

The Ingredients

Not just the bad-boy looks and the raw physical energy,
The dimple in the chin and the Cupid bow of the lips
That put you in mind of the statue of David
On the piazza in Florence; not just the perfect teeth
That seemed to twinkle and gleam in synch with his eyes
And the lubricated swivel of the well-tuned hips;
And not just the perfect timing, the way he turned a phrase,
The cultivated delivery of imagery and rhyme,
Or the ability to seem both innocent and ornery;
No, not only the black coiffed wave of the duck-tailed hair
And the sleazy-looking aviator shades he wore to hide
The fear of loss and failure that he could only confide
To his famously close mother; and not just the suits either,
Embroidered with sequins, big in the shoulders
And gathered at the waist, apparently made by the tailor
Of a matador in Vegas; nor the inevitable blue suede shoes
And the big gaudy rings on his fingers (if not his toes)
That twinkled most when beams of glitzy strobe lights
Searched him down on stage with the same array of hues,
Ruby reds, emerald greens, diamond whites, and celestial blues,
That caught motes of smoke swirling in the light grays, too;
And not just the blue notes that he could sing so well
In those lyrical tunes you still take note of now to hear—
But the ability of this hybrid creation, as genealogically mixed
As anyone not completely Native American, to integrate
A multitude of influences in our mutt-made nation,
Trying to make the most of a bad situation
With that Scots-Irish lyricism and that African vibration,
Singing about a variety of anonymous women
In a single album's medley, in covers and originals
Of various moods and tempos, from the bluesier tunes
To the rattles and rolls and the two-step, slow, and do-
The-twist numbers, modifying his voice to suit the theme
With a velvet vibrato in his libidinal baritone,
Balancing the influences of gospel, country, rockabilly, blues,
And the old English ballad like an international tourist
Using three or four languages in one worked-up sentence
Or a French chef tossing lettuces, tuna, potatoes, green beans,
Capers, olives, tomatoes, red onions, and hard-boiled eggs
With a vinaigrette dressing in a Nicoise salad.

The Satyr

I play them over and over again under self-hypnosis
On the television we watched from the living room couch
With pizza or popcorn, with hamburgers and French fries,
With Campbell's soup, Coke, and ice cream sundaes,
Every Sunday evening—those famous recordings
Of Elvis Presley performing on the Ed Sullivan Show,
The satyr of the sideburns doing some of his recent hits
Like "Jailhouse Rock" and "Hound Dog," "Heartbreak Hotel"
And "Shake, Rattle, and Roll," for the middle-American audience,
Dimpling his cheeks, puckering his lips, swiveling
On his blue suede shoes, and gyrating his magnificent hips
For the love-starved women of our sex-obsessed nation
And their immediate liberation from the gray contradictory
Forces of repression—for the lime-lit delight
Of *babes, gals, dames, and broads*, ready and willing young women
Who'd waited in line for tickets to the CBS studio
In mid-town Manhattan, but also for the rapturous
Karaoke of gals in their split-level family rooms
And arts-and-crafts bungalows all across the country—
From hayloft honeys in Nebraska to clam-shack cuties
In Rhode Island and Massachusetts, from apple-cheeked lovelies
In Washington state and the hillsides of Vermont
To surfboard bikini beauties in southern California
And heartbroken southern belles and dance-mad black girls
In Alabama and Mississippi, and for the deep infatuation
Of pregnant girls in bedrooms decorated with posters
Of Elvis's horrible movies, as well as for the freedom
Of party-animal chicks on red vinyl barstools
In cheap bars, hamburger joints, and clean-cut soda fountains,
And for all of those *femme fatales* who were born that way
In streetcar suburbs, university zones, red-light districts,
Blue-collar boroughs, and urban bastions of bohemianism—
Even for the vicarious pleasure of those few mature women
Of respectable bearing, tasteful ladies of the middle class,
Putting their bridge hands face-down on the card table,
When their husbands are out at poker games with the boys,
And rising from their folding chairs to do the Boogy-Woogy,
The Mashed Potato, the Jerk, and the wild Watusi
In living rooms in the leafy 'burbs, just beyond the edges
Of our soon-to-be-abandoned and razed-to-the-ground cities.

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
Gary used to put to such good effect in lounges, bars, and clubs
In soft ballads sung to his own keyboard accompaniment.

