

A Blues for Otis

I.

The sky's black hue casts down sleet
that hits the roof like a blasting comet.
The kettle's whistle fogs the pane.
A dog barks. Crickets clicking.
My people sing through it all—
joy, sorrow, pelting rain, the clash of purple lightning.
We're divine: a Black Nova, born in thunder.
Momma crooning through storm and fury.
After all, she was a bona fide singer,
boasting the best Shirley Temple curls this side of North Carolina.
She takes first prize in Spring Hope,
belting Lil Green's *In the Dark*.
In my dreams, Momma bellows:
I am the eye of the hurricane,
thundering through these Rocky Mount blues.

II.

Rocky Mount blues owned Sunday.
Church was a whole-ass day.
Hard seats, sore feet—no squirming, no laughter.
So much church, *too much church*
that when she was 18 she moved to New York.
She figures that's why her sister Irene became Catholic.
Momma called it *Express church—in and out in an hour*.
Northern Baptists, free of brimstone, got out in under two.
But gospel never moved her.
What got Momma high was the blues.
Blues that healed blisters, mended cotton-cut fingers
muted pain from Dixie,
blues that told Momma to defy
Look away, look away, Dixie Land.

III.

New York blues joints take Momma
back to Dockery Plantation,
to Chicago's Southside, the French Quarter,
to Bessie Smith, Bo Diddley, Charlie Parker, Ma Rainey,
James Cotton, Margie Evans, Valerie Wellington,
Ida Cox, Koko Taylor, and Magic Slim's diet of cigarettes and the blues only.
Blues—the mo betta, the butter, the stutter,
the swinging of hips, a pout of lips—
jazz clubs with Dizzy, Miles Davis on the radio,
The Mashed Potato, The Joe, the big ole afro.

Momma, baptized in sound and floating,
migrated to Malcolm in Harlem
who spoke about *The Negro Condition*,
as cocoa women smoked cigarettes, hob-knobbed,
while Blacks and Jews broke bread in a shared struggle.
Momma says New York Blues was about attitude,
altitude, the howling moon,
blowing a horn and working that lung,
And honey, singing a song until it's sung.

IV.

*Yoo, Hoo, Hagar, wake up gal—
Otis raps at Momma's window,
Yoo, Hoo! Gots to get some vittles for the pot!*

Momma springs from bed,
dark hair falling.
Yanking the window wide, yelling:
My name ain't no Hagar!

Otis—long-faced already, even with a smile—
Momma's best friend, the young Norfolk blues singer,
knows the routine:
*Nigra, you know you look like that crazy white gal
Hagar on Westover.
Now come on, we gots to get some vittles
in dis here pot!*

Otis bends low, pulling sparse grass from the yard,
and pitching the strands into an invisible pan.
Momma plays along, pulling and pitching too.

V.

Momma's first name is Dorothy,
Though the midwife recorded: *Zanada*.
I think that's where Momma got jinxed:
All the spirit and fire of a healer or gypsy named Zanada,
But stuck with the white girl from Kansas name.
Though Momma's as light as white, she feels black *all the time*
Especially when the fancy white kids whiz by
chortling, *Niggers!!!* from school bus windows.
Momma and her sisters coated with red dust,
oxfords ruined, dresses stained,
The six-mile walk to school looming before them.
Otis says *black folks eat dirt, because we are dirt.*

VI.

In the yard with Otis, Momma is a beautiful sunflower,
Dark eyes pushing through soil,
She's blooming wild as can be
under the blazing Virginia sun,
when Otis comes by with a watering can, saying,
Hey Hagar, you sure is pretty!
Don'tcha want some coooooool water, Miz Sunflower

YOO, HOO, HAGAR! Otis screeches,
You're dreaming again, honey.

Momma, snapped back to reality,
grabs more grass, grins.

Gal, Otis continues, You ain't no white girl ordering lingerie from Rice's Fashion Corner. And you sho won't be layin' in wait for your man, all perfumed and fancy. Naw, youse a nigguh gal, always gettin' vittles for the pot.

Otis tries to keep a straight face, but breaks.
Momma falls to the ground, they choke on laughter.
Hmmph, look at these fools,
Says the oldest,
Momma's sister: Margaret of Norfolk.
She's taken Momma in [Grandma has TB.]
Margaret stares out the window watching Otis and Dorothy rolling in the yard.
Look at those fools, she repeats to her husband Paul,
Who doesn't look up from his paper.
She gets a rise out of Otis's mother,
Hattie Watson, also, in the kitchen.

That boy ain't right, Hattie says,
He's funny, I must have dropped him on his head.

Margaret's lips purse, Hattie fans herself.
Margaret turns to the stove. She knows Otis is *a homosexual*.
Except Hattie calls him *funny*.

The turkey's legs—braced hard against the oven walls. The pan won't budge.

Hattie, Margaret sighs, We forgot to tie the legs!

Otis and Momma inside now, scuffed and grinning.
Hattie fluffing Momma's hair. *Why this is some good hair!* Hattie says.
Otis, standing behind his mother,

Mimicking her, mouthing to Dorothy:
Why this is some good hair!

Margaret rolls her eyes.
Her dress, although she's been cooking all day, is immaculate.
Immaculate is a new word Momma learned at school.
Jesus's birth was immaculate.
Once Momma asked Margaret where babies came from.
Margaret gave her a book filled with flowers and butterflies.

Stop fiddling with your hair, Margaret chides Momma,
while straining with Hattie, both at war with the turkey.
Peering in, Momma thinks the overdone bird
looks like a loose woman with legs splayed.
After much tugging, the bird, finally free—
Pops out—legless.
Otis retrieves one of the casualties, an errant drumstick,
and is swatted upside the head.
He chews through everything.

After the uproar,
Momma and Otis, in the living room
Pretending to play chess, but really, spying.

Paul in recliner, open-mouthed napping,
Hattie and Margaret, gossiping,
taking snuff at the kitchen table.
Yea girl, Hattie chuckles,
Elsie Paige bout to get her be-hind tore up by her husband.

Who's Elsie Paige?
whispers Momma, ear flattened to the wall.
Hush, Hagar! She's that rouged up hussy who lives
down the street. Always perfumed, but I bet not a drop
of water hittin' anything under them skirts!, Otis says in
her ear.
Momma wrinkles her nose. Hussy?
Unwashed privates? Too much.

Yea, Margaret says, *Elsie's been running over*
to Granby Street buying tight skirts,
then coming home like she's been working a bordello.

What's a bordello, Otis? asks Momma.
Nothing. Nothing at all, Otis says, rising
and moving to the window.

Otis looked *long-faced*.
Momma wonders why he's so sad.
She stares at Otis, framed by the window,
the violet sky turning crimson, and purpling again.
In her memory were fields,
that tumbling forest of belligerent white cotton,
and the insufferable *Nicotiana*
rising higher and higher, mocking her.

Momma said the cotton pricked
and the brown juice from squishy tobacco—
stained your hands for weeks.

VII.

Momma stops.
No more stories.

A strange storm makes landfall—
thunderclap, sleet, and prayer flung down.
Whatever happened to Otis, Momma?

Suicide, honey, suicide.

Then she starts humming again
like if she don't,
the sadness just swallow us
whole.