Allowing Some Blues

Poems by Anna Baker

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To my family, who in the portrait of their everyday lives,
with all their human strengths and weaknesses,
their contradictions and synchronicities,
their textures and consistencies,
can be found the everlasting vitality
of the human spirit.

The past is never dead, in fact it's not even past.
William Faulkner, Intruder in the Dust

Write the things which thou hast seen
and the things which are, and the
things which shall be hereafter.
The Revelations of St. John the Divine

We shall not cease from exploration
And at the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started
and know that place for the first time.
T.S. Eliot

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Going Home

I knew that place,
the interstate so flat you could skip rocks across it,
so black and hot that for a second I imagined my wheels sticking,
melded in the gluey black top.
The black trees even blacker
in the tangerine sun that seeped sideways,
oozing like hot cane,
caking the egret's spindle legs
as she fire-danced
in shallow swamp
water, black, thick and screaming.
The air began to wave and drip
in a sugared heat,
table-heavy with the course of life in it,
thick as breath,
sitting hot and wet on my skin,
and in my hair.
I am dizzy from too much saxophone.

Hurricanes

We never had storm doors,
or cellars to hide in.
When a storm came,
with a smell like the ocean
in the wrong place,
the sky,
a glaucous eye,
we got a look on our lips
and a dance in our hair.
We went out,
in them,
drank yellow air-
stronger than Tippitina's two dollar hurricanes.
Sipping heavy breezes,
with too much of something in them,
we danced with trees that had slow names,
oak, magnolia, pecan,
while the air bellowed
like a drunkard.

Daddy

His blue jean thighs
covered an old cigarette burn
in the car seat,
the color and feel of hot cream,
and between them
squeezed a cherry coke
that wet the burning leather seat
and his jeans.
Ashes singed his black chest hair,
and neck strained
he blew thick sad dragon smoke breath,
out of a cracked window,
chewed and lunged
spitty yellow ribbons
of lung butter,
in the wind
spun flat and wild
like a Spanish dancing skirt
and smacked hard
against the window.
I sucked a Slim Jim,
and counted telephone poles
between gas stations
where daddy filled
our shining luxury sedan
with Moonpies
a tube of peanuts each
and a carton of
True Blue 100's.
I adjusted my cutoff jeans
to wipe the sweat
from the back of my
thighs.

Nightsounds

From my room
the night sounds
of a child-free
nighttime house
drip and squirt
up the stairs
like the
luring beauty of an out of tune piano.
Strapped flat
to my four-poster bed
by flowered sheets
tucked too tight,
and white tasseled bedspread
that smelled like Tide,
I watched
white rectangles of
passing stranger's
light
ooze along my wall,
freeze white doll faces,
wild doll eyes,
in secret celebration,
hidden from me
with liquid darkness
and timed laughter
from Cheers
on the living room t.v.
I tried to blink my eyes
to the rhythmic click
of Daddy's toe nail clippers,
tried to catch my dolls
dancing in the dark
but when the clicking out raced
my blinking eyes
I would dream that Sam Malone,
not daddy,
was clipping his toenails
down the stairs
on the sofa
and laughing at
every right moment.

Herbert Joe

Before he was Daddy's little brother
he was his cousin,
and before he sold drugs
he sold Metabolife.
Before he went to Franklin County prison,
he went in the army reserves,
and before he had to post bail
he had two cars, a court martial,
a Burmese python,
a high school football trophy,
a pretty wife, white high tops
and one count of involuntary manslaughter.
I mostly saw him drive the Nissan,
tiny, toy truck, low to the ground,
but the blue Corvette came to our house
at least once.
I stood in the driveway with it
in a heat you could swim in,
the hot sun melting the silver speckled fiberglass,
the same color as those bouncy balls
you get in gum ball machines for a quarter,
I couldn't stop breaking off pieces
of the fender, it bent and crumbled in my hand
in a way that hurt and felt good at the same time.
This was before my sugar got hard and
before Herb stopped making me blush.

Grandmother Mimmy

About a month after she got married
for the fifth and final time,
and to the second Bill,
she would sit under the hair dryer
at Renata's Beauty Parlor
because the world wasn't new anymore,
but her hair color was,
and the tint of it made Bill nervous.
But, it was 1974,
and they were both wonderfully depressed.
So they sold some more land.
Amidst winnowed cotton fields,
tired and hot
with dusty, abandoned air,
their lives were fashionable,
and as mild as
sentimental poverty.
So, in true Southern Style
they spent
every shining dime
they had.

The Peach

Even in old black and white
she promises fun at a hundred miles per hour,
and I can tell
hers is a face that would sleep with married men
and accept furs from strangers.
With a long lady cigarette
and her bathing suit straps pulled way down,
It could be 1938,
in a time when all women were blonde and
addictive,
like Turkish Delight,
and they didn't walk,
but floated.
And where men flapped wildly,
like a moth caught in a gust,
blown against a wall,
feebly clinging,
too light to have struck hard,
but pale in simple,
bewildered,
amazement
of the women
who taste like
ice cold peaches.

Black Flies

My father lived
on that postage stamp
of long, hot, weary, dead soil
where airless days drip in and out
and scales of grass stick
like flecks of old dried paint in the dirt
and tomatoes either wrinkle into gruesome rot
or explode like grenades in a fire,
he lived
in a blurry heat
where screen doors always slam,
and life either shriveled to death
or lunged into a jungle growth
sucking all the air
and to grow up never existed,
as unattainable
as diamonds or rocket ships
mermaids or contacts,
and to think back now
childhood all so terrible and beautiful,
like the howl of hunting dogs
or the buzz of black flies;
better than silence but full ugly.
And maybe he makes it out worse than it was
when he says they never skipped rocks
and had only a tire to play with
an almost orphan,
for and against,
the woman, a nurse
with a switch
and the old man with short hands
and 4 bullet wounds,
in a house on loan
that screamed all night
after the flies were quiet.