That was back in the 70s in Columbus, of course,
When Gary was fresh from college and still fairly new
To what was then already becoming a refuge for gays and lesbians
Afraid to stay home in the conservative county seats
And farm towns of Ohio—when you had to be afraid
That you'd incite someone like that hypothetical hippie-redneck,
Who for all Gary knew had grown up in the closet too,
To see that layered orange hair of his, those bracelets
On his wrist, and those rich brown eyes that used to twinkle,
I swear, like kaleidoscopic mandalas of purple sequins
Whenever we dropped acid and floated into the skies
On the psychedelic stuff that had taken Elvis by surprise.

Memphis Bus Driver

Much as I might have wished, the epitome of *agape*,
The *par exemplar* of the Christian notion of universal love,
In the downbeat streets of Memphis that day,
Was not going to be the teenaged single mother I'd seen
Smoking a cigarette and pushing a carriage in the early morning
With a rehearsed look of resignation on her polished face
Up a street that brought to mind the pictures of Soweto
That I'd seen in the papers in recent years, houses boarded up
And garbage in the gutters, evidence of our own
American apartheid, the poor of darker color suffering
Indignities like they did in the squalid South African ghetto;
Not the tough-looking black cat in the spotless white chef's hat
Working the grill at the barbecue pit where I ate breaded catfish
And drank a cold beer for supper, fresh from seeing the site
Of Beale Street juke joints famous for hosting acoustic
Blues gigs by sharecroppers fresh from their Delta porches;
And not the old dude with the walker who'd emerged
From the darkness of a corner bar near the Sun Studio building
With his eyes far too red in the way too early morning—
But the dignified driver of the downtown Memphis local,
A sweet chunky black guy who swerved over and squeaked to a stop
When he saw me at the curb near the gate of Graceland
And hissed open the door, not because he brought to mind
The Muddy Waters I'd seen in pictures on the faded covers
Of rock albums commissioned by shaggy Brit invaders
With electric guitars, but simply because he was the kind
Of down-home brother with that thigh-slapping goodwill
Who could say to me in the handicapped seat, in all sincerity,
In a voice that could have melted the butter on my bread,
Not knowing that I'd been to the Lorraine Motel already,
When I asked him what I ought to spend the day exploring
Now that I'd found Graceland *closed on Mondays and holidays*,
"I'd check out the site of Reverend King's assassination
If I was you, man. You prolly heard of the Lorraine Motel?
They in the process of turning it into a civil rights museum.
But wherever you go, better use your head in the streets, my man,
Cuz like my mama done told me when I was just a kid,
They's some mighty unhappy folks on the streets of this city,
Sufferin', as I see it, from a lack of basic human pity."

Perfect Memory

Eager to see if I could sense, or at the very least imagine,
The presence of Elvis, the singing faun himself,
In the cockpit of his private plane, parked in the grass
Across the street from Graceland, or if I could detect
Some flaw, glitch, or excess of character in the meters, levers, dials,
And switches, or in the custom design features
And small decorative touches that you expect to find
In the possessions of the rich, I stooped to squint my eyes
And cup my face to the fogged-up window on the pilot's side.

I hoped to get a glimpse of a guitar-shaped drink tray
On the console perhaps, or maybe black leather seats,
A forest-green steering wheel, a sequined dash and control panel,
And—whatever the case—purple shag carpeting.

*

I hadn't suspected that the house of the famous satyr
Of the seedy sideburns, swiveling hips, and ducktail would be *closed*
On Mondays and holidays. and since there was nothing really
Of value to see in the cockpit after all, I should have just turned
Back toward the bus stop where I had been let off
Ten short minutes before. But I was charged by the same
Irrepressible more than morbid or perverse curiosity
That had charmed me completely one fresh spring Saturday
Afternoon of my adolescence, in 1967, I think,
When I spent a good half-hour squinting through the window
Of some mangled metal wreckage they'd towed in that morning
To the parking lot of the Gulf station next to Lawson's market
On State Street in Westerville, remnants of a crash
That everyone in that not very eventful town
In central Ohio had been talking about that morning.

*

An older guy from the high school had died in that car
The night before, just some kid around my sister's age, I think,
Someone she'd known from algebra class or homeroom,
A victim of recklessness or pent-up adolescent rage
Making a head-on collision with a tree in a field,
A burr oak, I imagine, a sugar maple, box elder, or sycamore even
That cows had used for shade since the mid-19th century
When the big abandoned barns we used to fool around in
In fallowing fields on the edge of town were built—
An eager boy on the verge of being a grown man

Out on the joy ride that he liked to take on Friday nights
In the rural area near the Delaware County line
Swerving to avoid a herd of deer in the headlights.

