OBSIDIAN BLUES
POEMS
HERMAN BEAVERS
Obsidian Blues

Poems

Herman Beavers
A still life and a way to get home again
Ralph Angel

The blues ain't nothin' but a po' man's heart disease
Sterling A. Brown
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on the slaveship *used to be*,
a polemic blast of wind,
the mere hint of an ache
& somewhere sits a child
sadder than me, long gone
brother suffering through
yet another mention of this light

around me, a bright tumbling;
character, the falsest of alarms—
electricity shirring, doubt
scoffing this pyrophoric embrace
    in Kansas City

a man puts a saxophone
to his lips, remembers a
darkness worth the effort;
the flash & murmur of a sad
rallentando floods his head
like a brackish, swollen
river impersonating a heaven
he could never afford
In a Tangle of Scars:
A Suite in Five Movements
Prelude: Dangerous

Yessir, it ain’t no easy way to settle for less than what killin make possible.

Here was my choices: rottin on the farm down home tryin to make a livin on shares or puttin my hand to a few Germans before they put they hand to me,

which wasn’t no choice at all come to think about it.

In ’19, when I got back from France with my Croix de Guerre, I had to bury my medal and burn my uniform to ashes to keep from gettin lynched—white boys figgered I was bound to get too uppity for my own good since I done been paid for killin white mens.

Thing is: they was right. Dangerous? Damn if I won’t.

I can’t even begin to help you understand how good I looked in that damn uniform.
I met Bird at a house party in Jersey. It was 1957. Nigga asked me for five dollars to buy pizza and wine. I stared at him like he was Jesus: he looked at me like I was some kinda haint. When I gived him the money (a twenty was all I had) he bend down to tie his shoelace, say, *I heard better guitar watchin Roy Rogers and Trigger*, and walked away. That was thirty years ago. I don’t think bout it much except when some fool come round, out to cut somebody whose story they don’t know.

Looka here, boy, don’t let no body tell you truth’ll make you free.

It won’t do nothin but kill you and you be mad rest your natural-born life.
sound of dough mixing, changing,
like how optimism shape-shifts,
becomes the bird in someone else’s hand.
your thoughts go back to the library steps:
the head librarian, a black lady

wearing a blue sweater over
a grey dress. not like momma,
with her head rags, dingy white shirts rolled
up to the elbows, always complaining
of the cold. the black lady librarian
turned, touched her pearls, surprised
to find you hiding in the bushes.
maybe you were playing hide &
seek with tonk and perry, maybe
pretending to explore another planet,
maybe you just wanted to silence
the shouting in your head. pearls clicking,

sweater draped over her shoulders,
she came to the edge of the steps, reached
out a hand, as if trying to pluck
your 9-year-old body from an angry sea.
just as you felt your heel lift off
the ground, ready to climb

into a new life, a voice
in your head said your feet
were planted in the only
soil that could sustain you.
you turned, darted away, left her
reaching, her hand dropping

like a wounded bird. now,
you idle on the loading
dock, waiting for the flour,
the shortening, the yeast,
ingredients used to build
this prison-house

its walls so steep,
you’ll never eat
your way out, not even
in a million years. pouring
the flour into the vat, you
wonder how bread came
to be such a cruel jailer.
when the breeze picks up,
people for miles
daydream
the taste of
your shame.
Third Movement: Eclipse

The jingle of the crystal
in the break-
front says you’ve pulled
into the drive. I start
to get up but think
better of it. Suddenly,

I’m twelve again and
my father’s refusing to let
me look at an eclipse of the sun.
The end of the world ain’t nothing
for a girl to be looking at,
is all he says as he sends
me back into the house.

Years later, on his deathbed,
I ask him can he see
death coming. Yeah, he jokes,
but I just close my eyes
and he go away.

Now, you happen into
the room like a gale
force wind. Anything’s wrong,
I don’t look it.

You nail me with
your stare, the warmth
and light you muster is
already past tense. These days,
I can’t get my mind off the stars.

The curve of the moon recedes.
The sun feels so close,
my eyes squint shut.
I wonder if anyone,
anyone at all, thinks I’ll
ever leave you. Light
splits the darkness open,
I think I hear bells.
Fourth Movement: Hamilton Railroad Station

He can’t stop thinking about corn, strong & serious as a woman, hands on her hips, waiting for the old man to come home & wreck the quiet. Black clouds, lightning & thunder, but no rain. This is a day he could love. It’s so hot, sin rests closer to the ground than prayer. The crowd at the baseball field waits for the game to be called.

