

The Horn-Player

Walt's teeth clack; his tongue contorts in his mouth. His voice is low, and in working at speech he labors like a man knee-deep in mud using his hands to dig at something he saw glimmering there. Walt sways on his feet; his undershirt sticks in his armpits and his stained sports jacket hangs from his scarecrow's frame. —*listen, baby, but I bet I still got it.*

He is unintelligible to all but himself, and in a crowded bar no one thinks to listen to him. He stands by an open window, sucking at the cool air coming in from the street. He rattles ice in the belly of his glass, and in the windowpane he sees someone with curves and black banks, someone leaning in closer, to better hear him. He thinks the words up just fine but they come out loose, crumbling, their edges rounded. —*bet I still got the tongue for it is what I mean, HAW!* He knocks the back of his skull against the wall but feels nothing; one leg of his slacks clings to his flesh, heavy and warm. The shadow-woman is only a neon reflection in the glass, her winking eyes nothing more a pair of taillights passing down the street on the far side of a planting of tall, dark trees. Walt slurps up the dredges of his watered-down old-fashioned.

The winder rain comes down hard and the air in Los Angeles is sharp and fresh. The roadways are a coast; the slick hiss of many-thousand tire-treads are breaking waves. Junk-fleets of litter sail down into storm drains, bright bill-boards and graffiti tags burn against a backdrop of wet concrete. The dry earth cannot get enough to drink and the brush and weeds and brittle lawns spring with new rigidity and think of becoming green again.

In the mirror of his mind Walt sees himself as he remembers himself when he was young and unbroken: talented, charming, and with his palm held out to receive the ripening fruit of promise. He rattles the ice again and thinks of artistry; —*ain't nothing perfect without its flaws.*

A gig band is warming up before their set. The bar has a small stage in the corner. Light glares along the rims and edges of cymbals and drum-heads, on a bass's tuning pegs and the grid of a guitar's frets and strings. There is feedback as someone tests the microphone. Walt moves slowly from his wall toward the bar. He places his feet carefully, as though he walked on ice; he leaves a puddle on the floor behind him. A young man in a button-down shirt pops the clasps from a case and draws up a trumpet. He puts the silvery mouthpiece to his lips, warbling out a small flash of an octave.

The Horn-Player

—*little sweet jeezus!* Walt gapes at the instrument. The horn blazes under the spotlights. Walt spills the rest of his ice down his chest, raising his hand to drink but forgetting that he has run dry. He staggers up to the bar, clutching the empty glass to his breast, his head wrenched backward. He stares at what he think must be molten brass.

Three people serve drinks. They lean over the polished wood; they nod consent. They mix liquors and liquor's accoutrements, they shout prices, they run credit cards and stuff tips into a big jar by the registers. One of the bartenders is a brawny, scowling man. He works hard at his body and wears tight black shirts to prove the way his muscles knit together when he makes his circuit from the bar to the register and to the wall of bottles with their mirrored backing. He likes to lean forward and flex for women when he sets down their aviations, their gimlets, any cocktail housed in that delicate, long-stemmed glasses. He knows Walt. He has kicked Walt out of the bar before, and done it roughly. The bartender crushes a wedge of lime into a drink with thumb and forefinger and he steps toward Walt, snuffing at him. He smells urine.

"Walt, what the fuck, huh?"

Walt throws up crooked hands with his palms exposed. He fixes himself with a lopsided grin. He slicks back his greasy hair, and does a little dance step, like a clown. —*little puppy-dog, squealin' like he want something, like his fuckin' tummy hurt.* A heel squeaks against the floor as he moves.

"What'd you mumble at me?"

Walt shakes his glass to rattle the ice, but the glass is empty. "Just 'nother one," Walt takes great pains to speak the words.

"You smell like piss, Walt. Tell me that you didn't piss yourself in here."

The trumpet goes off. A jazz riff, something classic and just outside Walt's ability to remember. The sounds is a clear bell-ring and it splits his head wide open; the curtain parts, for a moment, and light floods Walt's dank, wet skull. The horn's notes are immortal and Walt sees the as they used to be when they were his: bright sounds on the sheet music, like birds flitting up and down telephone wires and the posts of old split-rail fences. Flashes and iridescence, bends and warbles, the pulse of a heartbeat made symphony.

—*holy moly, man.* His jaw hangs. —*jeez-o-pete!*

The Horn-Player

The bar is called The Scholar's Pit. It is a low building of poured concrete whose walls are decorated in a strange amalgam of autographed celebrity head-shots and the dusty, desiccated severed heads of a congress of antlered creatures. The music starts and the sound is deafening. The cheering of the audience rocks Walt like a thunder, and he remembers himself as he once was and thinks they are applauding him.

