

**Living
in the
Woods
in a Tree**

Remembering Blaze Foley

by Sybil Rosen

Number 2 in the North Texas Lives of Musicians Series

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To
our tree house landlord
Zonko Joe Bucher
a phoenix rising

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Preface

Half a lifetime ago I was twenty-five years old and living in a tree house in rural Georgia with a country musician named Depty Dawg. It was, I would later write, “like falling out of a dream.” How could I know then where our lives would take us?

In the course of our love affair Depty Dawg would reinvent himself as Blaze Foley—the enigmatic, outlaw singer/songwriter whose fatal shooting at the age of thirty-nine would insure his status as legend. I, too, would become a writer, only to spend the next couple of decades trying to put that time and that man into words. Stuffed into plays and shaped into idealized characters, he eluded my attempts to recapture his untamed spirit, as there was always something missing, some misplaced piece of our story I forgot to remember for a very long time.

Fourteen years after his death, I found that piece again and was compelled to go looking for the reasons why I’d lost so much of the memory of our love. They were harder to face than I could have imagined, and surprisingly easier to find; Blaze had left me clues along the way. Now, sitting down again, this time to tell the unvarnished truth, it, too, wants to become a story; it’s inescapable I guess.

For the truth can be hard to recognize through a twenty-five-year-old lens. Translucent with age, veined with tiny fractures, the glass crinkles the borders of distant images, blurring certain moments and crystallizing others. I’m helpless to do anything but describe what I see and feel now, in the hope that these words will convey some of the fleeting sweetness we knew then.

Yet if memory is unreliable, what becomes of the past? Can it only be known through the present? At this moment I am fifty-two, a writer, single and childless. In the twenty-odd years since my life with Depty Dawg, I’ve known pleasure, jealousy, affection—though never again did I expect to find a heart in which my own could make a home. Over time I made up my mind: I would learn to long without suffering; I would make peace with being alone. Secretly, I used to dream that if I reached middle age with love still unmet, some man from my past would come back to claim me.

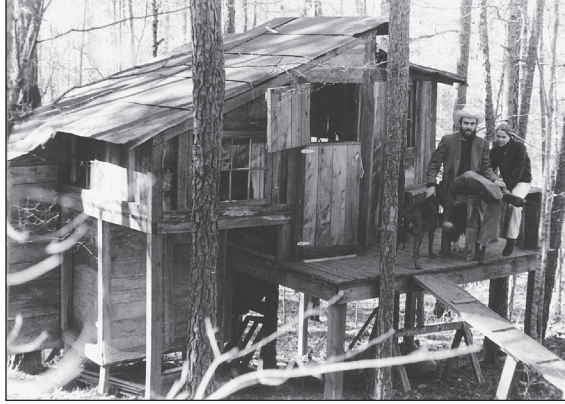
It never occurred to me that he might be dead.

Moonlight shinin' through the trees
Moonlight shinin' down on me
Lights the way for lovers in the dark
Moonbeams dance on rain-drenched trees
Sparkle for our eyes to see
Moonlight shine on down
And shine on me

Moonlight bathes the woods around
Paradise that we have found
Here among the trees and things we love
Shines on friends off far away
Brings us to another day
Moonlight shine on down
And shine on me

Layin' with the one I love
Lookin' at the moon above
Bein' where we really want to be
The autumn winds for now are still
The moon shines on
It always will
Moonlight shine on down
And shine on me

Moonlight Song by Depty Dawg, 1975



Part 1

Moonlight

Things I Can't Throw Away

The dead have a long reach. And they can be patient. They wait till you are ready, and then they seep back into your heart and crack it open. They pour out of the tissue where you've hidden them away and insist on being known again.

Depty Dawg had come back without warning two months ago, in early September 2002. In eight short weeks I've gone from being a menopausal skeptic about love, to a hormone-drenched teenager who believes in ghosts, who waits at night for one to visit her. Where once I prided myself on self-knowledge—a contradiction at best—now I stumble blind through memory and grief, astonished to find myself jealous of rivals I never knew, for the heart of a man who's been dead thirteen years.

I can hardly remember who I was before. The one thing I'm certain of is that I was already mourning the latest dog in my life—a blond, sassy lab-and-Irish setter mix named Larue. She had been felled by cancer of the snout, cruel karma for a being who always followed her nose. In long rambles through the woods Larue had revealed to me events I might not have otherwise noticed: beavers swimming in a moonlit embrace, bear cubs high in the pines. Her sturdy presence had made it possible for me to live on my own for more than a decade and write. Often I'd thought of dedicating every word to her, since she'd given up so many hours when she could have been out rolling on a dead skunk, to snooze beside me on the floor while I sat at my computer, wrestling with the muse. At the end of July I had put her to sleep for the last time, and now my bones still ached for her big-barreled body and undiluted affection, the warp and woof of our life together.

