

Lou Reed Meets Delmore Schwartz  
at a Bar & Other Poems

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## LOU REED MEETS DELMORE SCHWARTZ AT A BAR

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Three chords, three minutes, and I can make  
These cats dance, make them cry, unzip their pants  
And blow their load, but as far as creation goes,  
You must get out of the way of the song,  
It's the only rule, and I don't know where  
It comes but from what I know it ain't me, brother,  
Because when I sing paralyzed by hatred and a piss-ugly soul,  
Man, there's something there all right, but it ain't me.  
Like you said, it's the mystery of beginning again and again,  
While history is unforgiven. What do you know, Delmore,  
Maybe we're God when we write?

## PETALS

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I struggle at things that demand calibration,  
Like being asked what I mean by

"I have responsibilities." As though  
Suddenly aware of being cheated

Of something memorable,  
You stop to pick a flower,

A daisy of all things.  
Beyond you, I notice the prairie

Is as soft as your skin.  
When the petals leave your fingers

You don't say a word,  
You let them fall like they're broken

Pieces. We walk on the path  
On which liars and sinners have danced,

And if I turned to look,  
I'd find these petals on the ground,

The ground that will never find us  
Buried side by side.

I subscribe to the logic of oil  
And feathers that keep swans afloat.

There is no pretense.  
I am not a rock or a wheel.

What my nature is, that is what I show —  
I am incomplete.

I am a dirty word.  
I am feathers sticking out of a housecat's mouth.

If you go, I will know what I've lost  
And gained like a patient

Who absent-mindedly strokes her hair,  
Only to find staples mending her head.

## AFRITADA ONE NIGHT IN KENTUCKY

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Prepping onions and tomatoes for tonight's afritada,  
My hands running a steady bladed staccato,

I remember my grandfather, the last blacksmith  
Of Legazpi, whose hands, my mother said,

Were like cut from muddy alabaster.  
Such was all I had known of him

Since there was not much else she'd say.  
I remember Uncle Ramon's visit to Manila

And a set of knives wrapped in carabao hide.  
"A gift from Papá." She pushed it aside.

I was a boy sneaking downstairs at night,  
Hoping no one could hear me opening

The china cabinet, reaching deep behind crystal  
Glasses and Noritake sets hardly ever used,

Carefully pulling them out like an artifact,  
Afraid of my spindly arm betraying me.

I loosened the tie and spread them on the floor.  
They were fashioned from steel and antler.

I held one by the handle. It could cut moonlight.  
I held them with the same dread and awe

That took hold of me the time I took my father's gun  
From the closet where it was kept, but not hidden.

But this was different. I had convinced myself  
It felt different. I wasn't the one doing the hiding.

Many years later, as no one entirely forgets  
The very first time loneliness strikes,

How it storms into the house and takes everything,  
Maybe for reasons of unshackling

The heaviness of a Southern winter  
And the solitude it levies on old bones,

Or maybe it was about a little girl who wanted  
No more than to simply come out

After years of hiding and meet the man  
Her older self's son is hurtling toward, and define

For him the boundary of failure – because God  
Knows there is one – and tell him this:

That when she was all of eight in the middle of night  
Her mother shook her awake and hurried to take

Everything they could. But he caught them,  
His anger spilling from his mouth and smelled of gin.

Then he hit her. But it was the same every night before  
And after that. He'd come home drunk and hit his wife.

I turn on the stove, hear the ignitor hiss  
And flames come on like fingers hard to hold,

Hands that create, hands that destroy.  
I have nothing of my grandfather

Except these hands that my mother loves  
To remind me I got from no one else but Papa.

LOOKING AT MANUEL VASAURI'S PAINTING "SITTING BLUE FIGURE"

Wasn't it De Kooning who said if you want to find  
The painting, find the crack and enter it?

But I can't. I am just blindly feeling the curtains so I can draw  
them open and let something in. I am not De Kooning.

And neither are you his abstracted anguish.  
I can only enter if I breach space with a story in medias res,

Maybe at dawn when objects are taking back their shapes  
Or at nightfall when they suffer forms to darkness –

I can only guess. The inextricable candor of your legs,  
Does it come before or after lovers' legs entangle?

