

The Blue Route
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Club Coffee

By Katherine LeCours

December 23, 2006

*If you were a real coffee drinker,
you'd drink it black,*

my brother says
like a veteran of some war.

Defiant, I squint,
stir sugar and milk,
my spoon on the kitchen table
a dead giveaway. I sip,
remember hiding
for hours
of hide-and seek,
only to find that he
wasn't even looking.

Smile.

It's too early
for Christmas spirit,
so I build brown walls
between us.

January 2, 2007

How many circles are there
to this secret club?

The signs taunting:

Real Coffee Drinkers- Third Floor.

You might as well drink

a milkshake- Second Floor.

Pacing the first floor,

I must escape

this limbo

of indecision.

I trudge up the rickety

circular

staircase, winded

between floors.

I am caught: be *Real*

or add sugar. Never

more grateful

for the anonymity

of cardboard, I slide

into the third floor.

Spines stiffen

at the slight whisper

of whipped cream.
My brother
smirks in the corner,
arms crossed.

Liar.

What have I
gotten into?
milk already broke
my New Year's resolution.

February 13, 2007

Escape is impossible, my cup teases-
Now, mornings smell
like coffee.

The best part of waking up.

There is nothing good
about waking up: the dull ache
of morning, the panic
of missed trains. A bench mutters
underneath me,

I will not be your valentine.

Even the walls are tired
of standing up.
Trains delay without coffee,
My brother is
waiting and
my thoughts do not
Did I lock the doors?
connect. They are left
at the station.

divorce

By Katherine LeCours

Fused as one body
for so long that
I forget where I
end and you begin
until you, the right
half of our brain
have run off with
an older
left side.

In sympathy,
the left side of our
face slouches,
I cannot speak
without slurring
and I cannot remember
how to spell my
our? name.

this betrayal is baffling.
bodies are meant to
stay whole. brains cannot
simply be cut
in half. I can only
analyze. I balanced
our check book every
month, did our taxes.
wrote down every argument
we had in first-order
logical notation. recorded all
your contradictions. it was

up to you to
feel for us both.
to write our songs
about tomatoes and scrambled
eggs. to paint our
portraits, our landscapes and
mostly our living room.
to blow
seven hundred dollars and
twenty-two cents because

we didn't have a
crocodile skin lamp and
it called to you.
to rearrange the letters
in our names and
to finger-paint poems
on the walls of
the dishwasher.

your side of the
skull is empty and
silence shrieks as I
do the crossword puzzles
and leave space for your twittering
comments. I have done

my research and not
only does your new
left side not know her
times tables, the upkeep
costs twice as much
and she does not
have the last seven
years of your breaths
on file. she cannot
graph your happiness because
it is wrapped
in mine
and she has stolen
my post-it notes,
and our
past.

At War With The Birds

By Christopher Schaeffer

I. There's a bird nest outside my apartment. Right between the door frame and the porch's ceiling, a robin and its eggs, a nest of twigs and water bottle labels. When I come in from class or clamber in late, the shock of my footsteps sends it flying, a panicked arc towards the trees—when I leave, it darts out, veers, flies towards me like a beady-eyed dart, only swerving at the last second, alighting again on the slender branches on the lawn. Sallies, retreats. Bird-stuff.

The war's been going on for a few weeks. If you can call it that—so far things have been cold, the bird has dismissed my representatives, left my treaties unsigned. I fear that soon, we will come to blows, clumsy earth-born fists battering the tiny swift soft wings, the sharp spur of its beak against clothes, skin—the advantage of size, of course, goes to me, but the bird's animal swiftness, its hollow-boned tenacity...

