

Memphis Bus Driver

In the streets of downtown Memphis, I felt the old happiness
Of fellowship with humanity. From the tall blonde waitress
At the Peabody Hotel, yes, who served me my breakfast
With a soft angularity, and from the scruffy old hippie
At the Funky Junk Antique Store, too, who thanked me profusely
Just for dropping in, I took it in graciously, charmed
By their grace and generosity. But it was the dignified driver
Of the downtown Memphis local, a couple of hours later,
On my way back from Graceland on an unsuccessful visit,
Who made me the happiest, evoking my *agape*, that feeling
Of unconditional love for just about everybody
That I'd been hoping to find in the citizenry, if not in myself,
Since arriving by bus from New Madrid, Missouri.

It was that sweet chunky guy whose belt divided his belly roll,
Who swerved to the curb and stopped with a squeak of the brakes
When he saw me waiting at the gate of Graceland
With a look of grave disappointment on my white northern face—
Not because of the way he hissed open the door of the bus
And gestured for me to jump aboard and let my worldly coins
Jangle in his hopper, not because he brought to mind
The later Muddy Waters whom I'd seen in those pictures
On the faded covers of blues-infused rock albums commissioned
By shaggy British invaders with electric guitars,
And not because he was the kind of down-home brother
I like to see in public, even back home in stuffed-up New England,
Thigh-slapping and high-fiving, *jonin* and *jivin*
And *doin' the dozens*, with no regard for the local customs—
And not even because he said, turning to me from the driver's seat,
In a voice that could have melted the butter on my bread,
When I asked him what I ought to see, what I ought to do,
What I ought to spend the day exploring in Memphis
Now that I'd found Elvis's house CLOSED ON MONDAYS AND HOLIDAYS,
You could check out the site of Reverend King's assassination,
Or you could git yourself some ribs and beer at a bar up on Beale Street—

And not just because he followed those two recommendations
With a practical suggestion, a piece of avuncular advice,
As if I hadn't been jumped in the street before or had a doting mother:
Better use your head wherever you go in Memphis, brother,
Cuz like my mama done said to me when I was just a kid,
They's some mighty unhappy folks on the streets of this city
Sufferin' from the inability to give or receive pity—

But also because he said it with such class and authority,
In that voice that could have melted the butter on my bread.

Dedication

On the deceptively black-and-white *Ed Sullivan Show*,
The satyr of the sideburns was playing some of his recent hits,
“Don’t Be Cruel,” “Love Me Tender,” “Ready Teddy,”
And “Hound Dog,” for the cultural education
And liminal exaltation of a mostly white audience
That had never seen, felt, had, or even heard of the blues.
He was dimpling his cheeks, puckering his lips, swiveling
On his blue suede shoes, and gyrating his magnificent hips
On a stage that, according to one published document,
Featured “large, artistic guitars as decoration.”
He was doing this especially for the women of our nation
And their ephemeral liberation from the gray militaristic
Forces of repression—for the willing young women
Who’d waited in line for tickets to the live performance
At the CBS television studio in mid-town Manhattan,
For instance, but also for the vicarious pleasure of viewers
Who’d tuned in to watch. He was doing it for the libidinal delight
Of working-class secretaries in split-level family rooms
And Sears-kit bungalows all across the country.
For hayloft honeys in corn-fed Nebraska. For clam-shack cuties
In Rhode Island and Massachusetts. For apple-cheeked lovelies
In Washington state, Ohio, and the woods and dells of Vermont.
And for surfboard bikini beauties in sandy southern California.
He was doing it with a vengeance, doing it in style,
For heartbroken southern belles and dance-mad black girls
In Alabama and Mississippi, and for troubled girls as well,
Heartbroken and pregnant in pink bedrooms decorated
With posters of his movies. And for the dangerous ones, too—
No, not chicks, broads, dames, or babes, not *sluts*, *cunts*, or *whores*.
How dare you even consider using that language around them!
But for all of those understandably adventurous women
Laughing their heads off and flirting with the management
On red vinyl barstools in cheap bars and hamburger joints.
Even for all of those *femme fatales* who were born that way
Slurping frappes through straws at clean-cut soda fountains
In streetcar suburbs. For women of color, women of rhythm,
Amazed that this white man had synthesized the influence
Of basic black rhythm and blues. And for women of finely tuned brains,
Cultivated tendencies, high self-esteem, and excellent wardrobes
Who lived in sanitized zones around the great universities.
Not to mention for those equally worthy impulsive ones
With raw brains, honed instincts, and tragic, movie-queen beauty
In red-light districts, blue-collar boroughs, and urban bastions
Of bohemianism. It was happening all across the country,

And that's what Elvis was playing for—even for the cheap thrills
Of those few distinguished ladies of respectable bearing,
Housewives who'd put their lives on hold for years
To propagate the species, slapping their bridge hands face-down
On fold-out card tables while their husbands were out with the boys
Playing poker and bowling. Women of a certain age
Rising from their folding chairs to do the Boogy-Woogy,
The Mashed Potato, the Jerk, and the wild Watusi
In living rooms in the suburbs, just beyond the edges
Of our soon-to-be-abandoned and razed-to-the-ground cities.