Larue had been gone for five weeks when Depty Dawg showed up, first in the form of a note from an old friend in Georgia whom I hadn't spoken to in years. I didn't hesitate; I was ripe for distraction, and a voice from the past was

calling. I emailed him back right away: “Hello, hello, hello, are you still Billy and do you still have a ponytail down your back?”

Billy’s reply told me that he’d exchanged the ponytail for a beard. He was getting in touch after all these years to inform me of a documentary film about Blaze Foley who—unbeknownst to me in the years since his death in 1989—had become a posthumous country music legend. Apparently, Abraxas Productions, the film company out of Austin, Texas, had been looking for me for a long time. The filmmakers were too young to have known Blaze personally. But drawn to his moving music and tragic fate—not to mention a growing number of fans worldwide—they had started production six years ago with no clue that their roving subject had once been Depty Dawg with a tree house address. From the very first interview, they kept hearing about some woman Blaze had loved in Georgia, though the only name anyone could come up with then was “Little Sybil.” Finally, this past summer, they had backtracked him to Whitesburg, the red-clay hamlet west of Atlanta where Depty Dawg and I had first met.

“By the end of filming,” Billy wrote me, “they were desperate to find you. You were the inspiration for his song ‘If I Could Only Fly’ (is that not true)?”

True or not, Billy had been reticent to tell them our story. After all, no one in Whitesburg had heard from me in years, and maybe that was the way I preferred it. I’d never forgotten the tree house, but I rarely thought of Depty Dawg apart from it any more. If I did, it was always with the unquestioned assumption that he, like me, had assigned our time a vague negativity and moved on. The last time I’d seen him was in New York City, sometime in the early ’80s; I couldn’t even tell Billy the year now.

Intrigued, I got in touch with the filmmakers. They were willing to come to the Catskill Mountains in eastern New York where I’d made my home for the past three years—if I were willing to talk to them about Blaze or Depty or both. Somehow it made more sense to meet them halfway in Whitesburg, as so much of my time with Depty Dawg had taken place there. They think I have secrets to tell them; I know I have secrets to learn.

Since the arrival of Billy’s note, I’d begun to feel like I’d entered a dream I’d been having for years, but couldn’t recall until now. I went up to the attic to dig out a box labeled “Things I Can’t Seem to Throw Away.” It’s not very big, nor is there very much in it, considering how much I’ve moved around in the last twenty-five years. Or the volume of clothing, jewelry, furniture, house wares, knickknacks and whatnots that have passed through my hands so far—all of

them weightless, whatever their appearance. Try to grasp them and they float on through, like items on a spaceship freed from gravity or meaning, and so are soon forgotten. But some things will not let you forget them; no matter how hard you try to let them go, they insist on sticking around.

From the box I unearthed a stack of yellowing postcards and letters, postmarked 1976 and addressed to “Mrs. Little Sybil Rosendawg-Foley” of Austin, Texas. How long had it been since I’d thought about our hippie wedding on the back porch of a friend’s cabin in Georgia? Or the book of Shakespeare Depty had given me our last Christmas together? Here, too, were drafts of plays I’d begun about him after we parted, both unfinished. Beneath the scripts I found this other Depty Dawg keepsake—housed in the same black paper sack for over twenty-five years, coiled like an unbroken brushstroke and glossy as the day he gave it to me in Chicago: his ponytail.

Online, I typed in the words “Blaze Foley.” To my amazement, there were hundreds of links to his name. Websites devoted solely to the fallen legend, replete with photos, song lyrics, accolades, and eulogies, some exalting him as the Duct Tape Messiah, others as a poetic pain in the ass. His last live performance recorded a month before his death—as well as three tribute albums by fellow Texas musicians—had been released in Austin in the past decade. Tunes had been written about him too, including the late Townes Van Zandt’s “Blaze’s Blues” and Lucinda Williams’ “Drunken Angel.” And Van Zandt was said to have written “Marie,” his woeful song about homelessness, with Blaze in mind.

This was all news to me.

The man pictured on my screen was not the one I’d known. This man was thicker-set, weighted by intractable sorrow, aged beyond his years. Described as a “homeless homebody, champion of the dispossessed, mystical maverick, outcast, hero, addict, saint”—none of these exactly contradicted the man I once knew. Yet all of them together could not sum him up.

