Two
unused birdhouses, badly written
love notes, schematics of space
stations I sketched as a child,
when the cosmos were close
and tactile,

simple stellar clockwork. Now
I need an invention to remain relevant
and silver: the fabulous chorus
I haven’t found yet, words for
the arching sky, the sound of you
and me, listening for new things
every day.
Cloudy Blues

First a faint smudge,
then, barely, a pale smear of exhaust,

all that remains of Ellie’s 7:25
departure from the local tarmac –

a path past the gibbous moon:
God and all points westward.

I rub my eyes, search again
to find where the trail begins and the sky

ends, but I can’t – just like I can
never tell whether the background

noises in Leadbelly’s “Goodnight Irene”
are static pops, or handclaps echoing

across the hall in Louisiana’s Angola
State Prison. He must’ve sang his tired

voice dry for the stranger’s microphone,
flat-picking a borrowed twelve-string,

as the inmates across the hall mocked
his desperate howl for pardon.
I – IV – V

Ragged years pass in three chords, notes almost define life’s circular mechanism. They’re the sound of barrooms and basements, every glorious crusade and piss-poor plan. First, the struggle, our everyday fight. Weary feet, dishpan hands, a voice on the line that won’t connect. Seasons crumble, I’m still here – walls too thin, head too full.

Blue spruce wind eases through the window above my mattress, wakes new sparks in my hands. Upward leaps – reaching skyward from sidewalks on my way downtown, watching the horizon tilt just enough to alter the streets and my name. Mornings with a new lover. Joyful protest, constant belief in tomorrow.
Blazing pinnacle, quick as light
caught in burnished golden stripes,
a tattered pennant hoisted above

a broken war field. Cymbal crash:
climax. Catharsis, apex,
Vesuvius liberating lava and years

of silence. Flashes of acid sun
singe the city’s glass skyscrapers,
true as a flush in spades.

Resolve, re-entry. Inevitable
tumble back to cracked pavement
daydreams. Ten dollars in my pocket,
pigeons roosting in the pipes outside
my apartment, and somewhere, I hope,
a tired pianist plays the sound of

the cool glaze of the hour after January
sunsets, the moon etched low in an icy
sky, the soft voice: *hey mate, last call.*
“Jazz is the big brother of the blues.”
~ B.B. King
Jazz says move your feet, clap your hands,

*catch swing and laugh in every fingersnap.*

Jazz says feel hot notes, play sweet rag,

*just like jelly roll and the night immaculate.*

Jazz says never play a thing the same way twice.

*moments: light switch dice roll whiskey shot.*

Jazz says hey hey man listen, listen here,

*turn old changes to new oceans.*

Jazz says Southern trees bear a strange fruit,

*rend the dawn, burn the city, rise up.*

Jazz says come on up man, sit in, blow a bit,

*make new colors, paint new faces.*

Jazz says I’ll play it first and tell you what it is later,

*live now breath now feel now bleed now.*
Monk by Moonlight

Late August love music: black swells
curl against hard, flat sand, break
across the breeze and empty night.
Above town, Hercules surrenders
to streetlights; in the east, Pegasus splashes
from the Atlantic as faint Aquarius rises
from horizon blur. The tide’s rising
too, alive with ripples, fierce swells
tinged with glints of moon. Waves splash
around the abandoned lifeguard tower, break
below my khaki shorts. I surrender
to the warm wind, the motion of night.

Through headphones, another night:
a steel neon city, smoke and noise rising
to meet low stars. A tenor plays surrender
in B flat, bitter, libertine swells
that echo through the brick alley, break
against a fire escape like palettes splashed
with paint. Inside her flat, bad calligraphy splashes
across a legal pad. She’s felt too many nights
like this, felt her words slip, her voice break
on the phone, felt the distance rise
up, push against her desperate levees, swell
until she can only whisper I surrender . . .
Monk’s piano calls me back: “I Surrender, Dear,” those cool, downward ivory splashes from tinny headphones harmonizing swells and distant boardwalk fireworks. Nights like these, when all music connects, rises and flows over sand dunes, when drum breaks join distant barges, rumbling breakers like Oscar Pettiford’s rolling bass, I surrender to the moment and wade in, whitecaps rising, while behind me on the shore a child splashes briny water on marooned jellyfish, ignited in bioluminescent blue. The piano swells, a half-moon breaks past clouds, cymbals splash and shimmer. I surrender, dear, tonight – the stars rise, the sea dances, the music swells.
Ray Charles Playing “A Bit Of Soul” on Afternoon Radio

