

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 Say Our Last Ones

when I arrive it will be the last day
I picture a story like this
a guitar man loses his bass player in North Dakota
the gig trail links ahead across the northern tier
tonight will be Wolf Point just like last year
the new bass will fly in from LA
he learns fast / the guitar man is in his motel room
restringing his Strat / new strings every night
snow flurries and he wonders if the gig'll go on
North of there the tiny but chubby dyed blonde
hurries through her laundry / she idols the man
from last year / that evening she plans to wait around back
the stage area / waiting for him to stop playing
but this time he won't / he will play for his lost bass player
who is flying out to LA to be sprinkled off
Ventura while the guitar player and lady singer
drink beers all day

Wolf Point Montana

a stinky room in 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
whether the replacement player will make
it today or if the gig's still on / he's been
dozing all day so far / next door the singer's
wondering why she has her own room
on the North Line she shares with him
they lost their bass two days ago
in Stanley ND / flew him back out to LA
on runway 27 / aortic dissection the MD remarked
done tuning he plays the bassman's favorite licks
the singer dozes / up North just a bit
the wife who's waited a year is finishing her laundry
and is about to attack the cosmetics / she's a dreamer

Scobey Montana

about to attack the cosmetics / she's a dreamer
Scobey Montana / a little chubby since she married
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 how he stood still behind the band
but held it together with springy rhythm strokes
and finger-pick-like textures / she was no music critic
she liked his white streaked flowing hair
his odd wah tone on leads / she liked how obvious
the singer's passion for him was / how she knew/guessed the singer's
husband was unaware / she wanted to see him play tonight
the heavy snow though starting up and the timid bar owner
maybe she'll miss them / just one night / the next day Havre
just too far / she reached inside her waistband
her husband out at Brendis's 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 and over
most days / she never clutched the truth of the singer's passion
thought it only 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 would 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 stops 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
his role a simple bottom / Bon Jovi gets the early words wrong after
the grumbling interplay of Sambora's heavy rhythm intro / Tommy used
to work on the docks / the bass's constant low line / Mini's been on strike
the drummer's dear downbeat shade over mistakes / he's down on his luck
the women in the front row love it more / how true / so tough / the guitar
man remembers from Wolf Point the woman who stood off stage right eyeing
him / 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 bed to bath / the red door locked to the outside
from the next room it's on / we'll leave in two hours / the answer the phone gave
their rituals begin / hair body fingers stretching planning the meal / no bassman tonight
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
long-sleeve 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

fully / 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
articles blogs tweets / the grocery store checkout-line rags / she's read the reports of trysts
with the singer but the singer is too extravagant for him / she can hear that in his playing
her singing / the guitar player and bassman have been together every band and she can hear
the bassman in the guitar man's twisting licks / they are the couple / she's read that too
they rouse the drummer / he likes it late / their manager loads them all up minus one / they head
into town / when they play multiple nights in a town they mark down the best places / tonight
it's Wolfe Point Café / up North the wind gusts swerve her mightily but the cement bags hold

Care Crystal

it's Wolfe Point Café / up North the wind gusts swerve her mightily but the cement bags hold
her mind safely on the ground / this time she'll talk to him / ask him to take her / wherever
he goes / she will wait until the last reverberation of his last note is gone / she has packed
small things / they will buy her more later / 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 into spirals / the bassman hated all of these fixings / he called them fixtures / he pronounced
interesting words wrong / when he read words they didn't sound in his ears / when leads went on he counted
measures / when you mentioned a song the bass note names came to mind or the relative note distances
aphantasia he called it / the sullen singer / she's not been noticed since she found the bassman in his
bath / I thought he was alive but I touched him cold / five gigs canceled / the snow outside
can't care about anything / 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 then 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 down a set list / the guitar
player wonders what the new bass will be able to do / the singer lingers her hand on his wrist
outside the last tumbleweed bounds past / a snowplow scrapes by / the guitar player wonders whether they
will too tonight / the bassman's back in LA heading for hunoz where / he is 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 anticipating and regretting / they are wondering about the next ceremony
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 hard
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 is 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 sidelong 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 being cooked / 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 the movies made up in men's minds / the bassman didn't talk much / played
too much like himself / no one else you see / he figured feelings in the others and rejected
them / overlays and ambiguity suited him / he knew words he couldn't pronounce
so involved in his own mind he was / he dropped suddenly and it seemed like 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 was the power of the band / the singer was just a warm thing
on lost nights / tell me of the towns he once said / the towns are worn out
the flash flood of money out of them / 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 / see 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 in parts / hot in others / sad
she pulls over upstreet from 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 covers while the guitar
player hunched out the motel door to tell his kids goodnight / sometimes tell them a story
he's 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 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
of minor deaths doesn't travel / it's not them her head drops / she sees his bass case
it's not a Fender / a half mile away slipping slow the singer and her temporary man
are a tangled pair / the North woman slips back to her truck / she will make it to the coast
in a day or two / she will find the sea blue / a good thing / hope she imagined

A Thin Cup

in a day or two / he will find the sea as good as a blue thing / hope was what she imagined
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 the 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