

Money

The night I saw his pickup parked beside that
darkened house at 5th and Chester
I went home and swept my arm across his dresser
And his trophies, softball signed by Springsteen,
for Christ's sake, a Little Mermaid lamp
Framed photograph of me, a set of tags and collar
for a Boston Terrier named Champ
Who disappeared in '93, and a boomerang shaped ashtray
full of ticket stubs from Tiger Stadium and the Skydome
All went crashing to the floor.
It was an unexpectedly satisfying moment.
"Oh look", I said out loud, "Behold a shrine to the glory
that was Fred 'the Sled' 'Stiletto' Baxter"
And then I packed a few things in the laundry bag
and took the westbound highway out of town.
I didn't leave a note. I didn't think I had to.

When you told me, honey, you'd love me forever
was your money on the end of the world?
Were you running like the road went on forever,
were you betting on it ending?

I found a furnished room for forty-seven bucks a week
and rented it from Helen Carrothers
Who said she'd borne seven children but the one
she loved the best died as a baby while the others
Bursting with good health outgrew their clothes, learned to
talk back, tracked mud across her rugs in high priced shoes
Stayed out late and wrecked their cars and married badly
and once they were gone she rented out the rooms.
Mine had been Joe Junior's and was done in red, white and blue.
It had a view into the second story kitchen
of a seven story tenement
So on the third day when Joe Junior showed up
with a suitcase and a beagle named Ramona
I was glad to give him back his room and take a refund
on the rent.

When you told me, honey, you'd love me forever
was your money on the end of the world?
Were you running like the road went on forever,
were you betting on it ending?

When my right front tire blew out just past the turnoff for LaSalle
I coaxed her to the shoulder and the first car passing
stopped to help
It was a guy named Gordon in a two-tone Pontiac
who said he was a poet and then proved it
while I ratcheted the jack against the undercarriage

By reading me an epic poem he'd written
on the theme of good and evil
called "The Song of Gord and Eva"
based on the true story of his own failed marriage.
Poetic license, he said, her name was really Evelyn
And then he read aloud with the unflinching histrionic flair
of the profoundly drunk
And about the time good triumphed over evil
in a consequential and bombastic way
I ratcheted the jack down and tossed the old tire in the trunk.

When you told me, honey, you'd love me forever
was your money on the end of the world?
Were you running like the road went on forever,
were you betting on it ending, oh yeah?

As I kicked up gravel on the shoulder and
accelerated on the blacktop
shifted up to speed and joined the wave of traffic flowing
I think I understood for the first time in my life
that I really don't know where I am going

When you told me, honey, you'd love me forever
was your money on the end of the world?
Were you running like the road went on forever,
were you betting on it ending, oh yeah?

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True

I would have called it love,
he would have called it paying close attention
Who's to say that we were either of us wrong?
There was a time when he could call me after midnight
From a hotel room somewhere in the middle of somewhere
and ask what I had on
And I'd tell him the truth, convincingly
The devil's in the details and the devil's in the deal, religiously
And there were moments I could almost believe
He was nearer than long distance, my god, to thee

All that dangerous stuff, risk and dare and rush
And a prayer of follow through
The secret ways I wanted you
It's all still true, it's all still true, it's all still true

There was a stormy Tuesday in a northern west coast town
He was heading somewhere; I was burning time on the road
We spent the afternoon in a rental car driving around
Like kids with nowhere to go
In the parking lot at the Value Thrift
We fell together across the bucket seats and the gearshift
I tried to tell him how he made me feel
I said — it doesn't come along this real

All that dangerous stuff, risk and dare and rush
And a prayer of follow through
The secret ways I wanted you
It's all still true, it's all still true, it's all still true

The night he called me up and told me it was over
I heard trouble in the street,
angry shouting, breaking glass, cries for help
I sat there in the dark while the sirens screamed
And the whole world went to hell
And I thought about the book he gave me in Vancouver
With the crossroads on the cover,
I thought — if this night is ever over
I think I'd better go and read that book
And then I'd better go and look for another lover

All that dangerous stuff, risk and dare and rush
And a prayer of follow through
The secret ways I wanted you
It's all still true, it's all still true, it's all still true

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What I Know

What I know about this city would fit inside a box
The size of my lover's two room apartment
With the shades half drawn on the view of the alley
Newspapers, magazine, sox, shoes, Chinese take out cartons
On the floor, a blooming amaryllis,
Stereo pounding out some NRBQ
We're reeling around the room in some hambone highland swing
Until he jams his toe against a chair and turns the air blue

