

1959

it is the year of love-eyed vixens with paper cheechees
plaids, pleats, and Hawaiian-print polished cotton
bus rides on the red line, south to Gompers Junior High

oxfords are good for hopscotch, or scuffles at
recess, or long walks home made longer by gossiping
with girls named Dee, Jill, or Nancy, or twisting
fingers with boys named Oscar, Wayland, or Red

(white or black patent leather is reserved for church service and concerts)

i engage in scopings for mange-free strays to adopt,
or the scooping up of broke-winged birds for burial,
stopping for a soda a burger a comic book, wasting
a week's allowance in stingy quarters and dimes

"cooling it" on the porch when summer scorches the sidewalks,
admiring the whoosh of big-finned convertibles & coupes

on dinner duty for Moms, as she does a last-minute shop
(morning screams from the hallway still in my ears,
awakened to kill the earthworm trapped in newswrap. bruises
from spankings like blueberries under my skin. the marks
white teachers never notice. how can such an angel-faced creature
be such a violent bitch? and here i am her bittersweet spit)

on phone duty for Pops (ever absent without leave), collecting maydays
from the ships that never sail

living on books, in this revisiting, sometimes leaving loneliness
for skate blisters and the laughter and shouts of neighbor kids
between oobopshebop sways and swings between bike rides,
foul shots and hikes to the corner store for milk, bread, and syrup

a cooking ironing mopping scrubbing sewing washing fool

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the fragrance of wet grass ever rises on breezes, sates my nose
as i hose our lawn every evening at sundown. it will permeate
those dreams ahead. for now, i am content to watch the western
sky go rose go violet blue as all rainbows vanish in the spray

GREENING OVER THEM BLUES

maybe it is 1969 and i'm showing too much leg while
droppin' dimes in that phone booth on South Broadway, USA
the slip and glide of my attitude matching the eternal wiggle
of my hips as i slide into a day laborer's dreamscape

my faux bouffant a massive snarl of brown-bomber curls
paisley angel top hugging my ribs from A to navel
as i TKO eyeballs with a four-four strut, inviting
slow rides on the mercy seat and smooches in F sharp

maybe it is that last day of the week of the last wait

whatever it is, Lord Alice has defined it with his croon
that juicy mambo combo backing up every oooch
with a rose of red satin refrain—as freshly plucked thorns bleed
the final sigh from a universal klatch of cold soul survivors

those luscious liverlips smacking until the goosebumps rise
a response to memories of lovers begging improvise

baby—i'm steeped in the sounds of my wild wild youth
my shoulders locked to the lead guitar strum, the
whisk whipping my heart via ears, a verdant profusion
of warm coronets, tapping fingers and toes, moans on cue

then

his lips scat through my center
turn me the color of dang the color of jesusgodomighty

WINTER MORNING, VENICE BEACH, 2006

seagulls dive bomb above and around Dudley Avenue
as 500 joggers appear in sweats, shorts and antlers,
duck-billed caps, and shades for the marathon on the
boardwalk, some pushing strollers, others with Walkmans,
many carrying bottles of electrolyte water. bicyclers, dreadlocks,
and pigeons abound. a pierced and tattooed couple walks
their shaggy designer pooch beyond The Cadillac Hotel.
nearby stone wolves, the gargoyles of the waterfront,
oversee the angry rhetoric and cries of “bullshit” scrawled
on stucco walls:

“America, when are you gonna change?”

“Why are you locking up all the Black children?”

up the way, there’s plenty of outdoor seating at the cafes.
on the oceanside parking lot the reggae man is an ancient
darkness that emerges from his paint-splotched pastel-i-fied
trailer truck parked next to Diane’s Ark, where the
puffy smog-white Teddy bear hugs its black stuffy cub

adages of “love one another,” “Jesus was homeless,” and
“Spirit of Venice” tell her story in part if she never blooms
onto the asphalt

no one here seems to know that the sixties have been over for
nearly two score, not to mention the fifties

but then,

this is Venice Beach, west
where paisley, peace signs and promise still prosper

RED TOILE

when he grew up he fell
in love with a red toile curtain.
it had nothing to do with the
usual meanings of red, but with
the light of summer sunrises
and the aromas of breakfast from the
kitchen where mother hummed

red became the choice when it
came to crayons and exotic bits of
schoolroom chalk, wagons, and
two-wheelers, and go-carts

he dreamed of a fire-engine red thunderbird

he found himself drawn to snippy girls
with red under their blackness, high bras,
thick waists and thighs, girls who turned
the lights red when they stepped into
a brightness, women whose lips parted
to reveal redness as lickable as a lollipop

at times he dared secretly wrap himself in a red silk robe

the body of red led him to choose
abstract art as a pastime, in which the
worlds he created wheezed, writhed, and
burped impossible shades

red were the wheat fields of his visions
red were the darkneses of thought
red, a sheet of India ink washing over white
bleeding into flesh, his bereddened heart

red—red violet red lover red stone

when he finished growing up
he wasted no time.
he married a brightness
and made ragings by morning sun

LET'S CALL IT CHICAGO

—for Marvin Green

there was no name for it—that moment in which the lone smoker
dropped ash in the shadows of an empty bar, the piano blanketed over,
at the only available booth, back to maroon leather, mulling around
the notion of a new lover, toying with the cold thought of a hot affair

what could i name it—the pull of heavily lensed eyes, the assuredness
of your shoulders as you leaned over the pool table, confident in
your manhood, reading my attraction as if it were a headline,
the notion of privacy, darkness, the shedding of false skins

summoned up by my lonely soul

passion driving flesh like the El through designated vistas, twisting
on relentlessly day or night, carrying a mixed baggage of castabouts,
castoffs and castaways, daring the tunnels and damning the skies, those
piercing shudders of wheels on rails, those piercing cries of tensions recycled

this is the hotel Bismarck, where limousines once coughed up gold
slippers and magnums of dry Italian brut, where emperors dined and
high-class thugs ruled the smarmy depths, where divas flaunted ice
tiaras, furs, and floor-length hearts, ascending to descend plush red-
velvet stairways like legends

let's call it Chicago

this, a palatial ruin at the end of the atomic age, the patina ever
grand, the mahogany polished yet, crystal chandeliers sunshowers of
glitz, jacketed doormen in brass and epaulets catering of late to a
polyester-and-Spam clientele, and i, Child of West, hawking pain for
glory and a spot on the pantheon

would dare call this heaven, my pose as a later stage black beauty in the
throes of her woes, keeping not only the faith, but the promise to be
faithful—yet longing to yield and give way to the mundane breakage of a
vow, covets now this empty room, these empty chairs, the bandstand
absent musicians, singer, song

SASSAFRAS & MORPHINE

visits to the hospital then the hospice
i clean up vomit, pick sheet music up off the floor

at yet another crossroad. no mercy now.
salvation is the providence of dreamers

the nightmare of my son's death has gotten closer
and closer and closer/edge deep-violet

precipice. verge.
leap, fall, or give into the push

(my son found the peace
his mother is ever denied)

if i but knew where he was, i would stretch my wings
rise loudly and fly him home from Home

a call in midafternoon, "orotund, sweeping and final"
goes and is gone. my son. ululate and summon