Why is it when a man loves he forgets time but not the minutes?  
My eyes are weak. You are beautiful, a gift unrelenting,

But outside of you, people survive moments  
Of spectacular familiarity – cleaning up after sex or driving

To Wal-Mart where diapers are cheap.  
Rain never falls at the height of their grief

And they're hardly ever rendered in someone's art.  
They go home to silent things earned –

The check engine light disappearing,  
The mail-in rebate for the new contact lenses finally arriving.

You can only sustain these notes for so long until  
Another picture forms, and morning comes to find her,

All of fifteen years, O.D.'d on the lawn.  
They take pride in such a neighborhood where maple trees

Parade the street and the sun, filtered through leafy canopy,  
Flings radiant dabs on the stone driveway.

Throw in a yellow warbler for good measure.  
It's not hard to imagine it alighting, a counterweight

To the perverse irony of a unicorn on a t-shirt saying,  
"I'm Daddy's Baby Girl." Can you picture that?

Can you picture the mother's legs  
Collapsing from under her, trying in desperation to run

To the front yard, to the lawn whose edges they have kept  
So tight you can fold its corners with your eyes —

Like the green rectangle that hides your inviolable softness,  
Which any man gazing wishes he had the guile

To strip it off with something like De Kooning's intractable hand.  
Now you know. Sprawled in blue, maybe you've always known.

Bad stories end when one says — often the miserable soul  
Caught holding the knife — I never had any clue.

What sets scene is not time of day. It's always place.  
Don't we say, now I can place it, when we finally understand

What it is they've been saying? This room is blue  
Because the curtains are half-drawn and light comes in

From a motel sign outside. You persist looking at me  
With eyes I can't see and a face I can't read,

Not because they've been taken from you  
As history attests to — oh no, you're not the prisoner here,

You're not the one who is naked here.



## GRIEF AND THE CONVERSATIONS THAT COME FROM IT

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So let's just talk about Macao and Baccarat,  
How it saved you once, got you out of debt,  
Or how whenever the alarm bells on the floor judder  
Your body breaks out in sweat,  
And you can no longer stand it, a condition  
Haunting you like Manila, where you up and left  
Because of ghosts I know only too well,  
But yes, Macao is great, it's the new Las Vegas,  
And that dinner at Robuchon, milk-fed lamb cutlets  
With fresh thyme, is something I should try,  
Bucket-list worthy, I know, I know I said I'll try . . .  
But silence, it circles back like bad idiom,  
And when it does, it's to remind us of something  
That has been swept clean now of any meaning,  
Like, and I ought to know this, raking leaves in the fall—  
Sisyphian, isn't that it? —useless because the wind  
Is always fickle this time of year and  
So we just push it back until the trees are bare  
But by then, there's already way too much  
We no longer want none of it,  
But we always come back to it though  
No matter how hard we try to ignore, and it won't be  
Because it won't let us, but because it has to let us go,  
And we can let it collect dust or leave it gasping,  
But we still have to pick it up where we left it off  
Because it wants to be your son.

## THE BLUES

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It's never just 5th and 7<sup>th</sup> notes falling.  
It's never just bare bone feeling.

It's never just cadence or lilt.  
It's never just trouble.

It's never just putting shoes  
On a dead man . . .

Unless dead man  
Happens to be your brother.



It's intermission.

The guitar player picks up  
His beer and slides it across the frets.

The way he holds the bottle

Is the exact same way  
You stare at a heart

After you pull it out of a man.

## APPLES FROM ATOY THE SMUGGLER

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Even though it was Martial Law, Atoy said  
He could get you anything, anything you wanted,  
Would even guarantee it'd be at your doorstep  
In a matter of days. Mother took him on  
And asked for apples. Sure enough there  
He was outside of our house one evening  
Unloading two boxes of the largest Red Delicious  
I had ever laid my eyes on, big as my dog's head.  
That was a good year. The house smelled  
Of apples, sweet red apples.

Could there be a word more perfect than sweet?  
Ask anyone from the islands how they like  
Their mangoes, their coffee, their milk, their meat.  
A touch of it even lands in our gestures, in our gossip,  
In our accent, oh even our Lord is sweet (Jesus).  
Until an aunt comes back to the homeland  
And lays it down for us –  
Apples should be crunchy, not sweet.

She should know.