We bought chocolate and kumquats,
    stood outside the store, inhaling
    the smell of rising French loaves

across the parking lot, rich
    in the late hours. Five of us,
    in shorts and brown sunglasses,

framed by blossoming trees, cream
    flowers against sky. On the road home:
    painted wooden signs, gleam

from a cherry red bicycle, smooth
    molded leather of my tan sandals.
    At a stoplight, I watched a starling

swoop into a still churchyard
    fountain, splash tiny triangle wings
    while my tongue tested the tension

of the tart rind between my teeth,
    resisting temptation until the car
    jolted and my jaw clenched.
I sank hard into the fleshy core,
    while piano cascades slipped
    and tumbled like wayward seeds

and juice trickled down my throat,
    as copper light fell across me,
    sweet acid stinging my mouth.
Birth

Now I will breathe the joy that lives in art.
I’ll sing the swinging tambourine jingle,
the hard snap of ice water, the single
night when your smoky lover tasted tart
as September apples. Bless the ancient
cathedrals with new paint, torch each pretense,
and I’ll craft lines through rising incense.
This will be language to explain the scent
of grass on spring air, the celestial
hum of night, the starry syncopation
of Motown dance steps. This is our motion:
the kick and tumble of color we feel.
Blast poetry of death. I am not dead.
I’ll use my throat for things lively and red.
Past Brilliance

*Harlem, 1945*

Three songs in, Jim knew Parker was off. *Misguided bullets,* Jim said years later, *scattered inside the smoke*

*and signal flares of Minton’s.* Savage, feral riffs, momentary as neon flashes:

beer signs reflected in rum & Coke spilled across the bar. Discipline gone, swaying off-mic, Parker dripped blues and gravity, blind to his bandmates in the maroon night.

Jim was twenty, visiting the city on bellhop tips and a five from his aunt. Later, no sleep: coarse hotel sheets, his mind adrift on lost music, a ship guided south by unfamiliar constellations.

Caught in dawn’s half-rose ache he remembered Parker’s second chorus on “A Night in Tunisia,” the cute barmaid, the vagrant on 116th, behind the florist, warming his hands above a pile of burning lilies.
Steel Drum  

_Grotto Bay, 1991_

If I concentrate, I can remember  
tree frogs singing green evening,  
the thick-leaved palms in amber  
light, trunks curved inward, lining

the broad walk in measured intervals.  
I don’t recall where the empty lane  
led, only the light, the drowsy smell  
of hibiscus, intoxicating and foreign.

Yellow island mornings. One curving walk  
led past the massive aloe plant, the wrinkled  
woman in blue. I’d mouth hello, proud to talk  
with strangers like my parents did.

I was five then. I learned draw poker  
with strange new coins, ate powdered  
sugar on Belgian waffles, stayed up to hear  
the steel-drum band echoing through

shady palms, lush calypso rhythms vivid  
and new as the turquoise shallows where I spent  
hours with a small girl, trying to catch shiny  
fish using soggy bread and a purple bucket.
Playing with Kings

*Indiana High School’s “Jazz Artist In Residence” Program*

I. Jon Faddis, 2002

He saunters in, a storybook genie – bigger than all of us, bigger than life, already grinning. Late night bop lion, he swings his words in grooves we aren’t hip to yet. We are scared – even aging Dizzy admitted defeat to this giant’s chops. But he is warm, graceful, funny: when our director mentions we have two brothers in the band, Faddis glances over our sea of pale faces and cracks, *I don’t see no brothers in this band!* He works us for a hour on a single note, desperate to convey the exact length of an accented eighth – just long enough to feel the kick – then declares the remaining 128 bars solid. He takes us to the local diner, even buys Jenny a banana cream pie to take her worrying mind off a bad break-up.
II. Slide Hampton, 2003

