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With the Blues on Their Minds

Robert Johnson's echoed feet, soft in the street.

His Blues paint mud-soaked memory.

His cry, wounded, calls out to you and to me.

Robert Johnson's feet echo soft in the street.

With the Blues on her mind, Frida Lomax walks through the Delta Blues Museum Bar and Coffeeshop, turns on the lights above oil paintings of musicians who died in material poverty, consumed by knife wounds, calloused hands, liver disease. She sets up the folding card tables stacked by the corner so the tourists who roam the place might feel they're sitting across from Robert Johnson the night Lucifer called him home with poisoned sip of bourbon and a frantic whisper. Frida sweeps the unvarnished floor next to the short counter that doubles for a bar, vacuums the frayed gray rug that stands in for a stage, wipes the dust turning to grease where drum kits have rubbed through to the concrete foundation. Tapes a poster over a new hole forming in the black-painted drywall, unfolds a couple of steel chairs on the rug, straightens up the microphone stand. Some pink fiberglass has fallen from the ceiling, so she dusts off the aluminum sculptures scattered around the vast, wide-open room.

As Frida scrubs the deep-set brown stains on the side of the coffee canister, Lucky Speltner drops in, short dreadlocks spilling over the wide pink

bandana wrapped around his forehead, holding a blue guitar in his hand and says, hey Frida, you wanna hear my new song?

Sure, Lucky, she says. You playing just for me today?

Lucky smiles, exposes his teeth, the coffee-stained rows slightly misaligned. I'm always playin for you Frida. Woke up with the Blues on my mind.

Robert Johnson's echoed feet, soft in the street.

The Devil offers him the Blues for a fee.

His cry, wounded, calls out to you and to me.

Robert Johnson's feet echo soft in the street.

With the Blues on her mind, Frida watches Lucky Speltner sit down on one of the folding chairs and pluck out a few out-of-tune notes. He tightens the strings on the guitar a bit, belts out a Yeaaaaaaahya, shrugs his shoulder into a warmed-up position. His foot taps a dull beat on the stage carpet as he catches his rhythms and his body sways as he plays. The notes charge solid as they spill into the air, pushing and pulling reality around them, warping the veil between this world and the next.

Frida's body begins swinging with the music, the figure-eight scrubbing patterns grow regular and rhythmic as the Blues release into the air. Her hips undulate and her hand moves the worn rag down the counter until her final opening task is complete. She pours herself a coffee, black with two sugars, and moves the tip jar, really just a calcium-stained water bucket with holes rusted

through the bottom, next to the stage rug. It's time for her to sit behind the counter on a stool and listen to Lucky play his Blues. A drum solo palpitates through her calloused fingers onto the wooden bar to accompany the mood.

A few tourists walk in through the doors, seemingly drawn in by the voltaic soul of Lucky Speltner dancing in electric blue vibrations on the Museum's floor as Lucky metamorphoses into a living jukebox running on musical communion. He absorbs the energy of his audience, filters it back out with an additive property of spiritual transcendence. All it takes is one person's head or heel bouncing with the rhythms to keep him going.

It isn't long before Stevie Pear and Jackie Navarro join him on the makeshift stage, each jamming along in steel folding chairs that have wilted in the Mississippi heat. Stevie sets up his drum kit without Lucky noticing while Jackie sits between them strumming a cigar box guitar she built at home. They follow his rhythms, match his harmonies, play to the growing crowd and their souls leave their bodies to join Lucky's in neon display over the dance floor as Frida makes her rounds.

Frida takes down the coffee orders of some of the tourists who say they've come to wake their synapses in response to the spiritual groves they've come across. The younger folx start to complain that Frida doesn't have lattes or macchiatos or anything more than black coffee and sugar packets, seemingly unaware that Clarksdale is a town phased out of modern time, more present in an era belonging to sharecroppers seeking solvency, but they quickly point out to one another that this place isn't about the coffee—it's about the Blues being

laid down before them, the sacrifices of gods and devils who traipse the aesthetic of scarcity and crumbling paint which forever haunts this city.

Robert Johnson's echoed feet, soft in the street.

A guitar neck presses against his smooth cheek.

His cry, wounded, calls out to you and to me.

Robert Johnson's feet echo soft in the street.