My lover watches me paint my toes
I watch him shaving in the mirror
He says — did I ever tell you how I got this scar here
Or this scar here?
Yeah, I was pretty dangerous and I was pretty
Oh yeah, I was pretty, guess it's good you didn't know me when
I always knew the path between my fist and the other guy's face
Which goes hand in hand in hand in hand with taking it on the chin

Yeah, oh what I wouldn't have done back then
to feel my heart still thrashing
Drive fast, fight rough, love wrong, drink hard
And maybe I never really changed all that much
I just paid the lawyer with a credit card

My lover watches teevee with the sound turned down
Strumming his guitar and singing — hmm hmm
A-hmm baby hmm, hey baby hey
Ooh ooh I'm talking about hey hey hey hey hey
Yeah, I got this Gibson from my uncle Jim when I was twenty and
I got this lick from Albert Collins "-----"
Man that man could move!!
You know if it don't have that greasy groove
I hear my mother calling

My lover falls asleep between the words of the story he is telling
Something about a flame and the hair on his chest
I watch him curled beside me in our dark cave of blankets
Like a bear or something dangerous and wild
but, for the moment, at rest
And I think of all the stories and the inventory
Fingers he has counted on, pointing past point A
The vectors and trajectories, speculative geometry
Scares me so crazy I want to run away
I say — hey, which way is Jersey? No, I'm going to stay
And hear the rest of that story, find out just what was burning
Because I will not be afraid to be afraid to be afraid of you
And then I kiss him on the wishbone of his sternum

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Great Distance

They've torn up the highway from here to wherever you are
But I hear that song in my head and you are here anyway
Maybe it was just a time and a place; maybe it was just too hard
You gave me something good and then you took it away
But on the night you came to my door
and your hair was soaking wet
We made love in that stormy city to
the Complete Robert Johnson Box Set
Come on in my kitchen
Fall to sleep from a great distance

What were we drinking? I guess it was whisky,
we drank a lot in those days
There was something I wanted to tell you.
Seems I missed my chance there
Because after the whisky and after the laughter
and after you turned away

You asked if I loved you but by then there was no right answer
But I remember we danced in my kitchen
and laughed till we both were in tears
And what I still want to tell you is what you still don't want to hear
So don't listen
Fall to sleep from a great distance

What about all of your time on the highway
and all of the friends that you made
And all of the lovers you turned to for comfort
and all of that smoky whisky
And all of the laughing and all of the fighting
and all of the running away
And what if you'd let me love you,
what would I do with all of that history
So tonight in this stormy town
I'll light fifty candles and watch them burn down
Play Come On In My Kitchen
Fall to sleep from a great distance
Come on in my kitchen
From a great distance

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One Two

In your dream you are careful
You aim your rifle
You feel your fingers on the catch
Then one, two, a shock and a flash
And you shoot
Clean through the toe of your boot

And if there is pain or shame it doesn't matter
It's not your war anymore, you are home free
Lay back in the dirt and wait for airlift to Okinawa
Then wake confused, next to me

You say, yeah, you ask yourself, "what am I willing to give up?"
And it might just be a game, but no, we were
equipped for every joyous destructive perversity
I mean, the inventory of firepower we carried on our backs
If you thought about it you'd crack
Even still I wake from dreams
in that sweat of overpowering urgency
"What am I willing to give up?"
and you know, I'd give it all
to have what I still have

What about the stars and the moonless night,
undercover, listen...

One, two
Counting on your feet to carry you

You say, yeah, I lost some time out in the Arizona desert
In an old adobe overrun with mice and empty sardine tins
I stayed there awhile just shooting at snakes,
stubbing cigarettes into the dirt
Until the heat drove me out that's how I knew that I could feel again

What about the stars and the moonless night,
undercover, listen...

One, two
Counting on your feet to carry you

You say, yeah, it looks good doesn't it
I pay the bills, I check the oil, I phone my mother
before she can even wonder
Why I haven't phoned my mother
I stay inside the things I understand
Makes me look like a happy man, doesn't it
Well, maybe I am
Maybe we've all been had in one way or another

What about the stars and the moonless night,
undercover, listen...