Night

On a dark, sacred
Mississippi night,
when God isn't watching,
I can taste the blackness,
and sin becomes
frenzied play
under curtain of midnight.
Heat hangs in the air
like ripe fruit
on a motionless branch.
Sweat drips from my crotch,
so I dress in mist.
The live oaks sway
all legs and arms together
and the slivered moon
loves me.

Grandmother's House

In an afternoon of laze and wistaria,
where the air goldens
in constant summer,
always on the lip of rot,
there hangs
so much satisfaction
and so much longing
that the house is fuller than it is
And in the silent heat
women scream,
and children cry,
dogs and men groan,
come up in the dark
from the swamp in which they sleep.
Not for ears,
but for skin and hair to hear.
I walk through the hall
like a ghost,
and I listen to women
who dance on the edges of knives
behind tall doors and gaping keyholes.
Their lives hang
like breath in the walls,
each
an elegant ballet,
an elephant battle.
And I was never there,
but I remember it like I was.

A Parasol in Every Glass

The house was bourbon
and sweet smoke,
wild like a music box
wound up too tight.
Our great aunts sat around a bowl
of plastic grapes and poker chips,
in the butler's pantry,
sipping slow syrup
from great-grandmother's wedding goblets,
four fat fingers full,
a parasol in every glass.
They played poker like they drove cars,
fast, lucky, and into tops of trees.
In pink pant suits,
and hellcat hair,
they smeared red lipstick on faces shaped like figs,
their voices colliding and crashing in on top of each other
in the unwritten frenzy of a
street corner jazz band.
The shuffling of cards, a fevered drumbeat,
as poker chips drop among discarded crawfish heads.

A Funeral in Natchez

A beautiful day for a funeral,
and like a full color spread in Southern Living
they fluttered and floated
over cucumber sandwiches and curiously strong lemonade,
and when Ron Miller signed the guest book he wrote
"I knew I loved it here when the whole world showed up for Mac Noble's funeral."
And I added in mean little black letters,
in honor of Grandmother's second husband,
"in straw yellow hats, spring seersuckers, bow ties,
all swilling his favorite drink",
tapping white tapered toes across
the spot where we'd stepped over him on Christmas day
not looking down and no one drinking
because it might be hard on him,
and him the only one drunk,
on all fours on the back bricks.
They sipped cool mint under the stunted
Lagustrum where he'd leaned,
swaying like a circus act on that blue night,
(blue from the moon or maybe the bug zapper)
from that smallish tree to his
blue Pontiac Grand Prix
back and forth looking
for scotch in a brown paper bag
for anything in a brown paper bag
and daddy laughed
because he'd hidden the scotch just a reach away
and tragic white blossoms sprinkled
Mac's own seersucker baby blue
like dandruff.
And on the way to his funeral
his real daughter laughed,
smoothed her white linen
and told a funny story
about the gas chamber.
But his son never made it at all,
looking for his scotch they said
and my grandmother
as pickled as his liver over the years
and having been through all this before with Grandpa Joe
smiled a sliver as mama told her
"they came for you "
but I am not sure.
It looks to me like they came for the good time,
and a beautiful day for a funeral.

A Hundred MPH

In a silver car,
on the road to Plaquemine Parish Women's Prison,
to judge an inmate Beauty Pageant,
with the sun reflecting tropical fruit colors,
mango and apple and papaya,
We gloried in our skin
and licked the taste of sugar cane
off our fingers.
My hair curled in the corners of my mouth.
The swamp breathed
under moss and cypress knees,
lapped at both sides of the road,
and tried to crawl in the sunroof.
We passed a cop talking to a fat nosed girl,
and I hid my smile
behind my tongue
as Daddy drove a hundred,
and Jesus wiggled on the dash board.

The Road To Town

Highway 61 curls like my toes,
arches with my back.
With one hand at 12,
the other out the window,
I roar through a day
that hangs in the trees,
like a Christmas toy.
On beams of paved sun,
tearing through scrub pines
and brown grass,
through towns
where dogs are tied to trees,
every house is brick,
and waves a flag.
I pass
Hot mama's tamales,
and three boiled peanut stands
with hand painted signs,
they urge me on.
As I crest the highest hill,
I can see a church steeple,
a finger pointing sharp at the sky.
On the low side,
my road winds down,
maybe ends,
and the air fades to a graver tint.
Traffic moves in a slew,
past Texaco,
Sonic,
Walmart.
Like a worn out clock ticking slow hours,
we roll into a settled heat,
and I forget about what's beyond the town.
Dirt cliffs rise up on either side,
edges of a deep rut,
carved by a giant's fingernail
who sits above us
dressed in kudzu,
looming, silent,
and more dense than shadow.

Sweeping the Cemetery

With pony steps on a trampoline
of rotting leaves,
through the low light of smooth shadows
and sun shapes,
I followed a path to the cemetery,
twirling a yellow broomstick
like a baton with fire on both ends.
As my knees thrust themselves up
into the birds' nests,
my baton twisted heavily in the air,
thrashing branches and
sending a short shower of pecans down
around me,
scattered applause from my
imaginary audience.
Pecans gathered in my shirttail,
and the baton tucked under my right arm,
I roared like a Thunderkart through the iron gate
to scrape away thick, jelly leaves,
and the tangled hair of spider's webs.
The broom worked layer by layer,
barely breaking the surface until at the last minute
white stone showed through.
Finally, I could trace the names with my finger.