She's from America,

Where I am now, where the words  
*Cherries Ahead Super Sweet*  
On a makeshift sign come into view.  
I pull over and ask the woman how much for a box,  
Never forgetting to ask if they are sweet.  
*Si, si son dulces. Recogi la fruta yo mismo.*  
Lo siento, señora. No habla Español.  
Are these from your farm, I ask.  
She says, *no, no, America, they America,*  
In tired accent and tone  
That lets anyone within earshot know  
How things have always stood.  
I've lost her at that point, in bewildering  
Light that has optioned a great part of this valley.  
Off in the distance where a little boy  
Dribbles a rubber ball, kicking dust about  
In the same aimless way the bored waits  
For something to come to an end,

I spot the van where they must have  
Carted boxes of America just as sweet.

## THE OLD FILIPINO COUPLE AT THE IMMIGRATION COUNTER

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Confused, the immigration officer  
Asks him again, "Who's that with ya?"

The old man answers, "My husband."  
The officer lets out a big belly laugh.

He couldn't understand why,  
Must've been his accent, so

He thought nothing of it, just smiled back.  
But when the officer calls out to

The other officer at the next counter,  
He lit up like a house

Whose owner hears something  
In the middle of night.

Thinking it a shame not to pass on  
A good joke, the officer says

To the other fella,  
"Hey buddy, Get a load of this."

He points at the old man's wife—  
"This is his *husband*."

When a man can no longer count  
On words he's used his whole life

To save himself or to just shame  
Pigs for having a good time

At the expense of his wife,  
What else is there to stand on?

He's left hanging on some edge,  
Waiting for something, and when

Nothing seems to come any nearer,  
He turns frantic and yells,

“Mga putang ina nyo!  
Akala nyo kung sino kayo!”

Sensing shift, the officer says,  
“What did you just say?”

You’re in America now.  
Learn to speak English.”

A kid in ripped jeans waiting next  
In line, headphones around his neck,

Laughs like he’s come across  
Found money. He hollers,

“Yo, dude! The old man said  
Something about your tiny dick!”

## MAN ON THE PLANE

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Things were good until the bullets rained.  
Gathering firewood from the hill, he cheered  
As Japanese soldiers fell to the ground like scarecrows  
In October. But they weren't. Closer to the carnage,  
Among the men who lay in the field, arms outstretched,  
Facing the earth in the saddest welcome, was his father.  
It was a case, he says now, of mistaken nationality.  
This happened in Iloilo, where rice stalks heavy for harvest  
Dance with the ocean wind and miles of farmland unfold  
In light, where in a couple of towns away folks live  
In fear of black magic and spells and kindness disguised.  
You become a witch, he warns, a mangkukulam, when  
They invite you in for a meal and you eat what they serve.  
When a bird begins to grow in your stomach,  
Transformation has already taken place.  
For a second I close my eyes and I hear him  
In the swirling rhythm of our dialect asking if I knew  
Their town makes the best otap, cookies dusted  
With sugar and shaped like the tongue of a bull.  
But no tongue's quite like the tongue of a woman,  
He says, especially if it knows where to go – wo-ho!  
He wonders aloud if he still has it, this knack  
For spotting clean women in the market.  
If ever you're in town, he says, I'll show you around.  
Man is like the sea, he says, endless in his bounty of sperm.  
Such is his philosophy. His insensitivity I keep for a later time.  
Today I share with him the pieties saved for a countryman,  
A brother from a dying land, a boy who once picked up his dead  
Father's hat and Springfield rifle, inheritance of a guerilla to his son.  
Do we mark that day as his charge into manhood?  
Without a father, who taught the boy to be a man?  
He went away carrying a knife in his heart, etched on it,  
In phantom script, was the name America.  
Men like him understand place is important  
And the world turns like a straw hat in the wind.

## PEACOCKS IN IMELDA'S GARDEN

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A bottle of Merlot and we could feel the vines indulge us.  
Think of a harvested vineyard and autumn  
Can't be that far behind. So too is talk of immigrant blues —  
The rough years, the bank that dragged your house away,  
Still in the same voice that taught me to look at the *Pieta*,  
How it would have collapsed in lesser hands,  
To think about what holds it up, what gives it power,  
Its art. But you don't even pretend to remember,  
Now that you have a new house, a steady income  
Killing termites and bugs, a luxury SUV, a new wife.  
Let us not invoke art. Wasn't it you who said  
When speaking truth to power, no one really  
Gathers their brushes, do they? They don't  
Line up their paint and set up their easels.  
No, you said, they write. Take Marcos.  
He threw writers in prison  
But never touched a hair on an artist's head.  
*We're just peacocks in Imelda's garden, you said.*

Amber hills slouch silently in the west  
And cool California air grips our arms  
Like an old friend from the old country.  
Just when I was about to say, hey  
I'm beginning to love the cliché,  
"The days dragged on like cigarettes,"  
Having heard it sung by Elvis Costello, now old  
And round as a note bulging with concessions,  
The food finally arrives and you ask  
If we can say a prayer for this blessing  
Of arancini di riso, gorgonzola and dolma.



