

BLOSSOM, TEXAS, 1992.

After supper, I step outside to avoid kitchen clean up.
Before the door closes behind me,
I'm enveloped in a cloud of thick hot air.
I gasp for breath.

Instinctively, I relax, exhale, and slowly begin to breathe again.
I sit on the stoop, eager to savor a fine cigar
to help achieve a metamorphosis from despondency and self-pity
from having lost the love of my life.

Moist air and cigar smoke coalesce to bathe me in a convalescent analgesic.
The porch steps descend to lawn bounded at the street by crepe myrtle trees.
I sit in shadow-less slumber, immersed in twilight's blue balm.
The night is heavy and liquid.
Womb-warmth and sticky darkness envelop me
in a milky placental cocoon.
Cigar vapors encapsulate my face.
My sinews loosen and unravel.
My mind slips, unhinged.

Fireflies! The air is filled with flickering incandescence
as fireflies float up from the grass.
Crickets chirp in the shrubbery.
Frogs belch at the bottom of a drainage ditch.
Cicadas emit a chorus of steady, rhythmic buzzing –
the males, naturally, are the noisy ones -
punctuated by the intermittent counterpoint of their "boing-bong."

Dogs bark down the road.
I am suspended in foliage, heavy at its verdant August zenith.
Trees in varying sizes and shapes spread garden-like
over a carpet of lush grass: live oaks, Spanish oaks, sweet gum,
crepe myrtle, dogwood, red bud, billowing weeping willows.
The edges of things -- of trees, houses, fences, and old cars –
are softened by embracing vines and bathed in a luminous, soft gray light.
Too dark now.

I have to *imagine* the crepe myrtle in bright bloom,
torches dressing the scene at stage left and right.
Eyes adjusted to the thickening darkness,
Smoke vents from the barrel smoker across the way
and disperses across the yard.
Sweet barbeque fragrance creeps towards me,
complementing the soft nutty, woody buzz of the cigar
that lingers on my tongue.

Blossom, Texas, 1992.

The night is tantalizing, intoxicating, a soft hallucinogenic,
inducing a feverish, languid repose.
Mosquitoes have come threatening, but
as I have yet to finish my cigar, I resist
retreating from my garden of nocturnal delights.

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MAMA WEPT AT VICKSBURG, 1985

Out of curiosity or remembrance, people visit, but not many,
as Vicksburg's not a glamorous place,
just a worn and slumbering spot
on the Great River.

One hundred and twenty-three years gone by,
the ground churned raw from siege bombardment
softened now and rolling under manicured grass,
the cannons merely decorative memorials to slaughter.

Walk into a sunken cave, a "living history" display,
depicting defiance despite starvation, and
wounds grotesque and rotting.

How different the memorial shrines:
marble monuments to the victor,
brass plaques for the vanquished.

How different the burial rites:
the fallen Federals, lie in rows of regiment and rank,
with names and dates in regulation stones
beneath adorning trees.

Mama rests a moment in shade
before moving on into withering heat.

Where are the graves of the fallen Grays?
she asks the Ranger guide.
He motions wide.
No particular place.
One over yonder.

Sudden tears fall
onto tiny bits of stone
etched with numbers,
signifying a common grave.

She feels and *sees*
as the sloughing, fetid flesh
of babes and little children
placed or pitched
into the pit.

She knows, and weeps. ///

THE OLD JANITOR, 1959.

A seventy-five-year old janitor walks his rounds all day
on a concrete floor at Aerojet General,
a sprawling aerospace plant in drab Azusa, California.

The old man empties trashcans and cleans toilets.
That was my father,
and that was the last job of his life.
It was his first job in several years.
Four years later he was dead.

Every weekday morning he'd get up before dawn
and dress in janitorial gray shirt and trousers
and climb into whatever car we had at the time,
and go to work and come back hurting.
His legs cramped. His spirit cramped.

It had been a long slide downhill from a successful and adventurous life.
He was old and ruined,
a husk of what he once had been,
but now he didn't have a choice.
We needed the money for food and rent.
We paid the rent sometimes,
but seldom on time.