I've bought a gun from the pawn shop down the street. The lump it forms under my pillow makes it difficult to sleep, the shells in my pocket jangle at inopportune times at lectures and dates. I get weird looks. A girl notes my furtive polishing of the barrel during encores, the way I hold the heavy thing against my unshaven paranoid cheek when walking beneath spring boughs: *so you're one of those guys...*

So far I'm afraid to take a shot, to break a window or put a hole in someone's tires or whatever. The bird tugs my apprehension like a ripe worm. I awake each morning to its glossy eyes against the window pane, dun wings tucked against its chubby breast, beak pursed. It writes crude notes in the dust, Woodstock hieroglyphics. I'm looking into getting a cat.

II. You know that Hitchcock movie?

With Jimmy Stewart?

No, Rod Taylor. And Tippi Heldren? Ever seen it?

Never saw it.

Ok then. Basic summary—birds break in from the attic. A thousand million sparrows.

Everybody dies.

But how? They're just birds, right?

Dunno. I never saw it either.

III. Before the Wehrmacht, before Rommel, Patton killed turkeys.

Better than anyone else

because

he didn't use his hands—

while other boys

stumbled and capered after the fat birds

little George stood and waited

and when the circle was breached

flowed outward, saber leading

perforating feathers and wattle

like a hornet,

like a sewing needle.

When questioned about
his aptitude for killing
he didn't shrug, kept
his hands clasped behind the small
of his back, said:

*I imagine them as always/already food
and from there
the issue is entirely table-manners.*

IV. Bird related deaths:

Well, bird-flu of course.

Of course.

And...

and that's about it. I expected grisly news-stories
about eagles sucked into jet engines and disastrously
fucking up the works,
about evil finches pecking out old ladies' eyes...
but really the best I could find
was a blog about New Jersey woodpeckers vandalizing cars
for a brief period in 2003.

Compared to our oil spills,
our deforestation, our
thanksgiving dinners and duck hunts
it seems a bit one-sided.

Bird-shit, you can wipe away,
You can go on with your life.

V. Darwin too started out
wringing the necks of dodos
well not really
no
but what if he did?

What a sweet metaphor
for human biological horror-show
scientific blood-lust and ambition
that would be.

Yeah man
yeah man
that metaphor would rock ultimate
that metaphor would win like five pulitzers
and make-out with Myla Goldberg afterwards

VI. The bird moved out with May,
After the flutey mourning of its chicks went mute.
It haunted the eaves for a couple of days,
Making grief-mad lunges at any target.

I moved out too, tore down all the post-cards
And switched off the lights, polished off
Whatever wine was left, and passed the keys
Onto some clean-shaven kid in a Giants hoodie.

I never really had a gun.
That was the kind of lie it is okay
To put in poems, because the truth
Is never true in that kind of sexy symbolic way.

A dopey-eyed vegetarian,
An unhappy dater of Marxists with cute haircuts,
I could never shoot a bird.
I could probably never even sword-fight one.

I realized later I left two packs of cigarettes in that house,
And a three-quarters full bag of oreos.
All in all, that bird won. What I got in the end, was that deep,
Feathery, Nature-fear,
And a sketchbook heavy with silhouettes of wings.

I Loved Those Robots

By Christopher Schaeffer

Say, I couldn't help but notice
That in all of your love poems
You seem awful upset about
Those robots we used to have.

Didn't they clean our sheets every day,
Didn't they steam the carpets with their
Vacuum-arms? Didn't they adore us as well
As they possibly could have?

You call them crows, you call them laudanum,
You call them "rattling, ossified sarcophagi"—
That's rough. I beg you to reconsider.
After all, you made them,

It was you who gave them tinny German accents,
And molded the little skulls on their chests,
And programmed them to over-run City Hall
Instead of, say, play Bach on the cello.

And in a way I found their coldness darling,
The way their L.E.D. eyeballs never dimmed or flashed
The way they reached for your embrace like silver lobsters,
Pincers clicking tenderly as you backed away screaming.

You know all about lobsters and their nerve-endings, right?
You know they feel the heat a thousand times more intensely
Then you or I could with our crude fur-coats on? Of course
I'm not saying you boiled our dear robots. I didn't mean it like that.