To begin, he is not dead. (After a few inquiries, one agent says he’s awfully sorry but Hampton died a few years ago.) This amuses Slide, standing in our cramped office, though not much else seems to. At seventy he is business, offering occasional advice through a voice like smoke and scratched copper, sea-green with age and worn from years of calling out tunes. During a break,

I ask him to sign my copy of *World of Trombones*. He complies, then turns back to the tired, flat piano, gently fingering seventh chords, stringing out florid notes like laundry hung haphazardly on a June clothesline, starched shirts and delicate sun dresses waving in damp, light-speckled morning air. He seems happiest here, and I thank God that he’s still exploring.
III. Chris Vadala, 2004

He has none of the regal, imperial quality of the other two; he carries himself with the mild, reasonable bearing of a cobbler or a skilled waiter. Professional: clockwork precision in assembling his saxophones, his cool glance up and down a new chart like a general surveying a map, certain of preordained victory. Small in stature and presence, he waits for the solo break like a boy on a diving board. When it comes, he explodes. Swells and waves, he plays the fury of the sea, a bright, complex sound that leaps like a breaching narwhal over our rumbling foundation, trails of reverb cascading through grey mist before the plunge. He plays possessed, eyes wide, manic. Afterwards, he’ll shake hands, pose for photos.
Hip

I’d sing you swing in six-eight,
clap every glow in a row of fox-fur
scarlet trees, torches through morning
frost. I’d play eighths on this rake
‘til my fingers ached, weave cinnamon
leaves in threes, burn black nights
into pale notes. I’d hum the golden slush
of pumpkin and scattered seeds splashed
along my sidewalk like late October stars,

the way your world dissipated, sown
across two towns and three hospitals,
when the car swerved into your
lane, crushed your hip, dragged you
down Daughtery Drive, all the way here:
thin sheets, ammonia, white steel,
syringes, where I wish I could play
you the nutmeg breeze, the acorns,
the smell of burning leaves.
Sixth Anniversary

What a place – linen tablecloths
flawless, every waiter in shiny black
shoes. Say your lines: We ought
to get out more often. Julia will be fine
with the sitter, won’t she? I’ll chuckle
and nod, pretend not to notice

your pomegranate stew has stained your
mouth darker than the blood-red
marbles at the bottom of this glass
vase. Bay windows offer harsh headlights,
but you’re right, the striped wallpaper
really does pick up the little white crosses

on the navy carpet. And this pianist,
she plays well – each note plinking
with the precision of a pocketwatch. Thank
God the pauses are filled with the soft
crack of cups and saucers, patter
from those shiny black shoes.

But dangling above our heads
like some benevolent sword
of Damocles, the gold chandelier
throws specks of electric light
thin as the music onto the silver water
pitcher, fogged with condensation,
its glints reminding me of the August
night we travelled forty miles out
of town to see the Perseids
in a clear sky. You wore my blue
sweatshirt, clutched my arm, and said we
should drive across this whole gorgeous country.

Across the room, three old women sit at
a table for four. In the half-light, cutouts
in the empty chair’s mottled teak appear
as two crouching vultures, necks curved
and hunched. I straighten, suddenly aware
of the patterns at our backs.
Tide Charts

I was emperor of the ocean,
for an hour and a half.

All the tourists had left the beach.
and I waded into the sea.

The sun was low by then,
clouds dulled the horizon.

The world faded together:
shore, water, sky, even me,

all one tone of blue-grey,
like the colors that seep out

when I rinse paintbrushes
in a cracked ceramic mug,

or when you blew clarinet
to that Art Pepper record

for hours and days, until
I lost which notes were yours

or when I write songs and mix
and match bits of melody

like a vagabond’s patchwork
coat, flecked with red flannel.
Acceptance:

*Regina Spektor Plays “Somedays” at Washington D.C.’s 9:30 Club*

She screams, whispers, coos, calls,
but now, behind her red piano, she sings plain:

*Some days aren’t yours at all,*

her voice rising on *aren’t*, filling the hall.

God, she’s right. I’m drained –
ev\ery scream and whisper recalls
Jean on the phone, her father’s scrawled
note, words full of hard rain.

