

What's Your Pleasure?

Hot meal, hot shower, or a warm bed?
Ain't got none but offered
just one. Been kickin'
that round close to
twenty years now.

Unhook my bowtie, loosen
the monkey suit, waiter hands
me a five for bussin'. Was
a sophomore when I was
a senior ain't that
a kick? Bartender throws
me a ten, got a
Monty Millions air now.

Hit the corner shop
cold slice, a coke,
and some smokes.
\$7.45. Try to hustle
a kid at 9-ball, scratch,
\$5.45. Swipe
some TP, wash
my pits in the john,
a French bath as they say.

Hop the Septa to the all-night
laundromat, no doors, January
midnight so cold it'd
freeze oil, dryer's cough
steam, bathroom locked,
old Korean lady watches
me change, sees it all.

Wash the monkey suit,
no soap, pull
some chairs close
to the dryer, permanent press,
try to sleep, back hurts,
damned chairs, quarters,
permanent press, damned chairs,
quarters, permanent press, damned
chairs, cop on a stroll, move

along, quarters, permanent press,
try to sleep, damned chairs.

70 cents and the dawn.

Now I take showers that last
for days and bleed
the whole county dry, scolding
hot water braises
me medium-well. I pull
blankets over my face and sink
into the mattress, deep down
into the box spring where it loves
me. Part of me is still out there,
still in that laundromat, asking
that question, twenty years on, only
narrowed it down to two.

Settin' the Pace

Lunch break, half-smoke
and a strawberry lemonade.
Too good today mama.

I step out onto the sun baked U Street
where the riotous rumbles simmered
long before Dr. King's soul
bid us farewell up an ethereal stairwell.

"Bye Bye Blackbird"

I walk by the fenced in park
where the police once made
a young brother palm the granite
before cracking him open
like a pomegranate
to appease the Ivory Venus.

"You Leave Me Breathless"

Round the way to Ray's Records,
a browned mausoleum of Jazz,
Blues, Motown, Funk, 45's, 33's,
stacks and stacks of Stax tracks and wax,
piled and crated in meticulous chaos.
And old Ray, the legend behind the counter
with two bad hips and a Kool dangling
from his lips, Impressions swaying on the spindle
and Curtis wailing through curls of smoke.

"I Hear a Rhapsody"

The buttery bellow of an alto sax calls my name,
wild and frantic like the death throes
of an ancient, languageless civilization.
Snares loose and rickety, the brush
striking the head like an armor-plated
rhino ravishing a trash compactor,
bass line pulsing so deep in the chest
I wonder if it can stop a heart
and if it'd be so bad if it did.

"You Don't Know What Love Is"

I stand and hear the music of the ages
in front of a door rusted shut and boarded up,
and behind the spray-painted windows I see
the pained, faded face of John Coltrane
on a poster, his brow jutting outwardly

in frustration as though he knew
that *A Love Supreme* would be too good to last.

The Sweeper

I sit on the corner aimless
and blameless, a braised shit with
a raised fist. Change, miss?
Change this? Payment for pavement?
My juices sink into stone as
a grave forms around me.

She stands on the corner adjacent, wearing
40 like armor, her face worn and cracked
like a mask of elbows, a muddy moor against
the highlighter sun of a city worker's vest.
Her hair a frayed overgrown thicket of grey
and dusty brown, billowing against the electric
yellow of her hand-held street sweeper.

Before her feet leaves and butts, grease
and grounds, the civil secretions scurry. She is
Armageddon. With the cadence
of an old soldier she makes
that corner hers despite everything.
And when she notices
me sat there, my frank stare, holding
a sign asking for cab fare, the shame
of it all is more than I can bear.

“The Harlem Hellfighter”

I.

The constant, hellish shellings cough and choke
until the sky is overcast with smoke,
and metal filings rain down on my back
as crawling blood and gore fills every crack.
These trenches, veins of graves, on Belgian land
ain't nothing to this Hudson River man,
where not a soul here looks a thing like me
even without the sun it's all I see.
I signed my life away for this here task,
three squares, a gun, and neatly polished shoes,
to snipe the Huns and nick this copper flask.
To find my rhythm where I leave the blues.

II.

I travel home to take what must be mine
for all the blood I spilled across the Rhine.
My woman holds me closely to her breast
until the nightmares pass and I can rest.
She wipes away the tears with gentle hand
though she could never truly understand.
We swoon and jive and swing the cabaret
and soon I have a son that's on the way.
I seek what this new country has in store
and find she's just the same as was before.
My skin don't show just what my soul is worth.
I leave my flask but grab my polished shoes,
to watch the snow fall down on Harlem Earth
and lose my rhythm where I find the blues.

[APPLAUSE]

I will die in a hospital bed in whatever town I find myself in when the winds which have carried me decide to hold their breath. It will be a bland midday, and an old game show will play on a tiny television with cash and prizes, beeps and beats, a new vacuum and a ventilator and a live studio audience.

The host will stand before me in a suit like a thrift store couch as models walk past my amazing Craftmatic adjustable bed which reclines to any position and has built-in heating massage *how much do you want to bid?*

Contestants will look flustered in front of the cameras, unsure how to exist like someone just jammed a dozen tubes into orifices old and new. A glittering wheel will spin, forcefully, the lights and numbers like blades cutting through the air waves, fluttering by like days. My pulse slowing with the wheel, beeps, becoming labored, less frequent until it all stops and the audience explodes with applause.

I'm sorry but we do have some lovely parting gifts.