He’s looking for the last one out. The stationmaster ambles under the clock, carrying a trumpet so shiny it could send light bounding off into space.

A single note levitates loud & sweet on the air till the heat closes around it, leaving the whine of souls caught up in a soft rustle of forgetting, bodies leaving what they need behind.

If he wasn’t catching this train, He’d be picking corn hulls out of his nails, heading to the back door of the farmhouse to be with Almajean before her husband gets home. She’d stare at him for five seconds, then say, Get on in here, like she was losing time & had a good mind to go over every inch of his body till she found it.

Maybe that explains why he’s come to hate
the sight of a cornstalk stripped
to nothing, its green husk
shrugged to the ground, like
the dress sliding off a woman
with better things to do.

He looks
down the track,
sees clear to the next
county: there’s a defiant crow
perched on a power line;
there’s a ribbon
of lightning lashing
heaven to the ground.
Fifth Movement: Catcher

When I see him, Daddy is 25
and oiling his catcher’s mitt
with blood, the leather darkening
to a skeptical shade of midnight,
dark as that cheap red wine
he used to drink in Palermo
back in the war; thinking back
to those days, he stops oiling,
pauses long enough so I feel
the exuberance and embarrassment
of 25, that feeling of wanting more

than two hands could ever hope
to hold spreads across my chest.
When he goes back to oiling
the mitt, caressing it, knowing
what feats it will perform:
(catching the throw from short
to tag Amos Jefferson out at the plate;
the way it induces a curveball’s drop
into the strike zone), the question
rings through my head:

will I ever give anything, anyone
this kind of love? Would
a woman’s thigh, her naked shoulder
blazing like a flame under a bush,
be the eye gone blind made whole?
Daddy looks up from his work,
his gaze drifts past me to take in

a pair of high heels, a woman in

a skirt so tight, one night’d be
worth thirty years and he’s
saying, You know
how I’m using this blood?
She won’t never understand.
Espionage of Sweet
Music speaking in the nude:
black coffee after fast sex

behind the mall. If this night
could only cut across the bone,

a long shadow might gown a
woman; eye muscles obeying

a diagram. Rhythm could throttle
down, sweat a full head

of steel. The sky incarcerated
by an axis tilting beyond reason;

sore feet, a broken record talking like
herbs on whose powers we must rely.

Abiding in darkness’ irrevocable thrust,
hurt is a book sweet as pie,

bodies registering the tang
of rebuke, the remorseless

vocabulary of obligation.
Hear tell most nights the

gangsters of philanthropy save polite
its glow, chatting up the locals, eyes

grilling the street, voices
rebounding up and down the alley;

the way a man sounds talking
under a woman’s clothes.
Taking up Bass

You don’t need to know anything about me except for the fact that when I was 20, I was kidnapped by members of the Unification Church. Stop looking at me like that! It was only for ten minutes. Now it’s true when I tell you that they had me in the van. It felt like we were headed to see the Reverend. I don’t have any bitterness; I know it’s because my face is a book people read and think they know what’s on the next page. But I’m telling this wrong. What I really want to talk about is playing the upright bass. In my next life, bump fooling with nouns and verbs, I’m coming back as a bassist. It will mean I’ll be born with longer fingers, but that’s just the half of it. When I’m starting school, the first words I’ll learn to scrawl on the yellow paper with the green lines are bottom and time. By the time I’m in the seventh grade, that time in my first life when I was wearing high water pants and pining for the return of outdoor recess, I’ll be hearing bass lines, chords running through my head like the Rapid beating East to West across Cleveland. One minute, I’ll be leaning into the body of my instrument like I’m learning the moves of a new dance partner, the next I’ll be wearing a replica of Paul Chambers’ tux, the bass line of “So What” ringing through the dark corridors of my head, fingers moving of their own accord. This will mean my family will have to have a phone, so that the agent can call. When the van pulls up to the house to take me on the road for my first tour, my parents and sister will be so proud, they won’t touch any of my stuff till I get back—at my last gig, which I’m not ashamed to say will be in Omaha, NE. Of course, this will mean that basketball won’t make it into the story. And that will mean that I won’t be coming home from a day on the court. I won’t meet the woman with the smile that’s neither here nor there, she won’t ask me who my favorite comedian is, she won’t ask me if I’m ever lonely. She won’t say, Join me for lunch. There are some friends I want you to meet. I’m telling you, everything will be different. As sure as this callous rising on my index finger, believe me when I tell you: nothing will be as it was.
Levee Low Moan

