

Tuned Adrenaline: A Beat-Boogied Headful

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Epigraphs and a Dedication

Meanwhile, meanwhile, oh!, meanwhile,

...

*the boys that tremble beneath the pale terror of the directors,
the women drowned in mineral oils,
the crowd of hammer, violin, or cloud,
will scream although their brains may blow out on the wall,
will scream in front of the domes,
will scream maddened by fire,
will scream maddened by snow,
will scream with their heads full of excrement,
will scream like all the nights together,
will scream with a voice so torn
that the cities tremble like little girls
and the cities of oil and music break...*

—*Scream to Rome*
Federico García Lorca
1930

*Well, the girls all look when I go by
It's what I wear that makes 'em sigh
Black slacks... I wear a red bow-tie...
Black slacks... they say "me oh my!"
Black slacks... with a cat chain down to my knees
I ain't nothin' but a real cool breeze
Black slacks....*

—*Black Slacks*
Joe Bennett and Jimmy Denton
1957

*Where I'm from, the birds sing a pretty song
and there's always music in the air.*

—*Adapted from "Twin Peaks"*
The Man from Another Place
1990

—For Ron Goldman, my best sideman and colleague:
Play It!

When We Play Our Last Ones

when I arrive I'll picture a story like this
a guitar man loses his bass player in North Dakota
the gig trail links ahead across the northern tier
like last year tonight it's Wolf Point
a new bass will fly in from LA / he learns fast
the guitar man in his motel room restrings his Strat
new strings each night / snow flurries outside and he wonders
is the gig on / North of there a tiny but chubby dyed blonde
hurries through her laundry / she idols the man
from last year / she plans to wait 'round back
the stage area for him to stop but he won't
he'll play on for his lost bassman who's flying
out to LA to be sprinkled off Ventura
while the guitar player and chick singer drink beers
all day in a stinky room at the Tip Top Motel

Wolf Point Montana

in a stinky room at the Tip Top Motel
the guitar man is changing out his strings
Blue Steel 10s / he's put them through
the back of his Strat and is winding them up
with his tuning wrench / outside the light
rain has turned to heavy snow / he doesn't know
if the replacement will make it today
if the gig's still on tonight / he's been dozing
all day / next door the singer's wondering why
she's in her own room / on the North Line she shares
two days ago they lost him in Stanley ND
flew him back to LA on runway 27 / aortic dissection
the MD said / done tuning he plays the bass's favorite
licks / the singer dozes / up North just a bit the wife
who's waited a year is finishing her laundry / ready to fold
about to attack the cosmetics / she's a dreamer

Scobey Montana

about to attack her cosmetics / she's a dreamer
a little chubby since marriage she likes to horse
around outside her home / she saw them down in Wolf Point
last year a warm year with a warm light west wind
sliding through Scobey / then / through Wolf Point
she liked him standing still behind the band
but holding them together with springy rhythm strokes
and finger-pick-like textures / she's no critic
she liked his white streaked flowing hair
his odd wah tone on leads / she liked how obvious
the singer's passion / how unaware her husband
must be / she wants to see him play tonight
the heavy snow though starting up and the timid bar owner
maybe she'll miss them / just one night / next day Havre
just too far / she reaches inside her waistband
her husband is out at the Brendis barn cleaning stalls
that upward chord move still lingering a full year later

Pillows

that upward chord move still lingering a full year later
she has the tape she made and plays it over and over
most days / she never clutched the truth of the singer's passion
thought it part of the play the group made around the choice
of songs they played / the story they told to fit the songs
together aside from their flaws and mistakes / they were a party band
not a concert band / in the room next door the singer wondered
how hard the death would hit the band / hit the guitar player
she loved him sometimes / years ago on a tour / a decade later
on another / now the North Tier and here in the Missouri Breaks
she held a pillow between her legs she thought because of the cold
that came with the heavy snow and the wind from the West that wrestled
the light into dusk / she wished his arm over her side and cupping her
he did most nights and most mornings / instead if she listened hard
she could hear the plain song of the strings through the door between them
not fully closed / she knew it was closed / the guitar man had tears
the band was his and the bassman's / the new guy'd be better
he knew because that's how agents worked / he needed to know the songs
right now / the bass the only guy who never stopped playing
he waited for the phone and soon it rang / he let it / then the phone
next door / she would get it and fate would follow on / up North she took hope
over disappointment / she would one day run away / tonight just a drive