Through every mention ran a palpable reverence for his talent as a songwriter. Most of all he was celebrated for “If I Could Only Fly.” Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard had recorded the song on a duet album, *Seashores of Old Mexico*, released in the late ’80s. Now I learned that Haggard had rerecorded it over ten years later on a solo album entitled *If I Could Only Fly*. He had sung the song at Tammy Wynette’s memorial service, broadcast from the Grand Ole Opry on national TV. Until this moment I had no idea of the tune’s popularity or reach, though I could still sing every word.

I'd first heard them on a blustery March day in Chicago in 1977. Dimly I could see Depty Dawg sitting on the bed in our drab apartment, twenty-seven years old and razor thin, hair long and dark around his face. He'd been on the road, but now he'd come home to play this new song for me. Tears slid down his face as he sang:

I almost felt you touchin' me just now
Wish I knew which way to turn and go
I feel so good but then I feel so bad
Wonder what I ought to do
If I could only fly
If I could only fly
I'd bid this place good-bye
To come and be with you
But I can hardly stand
Got nowhere to run
Another sinkin' sun
One more lonely night

Neither one of us could have predicted that, twenty-five years later, I'd be sitting in front of a computer in upstate New York reading how, in the last months of his life, Blaze Foley still cried when he sang these words.

The Mill

I was in love with Depty Dawg before I ever met him. Our collision would take place in Whitesburg in May of 1975, but by then I was already pretty much a goner.

I was twenty-four that spring. Three years had passed since I graduated from the University of North Carolina with a bachelor of fine arts in theater. College had been all about social development; my educational advance as a freshman was that I'd finally made out lying down. I'd matriculate to inter-course senior year.

After leaving the university, I had acted in dinner theater and summer stock, doing postgraduate work in complex sensual pleasures. Now it was April. A children's theater tour in North Carolina had just ended, and I was at my parents' home in Virginia, waiting for the next job or the next adventure, whichever came first.

Depty was twenty-five then. He'd landed in west Georgia the year before, singing for beers and tips in nightspots in Carroll County. No one really knew where Depty Dawg had come from—only that Buzzards Roost, a bluegrass band out of north Georgia, had given him the name. By now it was vestigial, left over from a time when he'd been heavy and wore a flat, broad hat like the buffoonish cartoon character from '50s TV.

He wasn't fat any more. He was long and lean, six-foot-three and handsome in a sharp-boned kind of way, and his name in some mouths around the county had been elevated to "Deputy." Recently Deputy had landed a choice gig at a new private bar in Whitesburg, The Banning Mill Dinner Club, set in the old yarn factory down on Snake Creek.

I was in Virginia when Depty Dawg began performing there. At the end of April, I received a letter from Jo, a former college classmate, asking me to come down to Georgia to help start a theater at Banning Mill. In her letter,

Jo described the artists already in residence: a warlock jeweler, the hippie woman who made batiks, a gifted Jewish guitarist and his bartending wife—plus a traveling troubadour named Deputy. The name attracted me instantly, as if the individual letters radiated a rugged, romantic light. Something was going to happen to me with this man—though whether I knew it or decided it at that moment, I couldn't really say. Only that I was already fantasizing about Deputy when I wrote Jo back and said yes.

Jo was a square-jawed Nordic beauty, versatile as a director and actress. After college, she and I had been roommates in a tidy Atlanta bungalow shared with two other actresses. Our house on Tenth Street was next door to a menagerie of male hookers. Their pimp was a large, pale woman who sat in the grass in a see-through robe with her legs apart and no underwear on, an enticement I never really understood, given the sexual preference of her customers. Every once in a while the old lady who lived in their cellar would come out and scream at the pimp; I never knew the reason for that either. Sometimes the old lady would show up at our door, naked and asking for a peanut butter sandwich.

Our household was tame by comparison. We were serious thespians looking for theater work in the area. In the fall of '74, the four of us had acted in a play in the basement of old, converted Banning Hill, forty miles west of the city. *The Killing of Sister George* by British playwright Frank Marcus was directed by an ex-Atlanta actor living in a teepee on Snake Creek. We wondered how the play would be received in rural Georgia, considering it was about four savage English dykes. The role of Childie, George's mentally-challenged girlfriend, required me to drink her bathwater and eat her cigar onstage. We'd not reckoned on the local hippie turnout; the play was an unqualified hit.