One, two
Counting on your feet to carry you

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My Mother's Daughter

This is my mother's daughter, walking after midnight
On a dark street, a hot night, alone in New Orleans
Somewhere in the distance I hear a violin
And the hum of a porch light, moths flying at the screen
"Close your eyes," I said, "so I can walk away and not look back"
And if he did or if he didn't, I'll never know
I didn't want to go

This is my mother's daughter on the east Texas backroads
Looking for signs to the Johnson City highway
I don't have a map of Texas, I don't want to ask directions
I make wrong turn after wrong turn, still somehow find my way
"I will miss you," I said, "in ways I won't know until you're gone"
He took me in his arms and held me until I turned away
He made me feel so safe I was afraid I'd lose my edge
And I didn't want to stay

This is my mother's daughter at the San Francisco airport
Holding on to a guitar that's worth a lot of money

Late for my flight and crying like a baby
I stumble down the stairs
and through the crowded hallways running
"I don't know what's right or wrong," I said,
"this is just the way the story goes"
Then I left too quickly, but I guess he understood
Good-bye is just too hard to say, and promises
Are just no good

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Three Bills

These boys fight like tomcats, rolling in the ditches
Beside my house, now Bill needs stitches
Because Bill's busted his lip, so they borrow my car
And while Bill is driving Bill to the ER
Bill drives up in a loaned Ranger
With *Rockabye* blaring on the five-disc changer
And he's laying on the horn, shouting "anybody home?"
I run out to shut him up before the neighbors phone
And he's wearing this jacket made of three kinds of plaid
I say, "Bill, you look bad,
And since when did Tartan go with Madras?
You should have left that thing back in your checkered past"
Bill just looks away, pretends to cough
I say, "Bill, you were a grumpy guy long before you
ever had me around to piss you off"

Three Bills
It's going to cost you
Three Bills
It's going to cost you
Three Bills
It's going to cost you
Three Bills

Telephone rings at 3 am
I answer "Hi, Bill" because I know it's him
But it's Bill and I think he says something about bowling
But he's hard to understand, I guess his lip's still swollen
I say "Bill, where's my car? It's three o'clock in the morning"
And he starts talking real fast, then Bill has to horn in
He says, "Hey, come on down, you can borrow Bill's bike"
I hear a clatter in the background and Bill yells "Strike!"
I say, "What, you out of your mind?
The way you made off with my car, think I'll hold on to my shut eye"
And he says "I did you a favor, now you want to kill me?
I think you owe me one" I say, "Yeah, right, bill me"
He says "Have a nice life, you won't be breaking my heart"

I say, "Bill, I'm going to go... I've got to have a nice life
and I seem to be getting a bit of a late start

Three Bills
It's going to cost you
Three Bills
It's going to cost you
Three Bills
It's going to cost you
Three Bills

Morning I walk down to the High Spot
Waitress comes over with the coffee pot
She looks like she stepped off the cover of Glamour
Just then guess who comes spilling through the back door
It's Bill, Bill and Bill, dressed to kill
They say, "Come on to the movies... it's a triple bill!"
I say, "Oh lord" and Bill falls to his knees
Doing the dying swan, I say, "Bill please"
And the waitress looks up, says, "Right away, ma'am"
Starts walking toward the back, Bill looks and says "Damn..."
Then Bill and Bill are twisting their necks
Bill says, "Is she for real?" and Bill says "Holy heck"
And they fall into this moment of awed reverence
I say, "Hey, everybody looks more or less like a Barbie Doll,
if that's your point of reference

Three Bills
It's going to cost you
Three Bills
It's going to cost you
Three Bills
It's going to cost you
Three Bills

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Georgia O'Keeffe

The woman in this photograph is Georgia O'Keeffe
In nineteen-nineteen
The man behind the camera was in love
Light through the lace
Arc of her waist
As she reaches past the edges of the picture's frame

Georgia O'Keeffe could only guess about the future
Georgia O'Keeffe could only guess about the future

I remember waking with your hand on my heart
The arc of our curl

The same breath in the dark until the birds
Sing you awake
Then turning away
And moving toward the morning past the edge of the frame

Georgia O'Keeffe could only guess about the future
Georgia O'Keeffe could only guess about the future

Hum of the road, hands on the wheel,
Love and the search for love
And tall grass in the fields

Tonight I walked into the sunset
Wild blazing sky
Then walked on by
Until color shaded into black and white
I told you I'd write
But how could I say
The sky goes on forever

Georgia O'Keeffe could only guess about the future
Georgia O'Keeffe could only guess about the future

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Red Hair

You've always had a thing for girls with red hair
But this year all the girls have red hair
And you kind of feel cheated, like it's just that easy
But this girl is real and she's sitting right there
At the corner by the window, long hair down
You move in close through the restaurant's clattering
She has the kind of skin that you think of as milk
The kind of freckles you think of as a smattering

Oh, Caledonia, coming home

She has a long green dress, buttoned all down the front
It's open at the throat where the freckles thin
And you can see the edge of some silky thing
Paler even, god, than her pale even skin