MEDITATIONS ON A BACKYARD LEMON TREE DURING THE LOCKDOWN,  
OR THE DEATH OF METAPHOR

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It's already been a month.  
A man I don't recognize has been wearing my clothes,  
Same ones after I had to make a run  
For a dozen handmade masks from a woman south of town.  
She couldn't speak English.  
I thought I could speak Spanish. We gestured  
Like those gigantic inflatable tube figures at used car lots.

The house was on the main drag across from a barber shop  
Where men give you the once-over  
Checking for the wrong color.  
On my way back, I made an illegal turn  
And spotted a brick building with a sign that said *Church for Sale*.  
Even God wanted to relocate.

Today the sun appeared.  
A beam of light and the fulcrum of malaise wedged me out.  
The only thoughts on my mind were a title that asked,  
"What If Humans Had 6 Fingers?"  
(My answer to that? Sure as hell would change the way we do math.)  
And my guitar, and "The Beast in Me" by Johnny Cash.

My backyard these days  
Is as far as I care to wander.  
It's not where I thought I'd see you again  
Leaning on your walker, appearing as the indefinite past  
When you asked, "When are you going back?"

I thought I tore that page out.

And just as fast as you appear, you vanish.  
I invoke the prayer of the ordinary.

In a time when days pile on top of each other  
And I'm at the foot of insanity, I turn figurative—  
Think John Wayne whipping out his pistol and making the tenderfoot dance.

If nostalgia runs in my veins, I don't know how many times  
I've woken up  
To bandages around my wrists.

But I am porous.  
You made sure of that.

Let's end here with me looking up at the lemon tree  
Like a dog waiting for a command.

After days of promise, the rains finally came down last night,  
And right when the tree's on verge of fruit.  
Blades of white petals now mark the ground.  
A spider has found shelter in a curled leaf and tomorrow it may start to build . . .

But wait, wait, wait—

You know where I'm going with this, Cirilo,  
And you may just as well tell me to stop feeding this lazy metaphor.  
It's just too easy—  
As easy as inviting everyone to a parade

After a lockdown.

You also know I'm a load of crock.  
It wasn't "The Beast in Me" and Johnny Cash that breached threshold  
And cast their spell singing about how  
*The beast in me has learned to live with pain.*  
It's all figuration.

It really is about "Alison," Elvis Costello's contribution to the great songbook  
Of the one who got away, singing in the key of E  
About how

*I know this world is killing you.*

I'm afraid  
It's no longer about the girl.  
No one gives jack about her  
Now that the world has turned, and is now literal.  
Never thought it would come to this. Happy you didn't stick around.

## HOW TO PUT AN END TO IT

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don't water it for days  
say you didn't know  
use every cliché in the book  
walk away  
turn to John 3:16  
grab the wings and twist  
don't use scissors  
whistle while you work  
say you mean it this time  
redefine it  
mark the edges  
grab a knife  
start slashing  
then call it art  
leave out metaphors  
let it run  
lie  
hide  
cut it off  
watch it beg  
say it wasted its life  
erase its memory  
shut it down  
leave it in its cage  
take away the stars  
bring back the past  
call it names  
call it a motherfucking waste  
call its bluff  
call it mother  
don't call  
leave something  
where it lies  
not flowers  
maybe a rock  
promise you'll come back

## HEARING A SONG OVER HORS D'OEUVRES (REPRISE)

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How can I tell you I've started  
To love the phrase *the days dragged on like cigarettes?*  
Maybe it's because it's sung by a gruff and balding tenor, his old swagger gone  
And the notes sound like concessions bulging out like the belly of fish.

Or maybe I'm just not a prick anymore.

When the food comes, I whisper thanks for the grace.

You say you love the phrase  
*Read into it what you will*, now that you're hearing it from me

Because it reminds you of an open gate.

*You're in America now*

Gains meaning quite different in another's tongue.  
It's another order.