Two days before opening night, I got arrested for shoplifting at K-Mart. I needed a few props for Childie; at the time it seemed in character to steal them, no doubt taking method acting to an illegal madness. The security guard caught me with \$4.85 worth of hot bobby pins, hair spray, and razor blades. He suggested I call my parents to bail me out, since at twenty-four I still looked young enough to play teenagers on stage. I refused, preferring incarceration.

At the police station I sobbed with humiliation before giving in giddily to the bizarre. In line to be fingerprinted, the woman beside me asked me what I'd done. Confessing to theft, I returned the question.

“I stabbed my husband in the butt with a potato peeler,” she replied, not without pride. I didn’t know that was a crime.

Brought into a room to be processed—a term usually reserved for cheese—I was photographed front and side, just in like the movies, and taken to be fingerprinted. A plain-clothed officer rolled my index finger over the ink.

“Do you have a telephone?” he queried in a blues man’s contralto. “Cause I’d certainly like to see you again.”

“I’m a criminal!” I insisted. Not that it mattered; he’d probably taken the job to meet girls.

In the meantime Jo had found a bondsman, a middle-aged guy with greasy hair and brown teeth, to cover my \$500 bail. He offered me a lift home after my dawn release.

“Thanks for the ride,” I said as we pulled up to the house. “And the bail.” I wasn’t sure what one said to one’s bondsman.

“No problem.” Turning off the engine, he flashed a mottled smile. “Want to drop some acid?”

I demurred; it had been a long night. My crime spree had proved I was not cut out to be a bad girl. Except, as it happened, onstage at Banning Mill.

The Mill was a nouveau-rustic artist-colony bed-and-breakfast—the kind of cultural oxymoron only the ’70s could produce. A wet club in a dry county, in that lay much of its appeal.

For over a century the three-story, brick-and-wood factory had sagged beside the thundering stream. Snake Creek slithered through the granite foothills of the Chattahoochee River, dropping sixty feet in two miles and picking up power galore. Churning out Confederate uniforms during the Civil War, the Mill had been earmarked for destruction by Union General Sherman on his scorched earth march across Georgia. Banning Mill had survived, so local lore still maintained, because the hell-bent Yankee couldn’t find it.

That aura of enchanted seclusion had endured into the twentieth century. The creek’s white rapids provided a dizzying backdrop that drowned out the rest of the world. When mill operations ended in 1971, a local banker’s son recognized the Mill’s aesthetic and recreational appeal. McGukin was a cherubic young man with soft red curls, braces on his teeth as a result of a bad auto accident, and an unmistakable gift for mismatched ornamentation. Nothing that decorated the Mill’s restaurant and parlors went with anything else, a razzamatazz of homespun and chi-chi that could bring on stigmatism. People loved it.

McGukin's genius not only provided guests with wild country close at hand—they also got to rub shoulders with the wild unwashed, hippie artisans at work and play. Resident artists lived on the top two floors. Weekend-ers could wander up to the large, third-story studio where Ben the jeweler welded metal, if he wasn't out in the creek, bare-chested, panning for gold. Or they could visit the batikist stirring vats of richly colored wax for the sensuous tapestries of goddesses and landscapes she hung over the Mill's crumbling walls. Musicians and actors occupied the smaller rooms on the second floor.

Jo's letter had explained that I, too, could live at the Mill for free, so long as I was willing to create my own work and living spaces. A fair trade for a Utopian ideal: bring Banning Mill back to life—which included being civil to its guests—in exchange for a place to live, a small stipend, and the chance to make theater in a psychedelic wilderness.

That May I drove down from Virginia in the '65 Plymouth Belvedere my father had co-signed the loan for. Ethyl was my first car, bought for \$500, and already a relic of sorts. By the mid-70s, push-button gears had gone out of favor, in response to housewives' complaints that they were breaking their nails on the buttons.

North of Whitesburg, I turned off the highway onto the unpaved wagon road that led down to the dilapidated mill. Tall magnolias studded the leafy corridor with fragrant white blossoms, fringed brown by the late spring sun. Parking the car, I went in to find Jo. All I had with me were a few clothes, some stage knickknacks, and a slender black kitty named Meander. A vagabond for a number of years now, I'd learned to live lean.

The theater was on the second floor where a metal door facing the water shut out the roar of the creek. The first production of the newly formed Banning Mill Ensemble would be a pair of one-acts performed in the round. Jo and I would act in the curtain raiser, *The Master and the Apprentice* by R. Ball, to be directed by Leo, the teepee dweller who had staged *Sister George*. The second, longer offering—*The Bear* by Anton Chekhov—would have lumbering Leo as the oafish suitor to my equally ludicrous widow, and Jo would direct. We had only two weeks to get both plays on their feet.