Oh, Caledonia, coming home

So you take a table in her line of sight
Look out the window, order a drink
And you know in a moment, she might look your way
And if you catch her eye with a knowing wink
She might rise and follow you through the crowd

Lead her up the stairs, turn the key
To that darkened room, touch her hair, and you won't have to speak

Oh

Waitress' hair is the color of blood
She brings your drink, gives you the eye
But you can't be bothered, you look on past
At that long green dress, trying to decide
Would you start at the throat, move down from there
Or would you slip the sandals from her feet
And button by button, find your way
Up those long smooth legs until they meet

Oh, Caledonia, coming home

Couple in the corner, arguing in French
"Mais chacqu'un ont les cheveux rouge cette annee"
But the girl in the window, the girl in the window
The girl in the window just looked your way

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Absecon Bay

You went on the road because you were lost
You thought traveling would be a useful metaphor
And you liked the idea of having a roadmap
Choosing destinations and plotting a course
And you wanted to stop at some roadside bar
Where someone lonely as you are buys you a drink
And while giving directions from Roseville to Marrowbone
Imparts pearls of wisdom and changes how you think

At first you felt powerful like you could tell the future
Look at your map and say "five hours to Pritchard"
Then five hours later, by god, there you were
Pritchard, Alabama, just like you pictured
But later on, just restlessness
Just rolling through little towns in the dark
Where strangers dream interwoven dreams
You passed through, left no mark

It was an accident scene; you swerved to the shoulder
Thinking someone might need help
But up close it was just too real and out of control
And you just couldn't find it in yourself
So when the sirens came, screaming angels of mercy
You pulled out and drove away

Thinking you probably still could make Jersey
In time for the sunrise on Absecon Bay

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The Sky

It was the summer I lived in a room above a store
Small windows, street noise, bare mattress on a painted floor
Enamored of poverty, furniture I got for free
Or hammered out of motorcycle crates I found in the alley, ooh

I met a man they called The Sky

And I pronounced him ugly
Then I fell in love so crazy that it should have passed by quickly
And it would have I guess, but for that trick of nature
That told me to convince him that we had to stay together, ooh

In my own defense, he shouldn't have believed me
I was nineteen and a poet, drunk with the power of words
Words words words words words words words words
words words words

When he moved to my flat everything he owned fit in one bag
And we painted trees on all the walls to look like we were
in the forest and he
Lifted me up on his shoulders
So I could paint the ceiling blue, the color of the sky, ooh

We were so close together that we had no perspective
So we got a puppy, a lab-shepherd mix, we called him The Rock
And we bought a car, an old blue valiant, for twenty five dollars
And it ran with a racket and a great blue cloud but it ran anyhow, ooh

The Sky got a letter from his mother, she called him Frank
The puppy pissed on a pile of poems and I couldn't call
the image back
And I lost my words, they were coming out in three
Like "what the hell," "I don't care," "it's your turn," "don't blame me"

When it all ended we were idling at the curb
I said, "Everything worth saying has already been said by someone who understands the power of words, I
only understand their weakness, where they fall short, what they can never measure"
Then I ran out of words so I gunned the engine hard
To express displeasure

The Sky took The Rock and drove off in a great blue cloud
I went upstairs and I shut the window because the traffic
was too loud

Of course there were no words to say what I was feeling
So I stood on a table that I built from a crate and I painted a thunderstorm on the ceiling

The End

You were the first to tell me
What I was last to know
You said "okay, babe, it was good when it was good
but it had no place to go"
Then you were gone
And I've been up all night
With a bottle of blackjack and a bible
Trying to get it right

You followed me down
Through all my layers of resistance and confession
And you hid your hand real well
Behind persistence and attention
You were so high, coming on like the devil's gift
Seems I didn't put enough fight in it
You need that headwind to give you that lift

Do you remember a night so dark and black
Little shoes I threw in the trash of that hotel in Winnipeg
When you said what there is no taking back
Oh, but what did I expect?
It was love but it was not about love
Sex but it was not about sex

But wasn't it good
I laughed until I fell out of my chair
At your "why I oughta"s, your dirty jokes,
your "don't make me come over there"s
And wasn't it sweet, Jimi Hendrix and the sun going down
And if I hadn't fallen for all that, yeah
Would you still want me now?

You came into my life to break my heart I guess
Or to give me strength to go on without you
And I am going on, more or less
But the streetlight through the window
Ceiling of my room
The taste of whisky, fear of god
And my own body make me think about you

Tell me I'm wrong holding on to how I feel
But I know once I let go it's going to be over for real
Tell me I'm strong, it's a little miracle in reverse
Say one day I will meet the man who can hurt me
As bad as you can, babe, but you were the first

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