Destroy this memory
—Graffiti on an abandoned house in Post-Katrina New Orleans

hysterical city of drums
humming with battery acid
convict labor behind the
school grounds’ toxic

lacerated walls
receding waters elaborate
a frantic sweetness
bloody chains of language

travel like a river snake’s question
mark of venom
trundling through a dream
prattle a form of awe

Nightshade thistle &
phlox tanks
of rancid coffee
mercenary ghosts

breeze in such a lather
the sprung mist may
never stop dressing the sky
shadow ambling a woman puts on

her last metaphysic, slip showing
roots in need of a touchup
a thousand schoolgirls reading
the moan of this place

their curved shoulders
bisected with sobs, in a hail
of hieroglyphic fingernails
kitchens intensifying at the nape

gaping a vehicle of such fixed music
every camera’s a gifthorse must be these
shoes talking in tongues like
a symphony of screaming trees
in this joke no one gets
delirious with rhythm’s cold
blue fret the heart
of the artichoke judged

in a clack of consonants
and vowels you could ruminate on
a head of lettuce with shame.
a choir bone dry

as a worry stone probes
gospel’s evanescent sweet
spot, singing just so the roof
will stay up famine safe

as any riven star the storm cloud’s
sad regime trudging across
summer’s sprained calculus
creole race man wearing

one shoe
forfeiture the bread of hurt’s
thriving business nearby a soldier
shadowboxes with men in

creased pants rattling off
crisp answers waffling in
a gridlock of flattery the hot air
powering any summer storm.
i envy bodies at rest the robotic
confidence of a sunrise
when everything surrenders to the
locomotion of bad choices

grace shatters into brightness
& eyestorm: a lost zodiac sign
concealing a hatred of metals
a nebula unworthy of the slightest

throb the air grins with regret caught
in the magnetic pull of tongues
flagging our broken undertakings
cerulean blue envelops the spacecraft's

ferocious steel ache light speed's
kinetic energy loosed
upon my blood's
geometry iron wheel

gyrating as the year pulses
sweetly sexless a parabolic
flip of the hair, rooms
slanted with a sestet of ghosts

their bonetap
of rhythm booming
in vestibule of the soul's
anxious acuity how

delse explain heart-broke
women humming Gershwin
light playing off their hair's
marcelled waves round tortoise shell

spectacles sisters flawless
but for the dry &
meticulous nights
hissing behind lives
spent dancing to equilibrium’s
luminous downbeat testament
that breathing out
is easy it takes strength
to draw breath again
let all the blame
echo in the blocky
sadness of a Monk chord

disrupted gravitas
Espionage of sweet

for KR
OMPHALOS

Bright blood hitting
the air. The chins of arrogant
boys. February rages across
the eyes, pulsing as if the dark
nipple of the moon, the constant
spin of loss might be
a polyhedron of lack and
regret. To know how it
feels to know of another's
knowing, the blue light falling
about our heads. Water dripping
stone, wearing groove; gravel
is the heart never hard put
to elaborate. We forget how the dead
have touched us with their tundra
of sad songs. Ideas I have yet
to pilot, the salt on my
face closing like a slow eye. When
do I feel my way back
to myself: born yet
again, as in the color of trees?
Car doors pull shut, anxious
to yield up their secrets.
What might we make
of a deep thing like rose
petals, the present ache
enormous, as if the body is lamp
to the galaxy, your door
a mind clutching? Duty
of the wind, the blank
wall of your back
gives off the light of ten
dead stars, wax of the moon
the eyeblink of death. Breasts
jut out like dark water. This season,
all its wounded names.

Sometimes
there is nothing but tenderness.

for HD
thimbles of rain shower roof dwellers
with clear signs to hat across the river.

blank storefronts, dead eyes gaping at catastrophe’s
jagged prophecy running from forehead to chin
like an ethnographic scar; the weight
of the world wombs double.

fists waving in hygienic blocks of rage, sporting
squalid tweed & dimpled tie, a saint tallies up syllables
of candescent revolt, puts-on like a miracle
issued from an astonished, confounded god,

bad thumb speeding to a blur on a Stratocaster, strings
juddering like a systolic ghost swaggering
through the wind’s atonal toxin, singing *Gimme Shelter*.