*Some days aren’t yours at all,*

*they come and go* – Regina’s voice falls –

*as if they’re someone else’s days.*

His day, dragged in a dusty sedan. I’ll call
Jean after the show, talk baseball
to keep her breathing, explain
that sometimes it’s not your day, it’s all
you can do to take the hit, crawl
home, try so hard to lose your pains
in blue screams and shaking piano.

Some days aren’t yours, at all.
New Days:

*Making Resolutions While Listening to the Impulse! Deluxe Edition of A Love Supreme, December 30th, 2006*

They’re not really resolutions. I hate the term, instantly suggestive of unwelcome change – something I *should* do, rather than something I *want* to do, a dull crusade long forgotten by Valentine’s Day. So each year, a day or two before the calendar flips, I find my notebook, recreate the past year in cast-off phrases and a crude system of up and down arrows. Invariably at the end I jot a few remarks – *not* resolutions, just suggestions. Of course the old standards are here, like rarely-seen uncles at Thanksgiving: eat better, exercise, write more. But this year something tugs at my hair, cuffs me upside the chin, something in Coltrane’s acid-sweet chameleon tone, like teeth in an orange or a girl in the dark. Coltrane – I feel like I should call him John, naked as he is in front of the piano – barely sounds like he’s playing jazz. He’s playing art, no, *pushing* art, leading art over black rivers like a cosmic Orpheus, past map edges, into fog and Indian towns shrouded in Louisiana mist. I want to build bridges like his tenor, to strike into the west with a horse and a telescope.

Revolution Poem

*for Henry Miller*

An axe would work,
something with heft, or a rusted
trumpet, or a cracked, twisted palette
knife. Bring me a sloppy paintbrush, stained
bristles splayed like bloody limbs. I need a tool
of violence, an instrument for bright orange change.
There’s napalm in this radio
but distortion’s not enough. Charlie
Parker once said there’s no boundary line
to art, and I’ll prove him right. Tonight I crash
my cement truck through cocktail parties, to hear
melody in every shattered saucer and socialite scream,
and see the slugs pale
as their favorite soup tureen
crumbles. I’ll smear oil pastels until
cinder block walls explode with pigment. I’ve come
for your mauve beveled woodwork and the glass etching of
eight generations of clean, sweet Americans and I’m going to set fire
to everything square.
Damn your canned prayers, I’ll
find my salvation in blood-spattered steel
guitar strings. Let’s face this pale end fully alive
for once, howling like madmen, because I choose death
over dinner conversation, and even if the cold blade falls hard
my neck will gush colors
you’ve never seen. So when the cries
wake you tonight, look north past the armory
wall, and if the sky is red know that I’ve ravaged
every viola in the Philharmonic and my voice is lost
from roaring at the status quo, raging for something true.
III

“There are a lot of ways you can treat the blues, but it will still be the blues.”
~ Count Basie
Rock & Roll Talks

Rock & roll says do what you like,

*fly silver wind scream hymns and blossom.*

Rock & roll says there’s a better place somewhere,

*roads west: California days and fireworks nights.*

Rock & roll says we can make some kind of difference,

*smile on your brother join hands raise voices.*

Rock & roll it’s alright, listen, it’s alright,

*don’t worry too much we’re all here now.*

Rock & roll says give me one more chance,

*one more chord one more drink one more city.*

Rock & roll says stand up, don’t be afraid,

*no more rules, no more mistakes.*

Rock & roll says we could be heroes, just for one day,

*believe in the night, the dawn, an open hand.*
Trip to the Record Store

_Friday Afternoon, First Day of Autumn_

Off the curb, brown shoe striking
cold street with the snare
shot that opens “Like a Rolling
Stone,” the crack Springsteen
said was like kicking open
the door to your mind. Wind spills
my ink black jacket behind
me and now I’m in motion, sweeping
over sidewalks like brush
on canvas. Every stride in step
with the rhythm in my headphones,
the change of the crosswalk sign,
the passing flash of headlights. I’m
your adolescent heroes: Connery
as Bond, Achilles in his bloody chariot,
the one and only Billy Shears. I’m
Athos, Porthos and Aramis.
I am everyone who’s reached
his peak and knows it. Napoleon
on his white horse, Ali stinging Sonny
Liston in ’64, Thompson on assignment
and mescaline. I’m every child
discovering the sea, every president
on the red phone. I’m churches
on wedding days, small American
towns on the Fourth of July. I’m
every single nation at their height:
Portugal at sea, Germany at war,
Britain at tea and crumpets. Hell, I’m
the whole world during the
I.G.Y. and I swear to Christ
I’m motherfucking unstoppable.
Along The Road