The King

For a minute there, squinting up at Elvis's mansion
Through the padlocked iron gate of Graceland, *closed*
On Mondays and holidays, I imagined myself
An iron-red Choctaw brave, as young, proud, and virile
As a noble savage from an NC Wyeth book,
Body rubbed down with a thin coat of bear grease,
Moccasins and loincloth embroidered with seed-beads,
Out on a hunting trip one innocuous Monday
In January, at the turn of the sixteenth century
Around the time the Spanish have conquered the Caribbean
And are settling New Orleans, exploring the Mississippi
At least as far north as New Madrid, Missouri,
When he sees the padlocked gate, the blacktopped driveway,
And the portico of the house with the four white columns,
And thinks he must have stumbled upon the hogan
Of some prophesied king they haven't told him about yet.

As far as he can tell, it's not the illustrious hall
Of the Corn King, the Sun King, the Tobacco King,
Or the Rain King. It's not the abode of the Nut King
Or the Berry King, or any one of those other kings
Of any of those other indispensable earthly things
From Egyptian, Greco-Roman, and Mesoamerican history
Whom we've read about in college in used mythology books,
Unforgiving authoritarian superhuman beings
Who demand the sacrifice of infants, heifers, and virgins,
Because kings like those would never live in palaces like that
With a manicured lawn and a limousine out front—
But not the Muffler King, the Burger King, or the husband
Of the Dairy Queen, either, because those divine beings
Have yet to be born, have yet to be conceived, even,
By Madison Avenue marketing departments
At Monday-morning board meetings in midtown Manhattan.

From the looks of things, with a chubby night watchmen
Appearing now in the hunter's field of vision,
Coming around front at the end of his shift
In his polished, steel-toed shoes, his dark blue uniform,
And his plastic-brimmed watch cap, jangling his key bangle,
Tucking in his shirt, whistling Dixie, and checking doors
For signs of intrusive burglars and deluded groupies, he thinks
That it must not be the earthly home of the celestial king
Of extra-terrestrial beings, but a home for grown-up boys—
For middle-aged white men who never made much noise,

Caused much commotion, or took complete advantage
Of their many opportunities, for those who found their voices
As grandfathers and work buddies, military grunts,
And third-base coaches for Little League baseball teams.

And though this is not someone whom a Choctaw hunter
Is taught to kill, necessarily, if he ever runs across him
On his monthly hunting trip, nevertheless I imagined myself
Sliding with a silent movement a sleek hornbeam arrow
From my rawhide quiver, drawing my ash bow in an arc,
And aiming the flint arrowhead at the cheap tin badge
That the poor unwary man wears like a target on his heart,
Just as I would at the heart of a buck nibbling saplings
At the edge of an autumn meadow, killing the harmless man
In the middle of a perfectly pleasant hourly routine
That has honestly made his workday just fly right by
Since he quit that dull job guarding the bank last summer.

Oil on Velvet

I had imagined gaudy interiors, customized toilets,
A ubiquitous presence of shag-rugs and mirrors,
Gold brocade of upholstery, sumptuous velour drapery,
A kitsch charm of purple leather sofas and glass coffee tables,
Spreads of fried banana and peanut butter sandwiches,
Oreo cookies, and shots of rum or snorts of coke for guests
When I went by express bus from downtown Memphis
To Elvis's Graceland, which would unfortunately happen
To be closed on that particular Monday, as on all the rest—

Then the jungle room in the basement notorious for a rug
Of lime-green shag that carpeted even the ceiling,
For its pseudo-Polynesian Witco chairs and couches,
And for the fully stocked *tiki* bar where he and the band
Would rest between takes in their recording sessions—

That, and the bedroom where Elvis hosted his groupies, asking
That they not undress completely, but remain in lingerie
They'd bought for the occasion in downtown Memphis
For the titillating duration, sometimes two or three at a time,
The better for him, an artist after all, to put to use
His imagination on the beauty of those bodies
He'd chosen from the line of star-struck girls at the gate—

Plus the shameless collection of awards and trophies
From pop music guilds and entertainment agencies
And the pictures of him posing with politicians and movie stars,
Sports heroes, media moguls, and other famous musicians,
In a den I imagined to be decked out in a mixture
Of back-woods hunting shack and downtown corporate office,
Rough-hewn hickory table and mahogany desk,
Mounted antlers of a six-point buck and red leather chair,
With Loretta Lynn, Ray Charles, Sammy Davis, and Johnny Cash
In Nashville, New York, Atlantic City, and Vegas—

All of it no doubt as "tacky, garish, and tasteless"
As someone in a blog on a website has described it,
Worthy at once of collection by the Smithsonian Institution
And of those velvet depictions of Elvis that they sell
In crafts-fair booths and vacant lots on the side of the road—

"The most God-awful crap I've seen in my life," according
To my old friend Gary, who had to hold back his laughter
At the unintentional camp of it all, for fear he'd offend

The most ardent devotees at the museum when he visited
And inadvertently cause some volatile guy in chains
And black leather biker jacket that goes with his girlfriend's,
Some back-country cross between hippie and red-neck
Here on the pilgrimage he's been planning for 20 years,
To detect the effeminate streak in the trained tenor voice
He used to put to good effect in lounges, bars, and clubs
In soft ballads sung to his own keyboard accompaniment,
And in that layered orange hair of his, those jangly bracelets
On his not-so-limp wrist, and those rich brown eyes that twinkled
Like kaleidoscopic *mandalas* set with gold and amber sequins
Whenever we dropped acid, turned up the volume
On Hendrix or Procol Harum, and floated into the skies
On the psychedelic stuff that had taken Elvis by surprise.