I shouldn't have been angry with my old man
for not coming to my high school football games on Friday nights,
but I was.
I hoped he would come, at least to the home games,
but knew he wouldn't.
Hell, yes, the old man should have been there,
I thought at the time.

I was hurt and angry and sad.
Our brown stucco cracker box duplex rent house
was only a level walking block from the stadium.
I didn't know how bad his legs hurt.
My legs were young and strong;
his were old and frail.

Mom didn't go to the games either, but I wasn't hurt.
Moms didn't count as much as dads did when it came to football.

Little brother, Jimmy, believed the old man had an important job, because
the old man had lots of keys.

The Old Janitor, 1959.

Jimmy learned later that the more important the job,
the fewer keys, or none at all.

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THE DEAD ACROSS THE LAND.

My people, a string of country graves across the land,
remains of long-stemmed rag weed women,
buried beyond finding, beyond touch, beyond recovery.

Sitting still, seeking less what lies ahead;
seeking more that lies behind.
Go backwards to see and savor the spirits of
the overlooked and unrecovered,
and feel how much is lost forever.
Go backwards and find the things
I left or lost along the way.

Go backwards from a new and different vantage point,
a porch, a desk, a chair, a fragrant, sunken garden,
an arm's length vista,
to fill my empty sockets,
with form and color, with faces,
to substitute the imagined
for the actual but unrealized.

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THE FIRST TIME I HEARD ELVIS.

The first time I heard His voice
my head exploded
and my body morphed
into a new dimension.

His heavy voice
came disembodied
from a jukebox
to fill every inch
of the shack
at Foothill Boulevard and Madison Ave,
Monrovia, California
where we ate and hung out after school.

What is this?
I asked myself in 1956.
Everything
about the voice,
the sound,
the song,
was new.

He sang about
some Heartbreak Hotel
down on Lonely Street.
I was a lowly high school freshman
and knew all about lonely,
but no one sang about lonely.

Pat Boone sang puppy love
in his powder blue sweater
and white buck shoes.
Pat's voice smiled.

This new guy wasn't smiling.
I couldn't see him,
had never seen him,
but I knew he wasn't wearing
no powder blue sweater
and white shoes.
And He wasn't prancing.
He was sweating music
out of every pore.
He was reeking, too.

THE FIRST TIME I HEARD ELVIS.

He wasn't clean.
He was BAD.

He was from Mississippi.
Mississippi?!
Music from Mississippi?
Nobody came from Mississippi,
swamps and snakes,
hicks and hayseeds,
crackers and low-lifes,
Tobacco Road.
My ignorance was abysmal.
I didn't know shit.

Music was born in L.A.
Pat Boone,
Jan and Dean,
The Beach Boys,
guys who might have come
from elsewhere,
but they came *to* L.A.
and they *became* L.A.

I didn't know there was life beyond L.A.
and I didn't even like L.A.,
felt out of place
and hungered
for a different place,
a place with grit.

In His music I found grit,
with a bonus - sorrow.
I had sorrow in my life.
I heard sorrow when I heard Him.
Grit and sorrow.

His music was born of the Blues,
but I didn't know what the Blues was,
or much about black music,
what we called Negro music.
Little Richard
was alive and screaming
off the charts,
and he was

THE FIRST TIME I HEARD ELVIS.

black music then,
but he didn't speak to me.

Little Richard of the glistening Pompadour
was loud and fast and hot.
My world was slow, static,
dull and morbid.

Elvis burrowed into a raw nerve
with his song of loneliness and sorrow.
His music reached for me,
found me
and hit me hard.

His music –
the cosmic fusion
of Rockabilly,
black Blues,
black and white
Southern gospel music,
the bastard mongrel child
of mixed and blended lineage,
and Mississippi born,
like Him.

Elvis Aaron Presley
from hill country Mississippi
opened the door into the Dark,
and flooded my white world with black music.

*Listen up, y'all,
this cracker from Tupelo, Mississippi is here,
bigger than life,
and I'm the messenger*

*that's gonna rip all y'all's soul wide open,
change y'all forever,
you and the whole damn country.*

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