With the Blues on her mind, Frida Lomax shakes the massive hand of Ray Parker, who sometimes stops in for a cup of coffee before opening his juke joint next to the cemetery. It's said Ray communes with the spirits of that graveyard nightly, asking the legends of the genre to imbue the next few generations with ghostly muses as they come through his club. He claims he's a medium for the spirits of decades past, present, and future. A nexus point through which the Blues perpetuates itself indefinitely.

Ray never waits for Frida to pour his coffee; Frida never charges him. She considers his coffee a tribute to one of the gatekeepers of the Blues world, as though Ray could snap his fingers and the rotted studs in the walls would snap and as Ray fills his coffee, Frida notes something different in the old man. A lighter step, a few less pounds, maybe. Perhaps some regained twinkle sparking from behind dark sunglasses. How you doing today, Ray? she asks.

Woke up with the Blues on my mind, Frida. Like the graveyard spirits escaped their iron fence when these young people started playin. Something magic in the air. Didn't even need my cane this morning.

Yeah, Lucky is magnetic, isn't he? Oh, Bullfrog just called. Said he might be stopping by later.

Ray's eyebrows lifted. Oh, that boy is good too.

Robert Johnson's echoed feet, soft in the street.

He stalks the gutters, looking for a new love to meet.

His cry, wounded, calls out to you and to me.

Robert Johnson's feet echo soft in the street.

With the Blues on her mind, Frida Lomax welcomes Bullfrog Iglesias, who comes in around the time people begin asking for beer instead of coffee. Lucky has spent his energy for the morning and crumples in sudoric exhaustion on the floor. Bullfrog pulls out his guitar, a brand-new Fenton Deluxe, and fingers a new tune. He's young, but he's a prodigy, and the first time Frida had seen the man play, it had been in the cotton fields over by the Sharecropper Inn just outside town. One of the owners set up some amps connected to extension cords and invited people to watch from the roads on both sides of the field while they filmed Bullfrog for a YouTube video. Ray says he was disgruntled about it at first—filming musicians destroys the creative conscience, he claims—but his tune changed when he saw Bullfrog play on the cotton-studded range.

That day at the Delta Blues Museum Bar and Coffeeshop when Bullfrog strums his first note and belts his first lyric, the quivering of the strings shakes loose the clasp on Frida's bra as the last seal on the veil that separates the living and the dead breaks and Frida's heart beats in concert with the Delphic chords and the spirits of Blues past enter through the doors, filling the room with a thick fog obscuring and concealing the art behind its fumes.

A translucent Junior Kimbrough appears in a white undershirt during the first hour, judging Bullfrog's cover of "Meet Me in the City" while Muddy Waters deals a poker game next to the stage and Howlin' Wolf tugs on the Army uniform he's inexplicably wearing. An hour-and-a-half into the set, Frida realizes she's surrounded by the very demons and deities she prays to every morning she unlocks the Museum's doors.

Robert Johnson's echoed feet, soft in the street.

His shadow strays behind him, his world's grown bleak.

His cry, wounded, calls out to you and to me.

Robert Johnson's feet echo soft in the street.

With the Blues on her mind, Frida scans the faces of the spirits in the crowd and identifies figures from the artwork she's surrounded by each day. Big Joe Williams' nine-string guitar is laid up in the corner next to where he's bowed over a makeshift amp, attaching an aluminum pie plate. Bessie May Williams fans herself in a chair next to him, eyeing him like the husband he'd once been

rumored to be. Rosa Lee Hill and Leadbelly trade whiskey shots close to the stage, their bare toes touching. And Robert Wilkins reads a leather-bound bible in the corner, his face beading in a dull sweat.

The history of the blues awaits its return to the run-down dais.

Around mid-afternoon, Robert Wilkins jerks himself to his feet and walks out the front door, disappearing into the dimly filtered sunlight where Son House busks for a man whose hat looks vaguely familiar to Frida. When the man in the wool felt trilby walks into the museum, the crowd hushes, beer bottles sitting on tabletops ice over, and Bullfrog's guitar falls out of tune.

The man smiles as the air around him glitters with molecules of ice. A shadow darker than the shade of the room follows the man. It's connected to his heels yet somehow independent of his movement, flickering and fluttering in nonhuman twilight. Frida's memory sparks.

This is Robert Johnson, she realizes, his ephemeral youth persisting beyond the grave, a sign of the crossroads deal he once made. His hat sits askew atop his head, and the brim dips slightly over his left eye. A watercolor painting of him hangs behind the register in a rustic cedar frame draped with a slip of gold lamé.