That's how the official explanation from the police had it,
As reported by my friend Tim Duffey, son of the guy
Who owned and operated the Shamrock Towing Service.

But I think it may have been more likely, in retrospect
Given the distance of that tree in the field from the road
And my perfect hindsight vision more than forty years later,
That he was acting on an impulse to put an end to his misery
And head straight across the field on purpose toward the tree.

*

More immersed in the songs of the Stones and the Beatles
Than I was in those of any dated redneck doo-wop crooner
Of tunes from Mississippi, I had come to Graceland as much
To make fun of him as anything. I hadn't seen
The brilliance of those early 50s Sun recordings yet,
And for all I remember, as I looked through the window
Of the cockpit of Elvis's plane, I was humming some tune
I'd heard on the radio the year I looked through the window
Of that wrecked car, maybe even whispering that same rebellious
Verse from "Satisfaction" that everybody loves so much,
That cry against the totalitarian commercialism
That, now that I think about it, had sold me the record:

*When I'm drivin' in my car, / And a man comes on the radio, /
Telling me more and more / About some useless information, /
Supposed to drive my imagination — / I can't get no!*

Or maybe I was muttering the inane, motor-headed chorus
From "Baby, You Can Drive My Car," same as I had
Thirty years before as I looked into the driver's side
Of the Dodge Charger, the Chevy Impala, or the Pontiac GTO.

*

I didn't know that kid, and neither, I think, did my sister.

But if I recall, he had an odd last name, the same as that
Of one of the cardinal sins in fact. Not Envy or Pride.
Not Gluttony or Greed. And not Wrath or Sloth. But the one
That rhymes, as my friend J.R. Thomas back
In Columbus reminds me, with that other beautiful
Biblical word *dust*, as in *ashes to ashes, dust to dust*.

I think it's just a poetic accident that his last name
Happened to coincide with the name of the sin
Notorious for causing grief among young men.

That had certainly been the case for me already,
And I was only three or four years past the age of ten!

*

And I don't know if I wondered at the time, as much
As I do now, if his death was really a suicide—
Whether he was *fed up to here* with this frustrating life,
Sick of the constant struggle, and rejected so much,
So crushed, depressed, and humiliated, that he felt
There was really just nowhere left for a guy to hide.

But I can imagine now, in a way that I couldn't then,
What his life might have been like, what he must have felt like—
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 perhaps denied a movie date
By the tenth girl he'd asked in a row, told he was a loser
By luckier guys at a poker party on a patio in the country
For approaching attractive girls he didn't even know
In the hall between chemistry and English class at school,
Jilted by a young woman he'd been head-over-heels
Infatuated with, ever since he'd seen her last summer
At the park, the church, the ball-field, or the swimming pool,
Or asked by the captain of the cheerleading squad
To get lost for good and *never* to call her on the phone again.

*

For all I know, he really did just lose control, just like
The Westerville cops and the Shamrock Towing Service said.

But if so, I hope for his sake that he'd been loved and laid,
Earlier that evening, in the back seat of the parked car
That he'd worked so hard at one of the local auto parts stores
On weekends and in the summers to buy on his own,
Either 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, I also hope that the windows were rolled up
To keep out the bogeyman, so utterly ubiquitous
In Lovers' Lanes back then, known for a fact to haunt
The graveyard near there, at the end of Cabbage Road,
Surprising young lovers just when he had finally managed
To unbutton with multiple fumbles her blue plaid summer dress.

*

I remember once or twice, a couple of years later
When I learned how to drive, being so down in the dumps
That I thought I just might try to go for broke myself some time
And see if I could *break on through to the other side*,
As the Doors song had it, of whatever obstacle stood
Between me and peace of mind like the barrier of sound
That they'd been breaking in the deserts of Nevada of late;
That I might escape once and for all this cycle of suffering
In hopes of finding a place of pure unfiltered light
Where sheep, clouds, gowns, and everything is white,
Leaving my flesh, pink bits of brain and crimson smears
Of blood, flecked on the padded black steering wheel,
Splattered on the windshield, and marked on the white sheet
Of someone's perfect memory like a bruise-colored stain.