*Jackson Browne, 1977*

Lafayette, Louisiana. Hilton Towers. Three weeks into the tour. On a balcony over the parking lot, Jackson fingerpicks dusk melodies. She hasn’t called. Hours fade, and he plays blues, soft and lonely. Night swirls. He wakes at half past six to coughing exhaust, dew and dirty bricks.

Holiday Inn, Regency Street, Edwardsville, Illinois. After the show, Jackson won’t fall into liquor and idle chat for a little while. He’s still on his feet, manic in the small bar’s neon glow. “That ‘Shaky Town’ coda? Ra-tat! tata-tat!” No one is listening. “We *nailed* that!”

Desert Rose Motel, outside Tucson, Interstate Seventeen. She’s tan and willowy, haute couture cool. But in the hours before dawn, Jackson sits up and can’t understand how her dreaming face seems so cruel, his perfect lover, his perfect fool.
Los Angeles, Continental Hyatt Hotel.
Fifth floor. The Riot House is afire
with willing flesh and champagne.
Alone, naked, bruised, Jackson crawls
through soaked sheets to his tiny mirror,
chokes on the last of his cocaine,
collapses in scattered grains.

Cross Keys Inn, Columbia, Maryland,
room 301 (top of the stairs, turn right).
The band’s at the bar, but Jackson
croons into a lone mic on the nightstand
and Lindley’s fiddle hums purple night.
“You forget about the losses” – violin
vibrato – “you exaggerate the wins.”
Smolder

*Independence Day, 1971*

Night drags slow and hard,
steams like coffee, acid black
as new needle-etched vinyl.
Speakers preach soul through July heat
to halter top Jenny chaos-waltzing
down South Vine Street in red
haze. Mick’s strings clam and stick
with sweat but he struggles
through soaked maple to sound
a voice in swampy air. Back
porch crew aahs and claps for
yellow fireworks scratching sky
leaving baked plumes of ash
while Mick smokes over the changes
of Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young live
New York City ‘69. Scorch and burn
says the gold dust man, tells Jenny
this city’s blazed like the whole of Viet Nam
so she might as well shoot anything
she can. Wild-eyed boys’ choir yelps
cheap revolt cause the suits are drained
and drunk and nobody cares if children
play with lighters tonight. The city flops
on a stained mattress and sweats
through tangled prison sheets
by an open window, curtains ripped
down to coax any shred of cooked
alleyway breeze. Half past three
black fire still whispers and drips
down our necks so we run
through choked night to the river, plunge
like runaway convicts and emerge
in jungle air, anti-war t-shirts clinging
to our heaving chests. Through mist
orange lights flicker too near
to be memories and Mick prays
that Jenny’s waltzing somewhere,
but mercury’s rising still.
Solo

Brown leaves, my red sweater, and *Dylan Live at Budokan, ‘75*, left in my girl’s
car from before her surgery. Two weeks
of dead mornings, fog in my eyes,
I’d turn her keys, cue up track ten,
“Forever Young,” and listen to my hero
and his minstrels play his little prayer.
My mind wandered through the verses –
I imagined why the other drivers
were up so early, tried to invent their stories –
but just as I’d reach the last intersection
the solo began, a run of throaty saxophone notes
sad and pure as September dawns, reaching
a throbbing F, strong enough to carry
me through the parking lot, up the elevator,
still hanging as she clutched my hand,
as the nurse drew three more vials of blood.
Poem for Sweet Janie Miller