The band starts off strong, jumping deep into a feverish call-and-response, metered out by a sharpness of snare-drum and rim-shot. Walt licks his lips, and his teeth clack. —*but I bet that thing blows real smooth*. He stares into the movement of the trumpet player's hands, the mother-of-pearl key pads, the red velvet cushioning, the well-oiled valves.

Walt grins. He has lived his life hard, and he is aware of his fearsome ugliness like the buzzing of a thick fly close to the ear. —*step back and lemme blow that thing out of the water, kid*.

The bartender informs the woman pouring pints of beer that he needs to see about something. She nods and he works his way out from behind the bar. He looks to the floor, he jostles his way toward the wall where Walt had stood.

There is a reef of figures in silhouette, standing against the walls, the windows, blocking the cool air coming in through the bar's open doors from the street. A knot of sweating men and women dance at the band's feet; they pull at one another, bodies contoured to bodies, they smell like a density of ambition. They are young, and when they dance the weight of time melts away and they become wealthy and gorgeous. Walt hides himself amongst them and he moves toward the stage. He smells at women's necks. He steals a drink right from the fingers of an outstretched hand and gulps it down, disappearing into the pack of bodies. He lets the empty glass fall and it is trampled into shards and the noise of that violence is lost.

The bartender finds Walt's puddle. He stalks back toward the bar, toward the supply closet, scanning for Walt's filthy profile. With a mop and a spray-bottle of disinfectant, he elbows his way through the crowd a third time, growling. There is a pause in the music; Walt is on the stage, trying a microphone stand as a walking stick.

The bartender swells up, his face folds, and his jaw juts out. "Walt!" he bellows. "You're done! I'm gonna mop you straight out onto your deadbeat ass!"

The Horn-Player

Walt mumbles into the microphone through a shriek of feedback. —*little miss muppet, little miss muppet, listens here, baby, spilling all your curds and whey 'cause you don't know nothing about me, right here, HAW!*

The bartender stomps through the crowd to the front of the stage, brandishing the mop like a polearm. Walt's eyes roll back in his head. He bares his teeth and sneaks a knife out of the pocket of his jacket, he unfolds it with his thumb. The blade is crooked and would break against the bartender's chest, but the illusion of threat is enough to give the big man pause. He lowers his own sopping weapon.

The young man holding the trumpet takes a step away from walk, but the movement is a trigger; Walt snakes out a hand and takes him by the throat, losing the knife down onto the stage among the coiled wires of the microphones and amplifiers. Young eyes bulge, and the trumpet player coughs spittle into Walt's face as the blunt, dirty fingers creep tighter. The young man wonders through his adrenal instant what it would be like to live broken-throated, fettered to a dead dream of music that had been crushed from him on some odd weekday night.

The young man's salvation lies in Walt; Walt is not after blood, he is only after brass. The young man falls away into the cacophony of the drum set and Walt's clutches the trumpet away from him as though it were a caught, coveted bird. He cups his palms around the valves; his fingers slither onto the keypads into the hooks and rings set along the gleaming pipes. He fits to it like the hands of a woodcutter fit to an axe.

"Yeee-ow!" Walt howls out, his voice cracking, as raw as a wound. "Not 'nother step!"

He looks as if he might smash the trumpet against some nearby head, or sent the horn hurtling into a wall, or else simply twist it into uselessness with his bare hands. The bartender steps onto the stage, simple violence set into his face. He cocks his shoulder and balls a fist to lay Walt down, and Walt drags in one long, hot breath and puts the puts the mouthpiece to his ragged lips.

The brass glows in his hands and he remembers with a piercing vividness the greater spotlights of his past, the crisp collars and black silk ties; the confidence of elegant dress, the love and joy of spontaneous creation; he sees his name printed on the rich card-stock of evening

The Horn-Player

programs. That lost world seem real to him, contained just there, at an arm's length away, tangible.

Walt plays out a squealing, raging sound. His eyes are screwed shut, his veins embossed against his red, leathery forehead. The notes break and fall from their place at first but then being to mesh like the teeth of wild gears; the circuitry of his brain explodes into brilliant, chromatic flame and the music roars from the horn's bell like slices of glacier falling away into a churning sea; like sharks cutting tight lines beneath rolling waves. He takes a breath and plays again, music like the grip of the moon on the earth; like a falling star. His fingers pump at the trumpet's valves like the pistons of some daemonic engine, and his tongue flutters and rolls and strikes out his long call to heaven, sounded in the voice of brass itself, and like the snapping of two fingers, it is all gone.

Walt detaches himself from the horn and pitches it underhand into the bartender's chest, and the big man catches it delicately with both hands, cradling it. His eyes are glued to the instrument.

Walt does his little dance step off the stage and slips out the back door, into the rain. Huge curled leaves twirl in the rushing gutter, floating past him as he walks. He loses himself into a thick, cold fog but he grins as he goes, his tab unpaid and his lips bleeding.