How True / So Tough

over disappointment / she would one day run away / tonight just a drive
to the Wolf Point venue / like a cliché in her pickup / empty rifle mount
on the rear window / he bends the strings hard so they settle into their tuners
the under-window heater pops and flits out dust smoke from an idle season
he thinks he's been in this room before / he connects to the weak wifi
finds Living on a Prayer from the 12.12.12 concert / looks for the bass player
whose role is a simple bottom / his ringing ears hear the grumbling interplay of a heavy
rhythm intro / the bass's constant low line / the drummer's dear downbeat shades like mistakes
the women in the front row love more / the guitar man remembers from Wolf Point the woman
who stood off stage right eyeing his fingers / a player he thought but it looked wrong
she didn't sway the way women do who lust for guitar men / she studied his fingers
what the left hand did quietly on the fretboard / what the right hand did for rhythm
the bassman would be to his left in front by a little / the bassman sang so stood forward
the singer would wander / her knees deeply forward and back cranking her hips / he listened
for the sounds of his vibrato / how deep / how wide / how like the same kind of smear
passion makes in the right bed / how he knew all these things well forgotten / how true
the walls an old yellow / the carpet bare from bed to bath / the red door locked to the outside

Preparations

the walls an old yellow / the carpet bare from bath to bed / the red door locked to the outside
from the next room it's on / we leave in two / the phone's answer / their rituals
begin / hair body fingers stretching planning the meal / no bassman / the replacement
will meet them at the gig / he knows it won't be the same / he props his suitcase
lid open / does what he does / up North the woman prepares her story / the snow worries
the details so she invents different ones / her husband is cleaning his boot treads on the boot brush
nailed to the porch / after hearing her story he loads four bags of cement in the truck bed
he works his boots with a hoof pick / they live on the res / the singer strips and washes
everything / none of her is faked / she wears close black stretch pants and a loose black
tunic / she begins her warmups slow and low / the darkness coming on / wakes her up
fully / he polishes his guitars and cases them / grabs extra string sets and picks / he's ready

Quiet & Still

full / he polishes his guitars and cases them / grabs extra string sets and picks / he's ready
for what matters / up North she breaks free of the ranch / heads into the flaking future
she doesn't let herself think it but she loves the guitar man / has read all the online
blogs & tweets / grocery store checkout-line rags / she's read reports of trysts and
but the singer is too extravagant for him / she can hear that in his playing / different vibrato
her singing / the guitar player and bassman together every band and she can hear
the bassman in the guitar's twisting licks / they are the couple / she's read it too
they rouse the drummer / he likes it late / their manager loads them up minus one / they head
to town / whiteness in their way / multiple nights in a town they mark the best places / tonight
it's Wolfe Point Café / up North the wind gusts swerve her mightily / the cement bags hold

Care Crystal

it's Wolfe Point Café / up North the wind gusts swerve her might-be / the cement bags hold
her mind to the ground / this time she'll talk / ask him to take her / wherever
he goes / she will wait till the last echo of his last note lingers off / she's packed
small things / later they can buy her more / she'll say she can sing / the guitar player sits
on a fixed seat too close to a fixed table / the burgers are dressed with mayo and options / the fries
cut in spirals / the bassman hated all such fixings / he called them fixtures / he pronounced
odd words wrong / read words didn't sound in his ears / when leads went on he counted
measures / mention a song and note names came to mind / differential note strides
aphantasia / the singer is sullen / she's been unnoticed since she found him in his
bath / I thought he was alive / I touched him cold / five gigs canceled / the snow outside
can't care / no point anthropomorphizing it / just white bits of crystal water coming down

Last Tumbleweed

can't care about anything / no point anthropomorphizing it / just white bits of crystal water coming down
on the road South to Wolfe Point / the woman grips the wheel like reins on a bull / he is not
a mistake she thinks over and over / says over and over / the cement bags thump / at the café it's
sundaes for all / the drummer arrives late / waffles his thing / they jot a set list / the guitar
player wonders what the new bass can do / the singer lingers her hand on his wrist / outside
the last tumbleweed bounds past / a snowplow scrapes by / the guitar player wonders whether tonight
they will too / the bassman's back in LA heading for... / dead to the world / nervous
for nothing / snow has made it to six inches / the chill to 24 degrees / won't snow much colder
up North or down here they are all anticipating and regretting / they are wondering about the next ceremony