Pulling up a chair at Muddy Water's table, Robert Johnson addresses the still-silent room: Y'all get back to playin. No need to quit havin fun on my account.

Bullfrog's guitar squelches back in tune and the music begins to play. Leadbelly pours himself another shot and Willie Brown dances with a white woman near the stage. The Blues finds its rhythms again.

Frida reaches into the shelves under the bar's counter. She's learned from Ray to keep a bottle of quality bourbon for when someone special might show up. Previously, she'd assumed Ray meant a rock star or a supermodel in fishnet stockings or maybe even Morgan Freeman, but now, in this moment, she recognizes as so many have over the decades, as her father and grandfather knew when they decorated his portrait's frame, Robert Johnson is luminous, his calloused hands evidence of the grief cultivated in his work. He's the someone special.

Robert Johnson's echoed feet, soft in the street.

He strums his guitar to a gilded beat.

His cry, wounded, calls out to you and to me.

Robert Johnson's feet echo soft in the street.

With the Blues on her mind, Frida Lomax watches Leadbelly walk up to the stage and tap the broad shoulder of Bullfrog, whose face freezes in an icy trepidity. Leadbelly asks to play a little something, to which Bullfrog obliges, nodding his head in quick, sweat-fueled assent.

Leadbelly sits down on the folding chair and strums the opening chords to "Where Did You Sleep Last Night." In death, he says, this has become one of his

favorites, mostly because he loves Kurt Cobain's cover. As he hits the refrain—*My girl, my girl, don't lie to me. Tell me where did you sleep last night*—Frida pours a shot of bourbon each for Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters. It's on the house, she says, though there isn't much of a house.

The spirits throw their heads back as the whiskey flows down their throats and they gasp with the first bit of liquor they've drunk in death. You didn't poison that, did you, beautiful? Robert Johnson asks, his Blues rippling in a short chuckle.

No sir, I wouldn't dare, Frida says.

Well, then I suppose I can trust you. I haven't slept with nobody here's wife. I was wondering though, where's your husband at? He lets out a reverberant laugh, smoke forming lightly in the air above his lips as the bourbon appears to warm his frozen bowels.

Frida places a hand on her right hip and cocks her head. My wife is visiting her sick mother, she says, emphasizing the word *wife*.

The corners of Robert Johnson's smile drop for a moment, and he scratches his chin with a thumbnail. His smile returns and he asks, would you mind goin and fetching me a cigar? His voice lingers on the *ee* sound before the *g* in *cigar*, and he touches the back of Frida's hand with a sleeted finger.

Frida flinches, the chill from his touch rises through her spine. Probably some subconscious recognition she shouldn't let the spirit of a man who'd sold his soul to Satan get too comfortable in a museum filled with ghosts or maybe disgust at the man not recognizing her hint. But this is Robert Johnson, she

thinks, so she asks Taylor Reed to buy a cigar from a shop down the street. Don't you go trying to give that to Robert Johnson yourself, she says.

Taylor doesn't listen, of course. Frida's taken her fourth shot of the special bourbon with Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters when Taylor returns and hands the cigar directly to his ghostly idol.

Robert Johnson takes the cigar, lights it with a flash of fire from his fingertips. Well, thank you, young man, he says, and puffs on the cigar, sets it in the ash tray. How would you like some guitar lessons? I have a friend who can make you a great deal. Robert Johnson smiles again, a fleck of unpropitious intent glitzing from his tear duct.

Taylor's opens his mouth, his eyes light up, but Frida steps into the conversation before he can reply. I don't think that's such a great idea, she says, besides, he's already taking lessons from Lucky.

Alright, alright, Robert Johnson says. Just let me know if you change your mind. He pats the concave crown of the trilby with his middle finger.

Taylor pulls up a chair and keeps quiet as the poker game goes on. It isn't long before the sky outside bedims, the breathless night sets in. The lampposts illuminate the sidewalk in a warm, muted hue as throngs of people walk by the Museum in their transit from one venue to the next and the music of cerulean ghosts float through the air in electric currents. Inside the Museum, Frida stands watch over the tidal movements of Blues past, smoke wafting past the neon lights, voices rising and falling as the spirits take their turns on the stage.