I'm just saying, listen, I'm the one who left,
Diving into the bay and swimming like mad
While they were all plugged into the wall asleep,
In dreams far removed from their death rays and zap guns.

So don't take it out on them. Try to smile, at least,
When the burnt toast pops out of their heads,
When they spill weak coffee on the floor like puppies.
It's the best the little bastards can do.

Even after the night of the hands bright with black oil,
Elbow-deep in cogs and springs, they'll take you back.

When you piece them together,
When you breathe hosanna, invictus, my sweet robots.

They'll take you back.
And laugh against the lightning wall like we used to,
Head tossed back to bare your girlish throat,
When their antennas rise again, again from the innocent sea.

West End Blues

By Allison Stadd

I dash through the rain, trumpet case clutched in the crook of my arm. The marquee, emblazoned with “Curly Hawkins Jazzmen,” glows up ahead, a beacon in the surrounding darkness. It’s not just the rain that quickens my steps, but the menacing back alley that’s home to the best jazz bar in D.C. The war may have finally ended, but I’ve seen my share of fights around here that could start a third one. But aside from the weather and the threat of the inky darkness, what has me bolting down the street, wet suspenders clinging to my white cotton shirt, is the time. I’m almost late for the last set. But only almost, because I’d sooner mouth off to my mother, foregoing my supper, than miss a night at Blues Alley.

I’m at the door. The ticket booth to the right is empty. The club owner never waits for latecomers; if you know anything about jazz, you know never to miss the downbeat. My stomach tangles itself into a knot as I descend, the air becoming more and more clotted with smoke with each step. I round the stairway corner and stop, transfixed: Curly Hawkins and his seven bandmates, jazz royalty, lining the stage. Curly’s by the piano in dark sunglasses nearly the same color as his face, leaning on an arm, curls of cigarette smoke wafting lazily up from his hand.

I waste no time in thrusting my way through the crowd, countless other cats crammed shoulder to shoulder up to the edge of the bar. I recognize one in particular, J.J. Tatum. My mother’s sewing looks just that— homespun— next to J.J.’s pressed brown coat and slacks. He’s studied before under the same trumpet teacher as me— it’s hard to believe we both started a decade ago. Good kid, and plays a mean horn. But he’s also got a clean-shaven head brimming with self-assurance and this, here in Blues Alley, just isn’t his dream in the same way it’s the rest of ours. He shines like a new penny amid the loud, soiled stink of jazz. While my thoughts are constantly aswirl with musical notes and I save up my loose change to buy records, J.J.’s brain is bubbling with images of his name in neon and his parents’ money goes toward new suits and haircuts.

I clap J.J. on the shoulder and give him a good-natured grin as I pass. A familiar stooped back catches my eye up ahead.

“Bo!” I call. “Over here!”

The bartender cocks his head in my direction, a smile forming on his creased face in recognition of my voice. I fight through to the counter and set my trumpet case down gingerly at my feet. While I’m waiting for Bo to make his way over from behind the cash register where he’s making change for a customer, feeling each coin for size and shape, I survey the room.

To an outsider, it’s just a grimy nightclub: glasses of whiskey bearing lipstick stains and greasy fingerprints, cheap cologne choking the air. But to those of us who *know* jazz, who *live* it, who have it interwoven into the thread of our very beings, Blues Alley is where it’s *at*.

Suddenly the sound of the band bursts in my ears. It’s a few past one a.m., and Curly must have known he couldn’t have kept his audience chomping at the bit any longer. As the music starts to soak, soak into me, I tamp down the nerves clawing through me like fingers and forget about what’s to come later.

Around me, other young jazz die-hards buzz with energy. By now, all of us are slapping our thighs to the beat. Most of us have instrument cases locked between our ankles, leather straps worn to velvet. Some of us clutch thick, age-battered volumes of sheet music bound with a plastic spine.