Warm Air

up North or down here they are all wondering and regretting / they are anticipating the next ceremony
a sundae each on the cold night / they stand for leaving and the singer clutches the guitar player
outside they walk and slide to the manager's van and hope the cold's not torqued the guitars too much
he idles the van till the heater blasts warm / the van makes it slowly toward the venue
the snow's been crushed into wet ruts whose sides are splashed onto parked cars as they drive past
up North the roads are worse / no plows yet so the pickup is hub deep in snow / she's used to it
she pictures clutching him / the heater blasts warm / they could make it to the coast
in two days / set up a home / listen to tunes all day / wrap all night / it's better
than it's ever been for her / at least her dream is hers / the world near her is good
at changing the rules / good at burying her upward glances / in the distance she notes the flickering
home lights / meals being cooked / fires in wood stoves / she could smell it if she opened up

Tens

home lights / meals cooked / over fires in wood stoves / she could smell it if she opened up
her windblown window / if she recalled the stories she read in plains books / if she paid
attention to movies made up in men's minds / the bassman didn't talk much / played
too much like himself / no one else can see / he saw feelings in others and rejected
them / overlays and ambiguity suited him / he knew words he couldn't pronounce
so involved in his own mind / he dropped suddenly and it seemed he could get
up if he wanted / he didn't want / he never played with his back to the band / with his back
to the dancers / shut up and dance he told them once / the woman up North knew
he was tied to only the guitar player / not the black-leggings singer / she dodged
a curve in the road her dream covered over / she missed what she never had / she would grab
that all by the neck tonight / a neck of worn tendons / a neck of clean new Blue Steel 10s

Overlays and Ambiguities

all by the neck tonight / a neck of worn tendons / a neck of clean new Blue Steel tense
the song's new end / bass and guitar always together / they learned together
their musical strangeness power the band / the singer just a warm thing
on lost nights / tell me of the towns he once said / the worn out towns
the flash flood of gone money / the great photos of plains America display rusted
tractors / caved in roofs / peeled off paint / tilted silos / old men / old women
hey baby it's the fourth of July he sang / last slow song of the set / she cries in the dark
lies and greed he always said / the band's feelings / how that messed them up
the new bassman arrives motel-side / unloads luggage / tells his ride take me to the venue
he will use his own bass but the old bassman's rig / he's a pro / he rides slouched
snow in waves flashes off her windshield / she is cold in parts / hot in others / sad

Wrong Then Right

snow in waves flashes off her windshield / she is cold / she is hot / she is sad
she pulls over upstreet of the dance hall / snow's risen on the parked cars / she
the other one/ wonders if the last time he pulled her down onto the bed was the last time ever
the singer always waited patiently undressed under the covers while the guitar
player hunched out the motel door to tell his kids goodnight / sometimes tell a story
he memorized or makes up about the flat expanses of old railroad land stretching
toward the foothills / the long miles of dirt road disappearing into twilight fog
the mist / he tells his wife he loves her / and he does / he also likes densely written books
the singer's a light read / they are destined only for sweat and expulsion / she feels
his leads are for her / the words to the songs he picks or writes are for her / she
this one / is a romantic / the new bassman arrives / the van he's in slides stopped
he's dressed in boots jeans T-shirt and a leather barn coat/ he owns two cowboy hats
but didn't wear one for this trip / the woman frozen in her own North world steps
to the side of the venue / peeks to the parking lot / sees the wrong bassman / news
doesn't travel sometimes / it's not them her head drops / she sees his bass case
it's not a Fender / later a half mile away slipping slow the singer and her temporary man
will become a tangled pair / the North woman has slipped back to her truck / she will make it
to the coast in a day or two / she will find the sea as blue as hopeful films imagine / hope

A Thin Cup

someday the coast / the sea will be a quiet blue but not quite silent / like hope
his brothers / who knew? / will get in their kayaks by Ventura Pier near sundown
the moon a thin cup above / the pier marching piles / if you were on shore watching
the sky would start black above / turn yellow green under the pier / fade through red to black
one will carry a box by his feet / the other a bag of bagels / pelicans will linger by just
above the slight curls / once far enough they will stop and say something people brought up
by religion would say but mean it something else / then ashes will slip to the sea
and a bagel last meal / the brothers will not cry because they have forgotten everything
the guitar man will turn away from the singer in the Hi-Line Motel after Box Clubs at Boxcars
the North woman / her bags of cement her only grip on Earth / will be parked on a beach
in La Push / another res / a different song / a puzzled man behind her / ahead / the same ocean