Big Joe Williams' pie-plate amp rattles the empty beer can he's strung to it. It takes him a couple songs to warm up, but by the time he hits "Baby, Please Don't Go," he's got a couple of the tourists up and clapping. Memphis Minnie follows up with a hard, strong rendition of "Bumble Bee" before relinquishing the stage to Big Mama Thornton, who drops the microphone on the stage after signing "Hound Dog." Frida hears her ask a table near the stage if Elvis had really done her song better. Charley Patton tries to keep up with Howlin' Wolf during "Smoke Stack Lightning", and Elmore James covers "Dust My Broom," his eyes focused in on Robert Johnson's table.

Frida looks around, realizes the tourists have quit dropping in. There's fewer and fewer of the living sitting at the card tables she's set up and she's forgotten when the last person asked for a beer. She recognizes on that day, as happens whenever the Blues manifest in Clarksdale, the novelty of the scene seems to have dissipated with the memory of who these specters once were, and the tourists are out walking the streets of town, looking for the next new thing.

Robert Johnson's echoed feet, soft in the street.

His head bows in repetitive defeat.

His cry, wounded, calls out to you and to me.

Robert Johnson's feet echo soft in the street.

With the Blues on her mind, Frida Lomax spots a white man in a three-piece tweed suit and tan fedora who has emerged from the crowd roaming

outside and entered the museum through the front door. He leans against the bar counter, eyes green against a cadaverous, pale face. Frida doesn't think the man could be a ghost—she doesn't recognize him from any of the memorabilia distributed across the Museum—but the man carries a century-old look of menace. Maybe a hipster lost while meandering through town, trying to get laid, she whispers to herself. The bourbon vapors floating with her breath stun her nose hairs and she shakes her head until she feels in control of herself again.

The man orders a beer and a shot of bourbon, pays with a twenty-dollar bill. He sits in the darkest corner of the Museum under a solitary incandescent bulb. He drinks his shot, sips his beer, stares in the direction of Robert Johnson's table. Frida senses a stale detachment meeting the warm updraft coming from Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters. It thickens the fog that continues to rise in the faint light. Frida pulls another beer out of the refrigerator for herself, returns to the poker game.

The fog grows denser and denser in the edgeless radiation. The music fades from the stage and the spirits lose their consistency and evaporate further into translucence. The night seems to be coming to a close. The veil stitches itself up again, reclaiming the ghosts it had lost through the day. Frida slips a quarter of a lime into her beer as she walks back in the direction of Robert Johnson's table.

A pained yell reverberates through the fog. You son-of-a-bitch, she hears. You stabbed me.

Frida recognizes Robert Johnson's voice and rushes to his chair, passing the white man in the fedora who's jogging in the direction of the front door.

Robert Johnson, body supine on the concrete floor, guides her hand to the hole in his chest. Frida presses on the wound though there is nothing there. No jagged skin, no organ discharging from the wound. Only fog filling the hole where the knife has been exhumed and a pulsating touch of red paint. Robert Johnson laughs, stretches his neck to kiss Frida's jaw. On instinct, Frida grabs the knife lying next to his body and plunges it back into the wound. She pulls the knife out, presses her hand against wound and keeps repeating I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

Robert Johnson laughs, straightens his body, lets his small of his back arch away from the concrete. You know I'm cursed, right? There ain't no killin what the Devil's already got. I'll be back at ya, Frida. Don't you worry about me.

Frida wipes her cheek, leaving a burgundy mark that smells of iron and bourbon, as the fog ferries the ghosts back through the veil. Muddy Waters grips her shoulder in a formidable goodbye as he walks past and Leadbelly's guitar hits the stage rug with a twang. And immobile in Frida's arms, Robert Johnson grows dimmer and dimmer until nothing spiritual or physical remains. He becomes as he was in the beginning of his own true story—invisible, unknowable, unreachable.

Robert Johnson's echoed feet, soft in the street.

They're covering his body in a pristine white sheet.

Still, his cry, wounded, calls to you and to me.

Robert Johnson's feet echo soft in the street.

*They say the Devil is the one who made him free
Out at the Crossroads under that tree
Where he sold his soul for a little fee,
His art transformed, a dark commodity.*

*They say the Devil is the one who made him free.
But the veil offered him a false key.
There was no way out of his poverty.
Robert's soul reduced, white man's property.*

*Now his wounded Blues call out to you.
Now his cry, wounded, calls out to me.*