Curly Hawkins pushes his chair back and rises, adjusting one of the free-standing microphones at the front of the stage so the bell of his sax looks ready to swallow it. The horn is only two-foot-length's or so of brass, but the way he has it cradled in his hands, you'd think it was his newborn son. He fiddles his fingers over the valves, licks his lips, and starts to play. Every pair of eyes in the room is riveted.

As his solo eventually winds down to a close, the audience erupts. "All right, now," Bo rasps from behind my shoulder. He's finally made his way over. I turn around and grin. As Curly takes his seat amid raucous hollers and whistles, the guys play on behind him but no one steps to the front of the bandstand. The rhythm section— drums, bass, guitar, piano— keeps vamping, providing the customary cushion for a soloist to play over. But still no one moves. The audience fizzles down like flat soda. Around me people start to exchange confused looks, craning to get a closer look at the stage, wondering if there's been some kind of miscommunication.

But that could never be, and we all know it— jazz hinges on communication. My trumpet teacher's voice echoes in my ear. Jazz is about encapsulating the essence of one's being and translating it so others can dip inside of it. "Jazz music *is* the jazz musician," Bo said to me once.

You see, Bo used to play the trumpet. Or not so much play it, as work it. Beneath his disheveled appearance, from his scraggly gray beard to his stained black apron, lies a brassy jazz musician capable of bulldozing with his sound. "You remind me of myself at your age, Fletch," Bo often says. "That's just something you old geezers say," I'll laugh. But sometimes when I catch Bo staring off absently I suspect it's not just because he's listening to the music. It's because he's reminiscing about his early days, trying to siphon off the vibrancy of the cats in front of him to inject his body with the spirit of who he used to be.

So he's right— jazz is the artist's blood, his memories, his dreams, his pain liquefied and poured through the instrument. Every song is a photo album of musical images smudged around the edges from being thumbed so often, but still every bit as vibrant. Especially with the best of the best, and the Curly Hawkins Jazzmen were nothing but, any lapse in communication would mean a complete derailment.

Sure enough, Curly loosens his neck strap and unbuckles it from his sax, leaning the horn into its padded stand at his feet. He motions to the rhythm section to hush a little and adjusts the mike stand so he can speak into it. "We gonna do things a little different tonight," he says, voice rich and low. "One of you gotta step in." He nods to the audience. A few stray couples and lonely old-timers hover at the fringes of the crowd, but most of us are mainstays. The most serious haven't missed a jam session since the place opened five years ago, in '41. We come with our ten bucks, instrument and ego in tow, feverish with the anticipation of impressing whichever jazz immortals are playing that night. Once each gig ends and Bo and the owner start to close up for the night, instrument cases unzip and the *real* show goes down. And it's definitely a show— getting recognition means getting a job.

But tonight, evidently, is different. Gigging with the band during a live performance? The weight of the challenge lands with a thud at our feet. The corner of Curly's mouth turns up, a wry half-smile. "Curly Hawkins needs him a new Jazzman." The rhythm section keeps comping behind him, the pianist peppering the low sounds with an occasional high-pitched twinkle, as if laughing at the lot of us. It's not so unbelievable that Curly would be hiring a new kid—even though the Jazzmen are only about in their 30's, the group is forging new ground in what the scene has been starting to call "bebop". Adding another horn to a big swing band would make the leader look harebrained, but not so in Curly's case. What *is* inconceivable, though, is the precious gift he's just offered us. When a moment passes and the paralysis has not dissolved, Curly lifts an eyebrow. "One of y'all better get on up here," he grumbles.

Bo pokes me in the back. He hisses hoarsely in my ear, "Fletch, what the hell are you doing? Take out that horn and get your sorry ass up there!"

I swivel around. "But—"

Bo reaches across the bar and gives me a shove. His eyebrows knit over his glazed eyes. "Guys like Curly Hawkins don't give no second chances, now."