On Highway Sixteen East, poplars speckle
amber hills like casualties. Jack’s fingers betray
restlessness, drum a hollow beat on black briefcase
leather. Through frost on the Greyhound window, he scans
the landscape for primary colors. The driver drags
the broadcast down through junk and coughing
static, but halfway between Wyoming’s Favorite
Beats and Modern Country Ninety-Two, Jack’s
ears catch the shiny guitar plink of “Sweet
Jane” by the Velvet Underground. The notes
shimmer like young love, flirting with fuzz, almost
out of reach, like memories of Janie Miller’s
yellow hair whirling out the window of her ’68
Corvette. Another turn of the dial and the music’s
gone, Lou Reed’s yearning vocals fading
like the sepia photograph of Jack’s mother, nestled
in his pocket. She’s bright in dancing shoes, so distant
from the perfumed body he prayed over just yesterday.
Static sounds in Jack’s tired ears like the sea,
or the drone of Janie’s engine, driving into dusk.
I’m Slowly Turning Into You

_The White Stripes, 2007_

Coal and bone and blood.
Steam engine blues, iron music
churning like Detroit smokestacks.

Jack’s an Aztec prince parading
before the sun god, Airline guitar
ripping the haze of pot and spotlights.

Meg plays the armies of Europe
marching to war, imploding sky-scrapers, broken arms and silence:

those seismic gaps between
rifle volleys. Prophets of the church
of flesh and dirt, they synchronize

explosions like a squadron
of bombers, like a murder
of crows erupting from a swamp

cypress against crushed velour
night, Mars ascendant, retrograde
above granite November horizons.
Captions

Saturday night: live Springsteen on the stereo, college basketball muted on TV. Cut to commercial – above fabulous rotating bacon the closed-captioning reads *MCDONALD’S NEW BREAKFAST BURRITO*, then shows the generic “music” symbol: a curving white eighth note, a child’s cartoon of notation. I’m wondering what song is actually playing, thinking about the way labels always fall short of what we mean them to illuminate, how white and black pixels could never describe Clarence’s brawling saxophone, the cosmic architecture of Danny Federici’s rolling organ fills. What caption works for this carousel of good beer and one-off nicknames? I can’t neatly sum up Kristin singing the “Rosalita” bridge, Greg’s ridiculous grin when I ask *What album’s up next?* I don’t want a designation for this perpetual state of quarter to three: Adam karate-kicking magnetic darts into the fridge, Cole yelling *Play something jumpy!* Sarah and Patrick slow-dancing beneath old Christmas lights framing the Grateful Dead poster. We’re strangely beyond language, exploding between the woven Celtic tapestry, the curling sandalwood incense.
Solve et Coagula

_Alchemist’s Creed_

Malachite glow, soft hum, transmutation.

Roger Bacon and Nicolas Flamel searched
for quicksilver soul purification,

a philosopher’s stone. We’re separating
four minutes of recorded floor tom
into ninety-six disparate drumbeats,

each neatly cleaved from the mic’s
background noise, each crystalline, discrete
as the hundreds of violet knobs dotting
his mixing console, an emerald tablet

for the twenty-first century. Haydon,

the engineer, tinkers, twists, blends
rounded turquoise wave forms reflected
in his glasses. Endless pursuit for panacea
from Ludwig drum skins, white maple

sticks. Sanctuary and speakers, new
tones elemental and brilliant as blue

jays, bright against backlit pines. Slowly

he’ll synthesize sounds – steel chords

fluid as hotplate mercury, acid flash
cymbals, magnetic zodiac bass –

eight months of struggle, false-starts

and breakthroughs brought together:

jays roosting as night falls, nesting.
Laying Tracks

Behind my house, scotch pines
soar, prickly blue spruces sprawl wild
on the edge of the lawn. Tangled vines,
rain-carved trenches, purple berries. As a child,
these gorse-filled woods taught me design:

cardinals and tawny rabbits,
and fantastic elephant-ear plants
pieced together in grand jigsaw spirit.
Crawling through gullies in muddy pants,
I’d savor tart onion grass, my spit

green as finch feathers. Years later,
I’d find those patterns – in blankets
and wrinkled bedsheets draped over
cinder block walls, in my rosewood frets,
while I waited to record a backing guitar

riff. Through headphones: the same twisting
connections, the convergence of rhythm.
Swirling solos mimicked starlings,
incessant eighth-note snare drum
clicks recalled crickets’ staccato singing.
My Father’s Records


When I was old enough to understand he’d call me downstairs on Saturday nights, coax new wonder from Sony speakers, spin bands I’d never heard. We’d read liner notes, joke about album art, revel in the sighs, fuzz, and static pop of well-worn vinyl.