Perfect Memory

Eager to see if I could sense, or at the very least imagine,
The presence of Elvis, the singing faun himself,
The seedy, slick, bold, and tacky satyr of the sideburns,
In the cockpit of his private plane, parked in the grass
Across the street from Graceland, in the meters, levers, dials,
And switches, in the custom design features
And small decorative touches that you expect to find
In the possessions of the rich—a guitar-shaped drink tray
On the console perhaps, or maybe black leather seats
And purple shag carpeting—I stooped to cup my face
To the window on the pilot's side, mad I hadn't known
That the house would be *closed on Mondays and holidays*
But charged by the same curiosity, irrepressible more
Than morbid or perverse, that I felt as a kid of thirteen
One fresh spring Saturday afternoon in 1967
(The same year that saw Elvis and Priscilla marry)
In the parking lot of the Gulf station that the father
Of my fun-loving classmate Tim Duffey ran
Next to Lawson's market on State Street in Westerville,
Across the street from the tree nursery, near the tracks
That bordered the field in back of the high school—

Just like I did that day, when I spent a good half-hour,
That I might have wasted otherwise, squinting through
The driver's side window of some mangled metal wreckage
They'd towed in that morning, a Mustang, I imagine,
A GTO, or a souped-up Chevy, in which an older guy
(Whose unfortunate last name, if I recall, was Lust,
Not *Dust*, as my friend J.R. back in Columbus
Suggests, not Envy or Pride, Gluttony, Greed, Sloth,
Or Wrath, but *Lust*, for Christ's almighty sakes)
Had died the night before, a kid my sister Sue's age,
A victim of recklessness or pent-up adolescent rage
Managing to make a smack head-on collision,
In the rural area near the Delaware County line,
With some sort of tree, a burr oak, I'll bet, a sugar maple,
A lumpy box elder, or a big horse chestnut tree
That cows had used for shade since the mid-19th century
When the big abandoned barns we used to fool around in
In gradually fallowing fields on the edge of town were built—

Out on the joy ride that he liked to take on Friday nights
Maybe swerving to avoid a deer in the headlights,
Or, given the distance of that tree from the road,

Acting on an impulse to put an end to his misery,
Heading straight across the field on purpose toward the tree,
Fed up with this frustrating life, sick of the constant struggle,
Rejected so much, so crushed, depressed, and humiliated,
And so devastated, say, that he'd been dumped that night,
Just a month or so before his high school graduation,
By the high-school sweetheart he'd planned to marry
For the past six months, or denied a movie date
By the tenth girl he'd asked in a row, told he was a loser
At a poker party in the country, where there was weed and liquor,
For approaching attractive girls he didn't even know
In the hall between chemistry and English class at school,
Rejected by some young woman he'd been head-over-heels
Infatuated with, ever since he'd seen her last summer
At the park, the church, or the swimming pool, or asked
In so many words by the captain of the cheerleading squad
To get lost for good and never to call her on the phone again—

Not loved and laid, earlier that evening, in the back seat
Of the parked car he'd worked so hard at the auto parts store
On weekends and in the summers to buy on his own,
By some exceptionally ordinary but soft young woman
Who liked to bake cookies and work in the garden,
Some delicious-looking sweetie with the body of a goddess
Who wanted to put her charms to use as an actress,
Some flamboyant rebel artist with wildly tangled hair
And parents suspected of being card-carrying Communists,
Or some brilliant young feminist with a bright future
In internal medicine and a doctor's careful touch,
In any case the rolled-up windows making the car look
Completely enclosed in a white shroud in the moonlight
At the end of that road that ended abruptly at the reservoir,
A spot the locals and fishermen all called Cabbage Corner—

So down in the dumps that he thought he just might try
To go for broke this time and see if he could *break on through*
To the other side, just like the song by the Doors
That was playing on the radio when he did the deed had it,
Not to the other side of the barrier of sound
That they'd been breaking in the deserts of Nevada of late,
But the one full of nothing but sheep, clouds, and gowns,
Things that are white with a pure unfiltered light,
Escaping once and for all this cycle of suffering
That we know we should all be trying to shirk, leaving his flesh,
Pink bits of brain and crimson flecks of blood, smeared on
The steering wheel, splattered on the windshield, and marked
On the white sheet of my memory like a bruise-colored stain.