I look desperately around to see if any of the other youngbloods have mustered the courage to mount the stage. None of us can fight the shellshock long enough to pry our feet loose from the floor. My head turns syrupy.

"Go!" Bo insists. Swallowing hard, I scramble to retrieve my trumpet case from beneath the bar stool and unzip it. I give the mouthpiece a buzz or two and twist it onto the horn. One thought scythes its way through the brambles and thickets of my mind: I have to do this for Bo. He had his shot, long ago, a callback with Ellington's orchestra. Now this is mine.

By the time I've made my way to the foot of the stage through the haze of smoke and the tangle of bodies, the crowd is in a flurry. Those who neglected to bring their instruments tonight are scowling. Those who have felt the weight of Curly's offer settle like gold dust around them are unlatching their cases with frenzied fingers. I hoist myself up to the lip of the bandstand near the central mike and feel the heat of the overhead lights stain my skin. My back to the audience, I look to my left: the rhythm section players are still playing. I look straight ahead: the tenor sax player mops his bald head with a handkerchief, the trombonist stretches out the slide of his horn and empties his spit valve with a woosh of air, the trumpeter pages through the sheet music on his stand. Finally, I look to my right: Curly Hawkins. And another guy in a pressed brown suit and felt fedora grasping a trumpet. J.J. Tatum.

Curly turns in my direction as I step to him. "OK, then," he grunts into the mike he's slid out from the stand. J.J. and I, on either side of Curly, make brief eye contact. Curly holds a palm up, the power of that one gesture enough to stem the tide of people hungry to join us on stage. I can barely see the crowd through the blinding lights. But I can feel the smoldering glowers from those who didn't make it up here fast enough. "Curly don't need him but one new Jazzman," Curly continues. "But—" he turns to J.J. on one side, then me on the other, "—y'all done proven you at least got the legs to get up here first. So I'm gon' give you both a chance to blow your horns." He cracks a smile, and turns to J.J. to ask for his name.

“J.J., sir.” J.J. extends a confident, well-manicured hand to be shaken. Curly looks down at it and lets out a chuckle. “There ain’t no camera crew in here, brother, no photo op. Let’s just be cool.” J.J. flushes and slides his hand into his pocket instead.

Curly looks to me next. “And you, my man?” I can see my reflection in his black frames. My jaw is firmer, my gaze more intent than I expected them to look. And my rolled shirt cuffs may not be as starched as J.J.’s, the toes of my black shoes not as polished, but hey— neither are any of the guys’ on stage. Or, for that matter, most of the guys’ in the club.

“Fletcher,” I answer with a nod. I grip my horn with both hands.

Curly nods back at me. “Cool. Someone show me some chops, then. It’s a blues in F,” he adds as an afterthought. He moves back to his chair in line with the other Jazzmen and slumps into his seat, crossing his legs into a four, arms in a lazy pretzel over his chest. I turn to look at J.J. but he’s already striding over to the mike. The rhythm section gets louder behind us. Falteringly, I gaze out to the margins of the crowd. I can only make out faint outlines but I see who can only be Bo, his back bent like the bow of a tired tree trunk, behind the bar. I feel a renewed brawn churn through me and I fold my arms over my trumpet. I turn to J.J. to let him do his thing.

And he does. J.J. takes his solo by the throat. As he plays, knots and loops of sound tie themselves around the room, hemming us all in so we can’t look away. He looks the perfect magazine picture of jazz: sharp young black man with eyes squinted, lips mashed to the bright mouthpiece gilded in the stagelight, and fedora cocked jauntily. I keep my head firmly in his direction. I don’t want to see anyone’s reaction. I don’t want to make the yawning hole forming in my stomach stretch any further.