He taught me to lose myself that way: eyes closed, head nodding, a faint, easy smile, wandering through amethyst harmonies swelling up like sun-warmed August seas.
My Mother’s Garden

Born to nurture, she finishes potting
two begonias, brushes dirt from her gloves,
surveys terra-cotta temples glowing
like lanterns across the veranda. Love
in yellow petals, spilled Miracle-Gro
across warm cedar planks, unfolds
lazy amber afternoon through pines, flows
soft, like a hose misting new marigolds.
She drifts in iced tea and backyard strumming –
my guitar singing as earth blooms sublime
around her, sweet heliotrope humming
pure color, ringing like copper windchimes.
Later, in blue dusk and lamplight, I’ll feel
roots – posies, dahlias, my own, growing still.
He’s been up since Thursday, writing with Duane, 
rummaging his frets for notes he can’t reach 
or find. Beer and bent playing cards, cocaine 
spilled across the console, fourteen songs – each 
a prayer to her honeysuckle bangs, the tight 
violet skirt, the way her lips curve to form rose-kissed 
rings of pot smoke. *Pattie*. His best mate’s wife – 
alone in London while George finds Krishna 
and other women. Bleary, strung-out, he 
barely keeps his cool on the phone, invites 
her down to listen to his newest plea. 
Afterwards she’ll question the title. 
*Leyla ile Majnun – the madman of Layla*, 
he says. *Persian tale of forbidden love.*
Christmas at the Café Wha?

for Kristin

I ask Megan, the waitress, how late the kitchen’s open and she laughs. We’re staying, packed in with strangers, faint condensation smudges of drinks long gone dotting greasy tables like smoke rings rising in early winter evenings. No one’s more than fifteen feet from the stage – a platform the size of a bathroom, somehow big enough for eight cats and a drum kit. The leader – me in fifteen years, I think, all sweat and vibe and electricity – can’t stop talking about Santa Claus. I hope you’ve all been good this year! he sings, before leading the band headlong into a rolling, soulful Creedence cover. Megan brings us more beer and nachos – they call them “wha-chos” here – and I toast my girl, marvel at the wild European dancers, the guitar drawn in violent neon on the back wall, the lunatic up front trying blindly to conduct the band. Tonight we’re brothers and sisters, knocking elbows, half-drunk, caught up in a rambling, sloppy, fantastic third set. Peace on earth, goodwill to all men.
Regent’s Park

London, 2006

I.

The sun had already paled when I first met the park. I wandered left, purple light falling over arching branches, bursting white blossoms. Ahead, hedges obscured sight, but I heard quiet rain, whispers and sighs.

Around the corner: the Triton fountain. Lanky poplars flanked the pool, mocking my old Zeppelin shirt, foolish in royal fens.

Triton and two Nereids, a sea-foam throne, bronze and tarnished in their chaotic bath, solitary and cold. I was alone too, trying to befriend the sky, the paths, and the sleepy brown ducks with mottled wings – American child in the land of kings.
II.

She was four, probably, in loose shoestrings
and a red checked jumper that bounced as she
ran down the brick walk. Scattering ducklings
and businessmen, a perfect Botticelli
hellion, she laughed like bells, a pigtailed blur,
and I stopped. How could I chronicle this
moment, even remember these wonders
without resorting to Eden clichés?

The park was strange, dreamlike, even during
the noon rush: families and lunch breaks. Two geese
stood at the lake’s edge, feet barely submerged,
gazed across ripples, easy summer peace.

I smiled, thought about my father and I
watching Atlantic waves every July.
III.

My friends were asleep but June night was grand in jewel tones. I grabbed my headphones, my copy of *Springsteen & the E. Street Band London ’75*. Through the park to High Marylebone, then south nine blocks, past lamp shops, through the Arab district, to Oxford Street.