Call it “The 21st Century Hobo Rag”
   Call it “The Rock of Spent Wages”
   Call it “Blues Concerto for Left Hand and Scar”

What we capture
are words, ephemeral
breeze on humid skin.

Apples.
The way the light
betrays them.

Call it “Sunlight on Abandoned Saxophone”
   Call it “Still Life with Apples and Death Mask”
   Call it “Disappointment Masquerading as a Red Light”

Conjure this body a guitar
Conjure Robert Johnson
   where the Southern x’ed
the Yellow Dog, fathoming
   hurt’s mysterious chart
a fingering placed
at the base of the neck; blood pulsing
in a swale of mangled chords.

One finger slides North
    reliable as the Rock Island Line
change the sound
the same.

    Call it “Still Life with Guitar and Heartstrike”
    Call it “Landscape with Skull and Banjo.”
    Call it “Abstraction of a Bent Chord”

No wind. Only grace.
A bright blue washed
with graphite, ochre to fill
in this place on the canvas;
voices hovering in summer’s
    heat awestruck,
the last daub of paint, curve
of the final brushstroke:

Light glancing along a wall
in Brooklyn; a tall black
woman wears hoop earrings,
as red dress, her arms crossed,
    standing
in a triangle of sun.
The water tower
    shivers in
the monumental light

    Call it “Abstract of Wheelhouse and Boatwreck”
    Call it “Portrait of an Insolent Woman”
    Call it “Eye Climbing a Distraught Sky”

In dread’s clangorous maelstrom;
minstrelsy’s indignant theory of space:
the factory, its derelict muscles
shouldering the neighbor-
hood, the oiled rasp of Clio’s
flywheel; the truck we
could have with grief,
    a moment of taut clarity,
    this sundering, this
chokesob
    this tundra of yes.
Making Fast

O Navigator, guide me through grief’s most brilliant storm

1. Cathexis

rain is a language
I’ve always
known I could mimic.
my life gothic
as a minstrel’s dancestep;
eyes grinning,
heavy clouds muscling,
a thin and frightened moon,
black sky rhythm,
deus ex machina annulled.

at a distance, she’s wearing
a sleeveless black dress,

blood wailing
with protein’s false
promise; eyes
half-awake

Now, she’s kissing me
behind the ear, waking me
in the morning’s rusted light.

2. Pain Management

swing of the door’s arc,
the pure, final
tumble of the locks,
tight sleep of the jamb.
in this rented house
my bedroom dilates
with sound, makes idols
of passing shadows
bright jet of breeze
sleesh of cartires
on a rainwet street,
staring
at the ceiling pointless
night presses in on
the spine’s tone deaf xylophone;
the patina of small, intricate
wants glistens and
hangs from my eyelashes—

no melismatic raft
to take me across this
swelling river;
falling down
history’s blue chasm of regret
I discover

—a deep breath,
eyelids sprung open
collapsing
the partition rending
this world from the next;
the promise
beyond her hospiced eyes.

for SLW
Teasing, you called me  
“The Traveling Man,”

don’t look back.

During the last two
and a half weeks, I’d been

to Cleveland, Philadelphia,
San Francisco, New Orleans,

Atlanta, back to Cleveland,
with another trip to the Left Coast coming.

As usual, I drove
you back to New York, this time

in my new car. We got up to your room
and like always, got out of our clothes

to try love. I saw then how
your body had changed, how time

and circumstance had altered the body
I once knew. With my car pointed

toward Connecticut, there is no way
for me to know that in two years,

I will look at a picture of us, taken
on vacation in Ocho Rios

And collapse into tears. In two
months, I’ll remember that night

25
at the Algonquin, how we called
room service five times because we

could not believe the bottle opener
was in the bathroom, how you swore

Dorothy Parker’s ghost was watching us. In three months, you’ll send me

a check for one hundred dollars. In just under six months, I’ll survive

a tornado that rips through New Haven. Five days later, I’ll move to Philly.

In a year and a half, I’ll call
you at your new apartment

let the phone ring nine times,
call back and let it ring eleven more.

With a small flash of panic, I’ll
figure you’ve moved on with your life,

found someone else to kiss the small
of your back, the inside of your thigh.

Three months later, on a Friday night,
my phone will ring and your father will tell

me you’ve left it all behind. The next
morning, I will rise at dawn to walk

along the Schuykill and with tears
steamrolling down my face, remember

your face in my bathroom mirror, how happy
you were that your hair had grown back.

for SLW
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