The drummer sets up a riff, cuing everyone to the end of the thirty-two bars that make up one full chorus. J.J. thrusts his trumpet funnel-end to the sky one last time, veins in his neck straining in summoning every last scrap of himself to blow through the instrument. The throngs of other young players in the bar, though they may be envious, award J.J. with clamorous applause, whooping and “hey now”-ing and “ok, brother”-ing. He’s done it. He’s found that square-root-of-minus-one essence of jazz and steeped his solo in it, rolled the dough of it in that sugary bitter coating, kneading it in so it becomes inseparable. He’s proven himself worthy of the Curly Hawkins Jazzmen.

I finally let myself glance at Curly, battling my absolute fear of gauging his reaction to J.J.’s performance with the need to ascertain what’s to happen next. But he hasn’t moved an inch. His expression is impassive.

The roar of the crowd starts to fade. The drummer twirls a stick between his fingers and cues up the next section. Every nerve ending in my body is buzzing, and I strain all the muscles in my legs to take a step in the direction of the mike. J.J. has moved to the opposite side of the stage, face rosy with the heat of the lights and the heat of the music and the heat of gratification. But my feet are nailed to the floor. My mind turns to melted butter, and up here I don’t have Bo to thrust me forward out of my stupor. I can hear the chords of the piano moving through the F blues cycle, rounding the corner and almost at the green light where I have to start playing or else miss the train. The slow creep of panic starts to stiffen my joints.

“West End Blues!” A call from the far back of the crowd.

I squint in the bright light.

Maybe I do have Bo, even while I'm up on the stage, vulnerable in the clutch of the hot spotlight, alone out on the edge of the gangplank awaiting the judgment of my peers and my idols.

"Let's hear us some West End Blues!" the throaty holler comes again.

A few cries and cheers punctuate the request. West End Blues brought the trumpet into the limelight— only Louis Armstrong could have done such a thing. Yessir, eighteen years ago, in '28, he was the first to make the trumpet a solo instrument. The audience's calls start to pick up, and I loosen my grasp on my horn. West End Blues, now that's something I can play for sure. One of the first tunes my teacher played me. Jazz music *is* the jazz musician, isn't that what Bo says? This music has become a part of me, sewn into my insides. Jazz is where I belong. I feel my feet unglue themselves from the floor like a slug suctioning itself off the bottom of a ship and I make my way over to the mike just in time for the downbeat.

I start to quote good old Louis's solo to a crisp. As the blood begins to flow through me like warm milk, loosening my limbs, I tie in some Fletch flair. I uncap the lid of the song that launched Louis onto the scene and reach in with a stirring spoon. Somewhere off in the distance I can hear the approving grunts and shouts of the crowd, crescendoing as my solo gains momentum. I feel the weight of the wooden boards beneath my feet shift as J.J. fidgets nearby.

But I don't care. I'm deaf to the sound of the applause, wrapped in the sound of the music, just as Bo is blind to the contours of my face but invests his belief in me just the same. "You remind me of myself at your age, Fletch." That's what Bo tells me. And now I really know what he means— because jazz, for us both, is more than a starched suit, and more than the sounds that emerge from a group of shiny instruments. And when my youth has eased away, I'll be just where Bo is, a permanent fixture as close to the kernel of this art as he can get, no matter the infirmity that worsens just a little with each passing year. Because there is no other place.

Contributors

Katie LeCours, originally from Saratoga Springs, in upstate New York, is a senior English major at Ursinus College. She has always been in love with words, but began writing in a poetry class at Ursinus, under the direction of Nzadi Keita.

Chris Schaeffer was raised by wolves. Upper middle-class wolves with two-door sedans and NPR bumper stickers. Yeah, wolves really aren't as cool as they used to be.

Allison Stadd is a senior English major with a Creative Writing emphasis and an Art History minor at the University of Pennsylvania. She is currently an editorial intern at Philadelphia Magazine and hopes to pursue a career in writing upon her graduation in May 2009. Reading and writing have been her two greatest passions since a young age. She has been published in various publications, both on-campus and nationally. Secondary obsessions include crosswords, jazz drums, and cupcakes.