Blue neon tinged a busker’s trumpet bop, cool sidewalks hummed rhythm. Alone with three thousand other people, I listened to Bruce tell the crowd *this is my first time, I’ve never been here before* as I waltzed through midnight carnival, kebab stands, street jive.

I was still breathless when I reached the park again, so fierce and brambly, wild and dark.
IV.

I had a sunset room over the park.
Reid Hall, 225: a small square room
with two shelves, butter-yellow walls, and plaid
green curtains. At seven, the sky would bloom.
I’d be writing home, or checking box scores,
when pure tangerine light would play across
my typing fingertips. From my third-floor
perch I’d look past the lake’s rippling rose
water, to glowing Marylebone manors
where skyline ignited: violet cloud fire
calling me West, past the mosque’s moon tower,
the cool copper blue of the bandstand spire.
One photo shows the gold streaks, the church dome,
but not how horizon tilted towards home.
V.

I was late but he was feeding robins,
trying to explain the delicate hand,
the fluttering whistle, the gentle grin,
to a small skittish boy with hair like sand
who didn’t care to know, whose mother led
him away so politely as I edged
closer to the old man. I just wanted
to say *that’s really splendid*, but he said
*they love cheese crumbs*, told me about little
bags of corn and hand-cut almonds and sprouts
but I was late, I said *sorry* until,
heartbroken, I backed away, he called out
that he knew a good church group and boys’ club
on Baker Street, not far from the Globe pub.
VI.

Always the left walk, Queen Mary’s west edge,
where the sound of the rushing spray met me
under blossoms, within boxy hedges.
The last time, silence. Without cascades, the sea
god looked small, lording over a calm pool.
I felt small too, in the still evening haze
that settled on statues, on the rose wheel,
where I’d heard an old woman muse, two days
ago, it’s a shame that photographs can’t
capture the smell. I sat with a lone wren
on a bench that read FOR EMILY BRANT,
WHO LOVED THIS PARK. As the light waned, I ran
to the garden’s peak, the hilltop terrace,
savored the sky, the ducks in golden grass.
A Place to Burn

*Bob Dylan in London, May 1966*

Striped pants, black sunglasses, cool wind
in his curls, flitting like some harlequin bird
down sidestreet London cobblestones –
he’s motion and restless electricity.
This afternoon his tongue isn’t burning,
he’s prancing, and sprinkling words like rain.

We loved his sound, ever since “A Hard Rain’s
A-Gonna Fall” and “Blowin’ in the Wind,”
but this is new energy, quicksilver symphony burn.
White and black storefront signs – ANIMALS & BIRDS
BOUGHT –OR– SOLD, CIGARETTES & TOBACCO – catch his electric
eye. WE WILL COLLECT CLIP BATH & RETURN YOUR DOG. Stoned

or not, he’s riffing immaculate across alley stones,
past black taxis slick from cold morning rain.
His sparkplug voice ignites, loose electricity
crackling in damp spring wind:
*I’m looking for somebody to bathe my bird,
sell my dog, buy my animal, and burn

my cigarettes. I’m looking for a place to burn
my bird, clip my dog, sell my cigarettes and stone
my animal. I am looking for a place to bird
my buy, collect my clip and sell me to the cigarette! Raindrop
patter and laughter. He’s twisting, winding
himself like a jack-in-the-box, motley and electric,
just like later that night, when his electric
guitar clangs “Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues” and burns
the critics’ soft ears. Now he’s blowing fire and wind
through a Hohner Marine Band harp in C, stone
faced and singing: *When you’re lost in the raaaaaiiiin–*
Brown tangles glow in stage light and he hovers, birdlike,

behind the round microphone. Three rows back, a blonde bird
smiles, then shrieks *TRAITOR* through the electric
wash. Levon thumps the drums and Richard’s keys rain
inverted chords and suddenly everything is burning
and he wheels and spins against the stony
faces in the crowd, their empty *Judas* wind –

*PLAY FUCKING LOUD!* he screams like a blackbird burning,
as electricity flares into “Like a Rolling Stone,”
and the night is all rain and fire and wind.