The Mill was still being restored, board-by-board, brick-by-brick. McGukin had contracted Zonko Enterprises, a local carpentry outfit, to remodel the basement. Often we had to project our lines over the racket of the renovations, so we sometimes scheduled rehearsals in the late afternoons,

once Zonko had knocked off for the day. Sometimes the crew would come by to watch us work.

Since his arrival in Carroll County, Depty Dawg, as many still called him, had become fast friends with Zonko's foreman. Kentucky-born Joe had a wit that sizzled, and an unrivaled devotion to dancing despite the flat feet that had kept him out of the draft. He and Dep had bonded over a mutual love of songwriter John Prine, radical politics, and hardcore carousing. At night, Depty Dawg sang with a band in the downstairs bar, but during the day he moonlighted for Zonko.

"I'm no Jesus, but I can pass," he remarked of his carpentry skills the afternoon we were, finally, formally introduced.

Hillbilly cadences gave his bashful manner a comic lilt. His lean figure was slouched, sweaty and dusty, against the wall of the theater where he and Zonko Joe were downing a cold six-pack.

Joe chortled. "Yeah, tell her about the time you painted Mrs. Lumpkin's curtains."

Depty blushed. "What I lack in sense, I make up for in zeal."

I could hardly meet his glance. From the beginning we would be shy with each other. And for me, since I'd already planned—if not our wedding, then at least our madcap elopement—there could be nothing casual in our encounters.

He had fulfilled my expectations of Deputy. His eyes were luminously blue and unerringly direct. So what if he wasn't exactly the Sundance Kid? He had the requisite cowboy boots, mustache, and pierced ear. And besides all that, he was funny and sweet, with a curious, listing limp.

But mostly there was the music. I'd never heard anyone sing the way he did, in a deep, resonant baritone, his heart laid open and bare. He performed familiar country standards: Hank Williams, Merle Travis, Chet Atkins, with a little John Prine and Kris Kristofferson thrown in, and a dash of bluegrass and gospel. Nothing of his own yet. A young, raw performer, he had an unmistakable purity, a depth of feeling revealed by an unadorned delivery.

Watching him perform, I sensed a vulnerability that drew me closer. During his break we found it impossible to make small talk. In an early, halting conversation, he told me that his given name had been Michael David Fuller, and that Mike Fuller had been fat. It wasn't difficult to feel the lonely kid this svelte young man still carried on his skin. I was drawn to that fat boy too. In high school I'd been a dark-haired, flat-chested Jewish island in a sea of blonde, stacked WASPs. I wasn't a wallflower; I was the wall. Gravitating

toward the theater crowd, I'd felt at home with the self-proclaimed weirdoes, the ones who were different and unafraid.

Mike Fuller had found a measure of acceptance when he lost a hundred-and-fifty pounds—only a year or so ago, Depty Dawg informed me now. In that way he felt brand new, a slim blank page waiting to be written on.

I was curious. “How'd you lose all that weight?”

He smiled. “I was on Thorazine.”

The remark was thrown out so casually, I didn't know how to respond. What did I know about Thorazine, except that it suggested madhouses and insanity? Perhaps he was trying to tell me something about the life he'd already lived; I wasn't sure and didn't pursue it. In time I put it out of my mind. He never mentioned it again.

It didn't matter. What mattered then was the musician before me. I wanted to be absorbed into that music. And I wanted to put my arms around the tender man it was coming from.

Hear My Song

Years later, his music would bring him back. Though I'd distanced myself from his memory, my feet had never stopped responding to the melodies he taught me. Bluegrass, country, gospel, and swing—these were the rhythms I still claimed as my own. Yet all I had of Blaze's songs was a 45-rpm single of "If I Could Only Fly" released in 1978. It had to be at least twenty years since I'd listened to it. I told myself that was because nobody had record players any more.

Then, in early October, a month before my trip back to Georgia, the filmmakers sent me two Blaze Foley tribute albums, and his final performance, *Live at the Austin Outhouse*. My hands shook strangely as I took out the live CD.

With the first plunk of his guitar, the first vibration brought back the flat pad of his thumb against the strings, and then in a rush he came flooding into me—hands, hair, mouth. With piercing clarity I recalled the dark patch of hair on his chest, the warm fur of his belly. Through his voice, so suddenly close and familiar, he was in the room, and in my body too.

Love. My love.

Weeping, I sank to my knees. His return was more than a quality of memory, arrayed in thought and image. It had a shimmering, visceral substance, startling in its vividness and irresistible in its grip.

In a word, I was haunted.

From that moment on, Depty Dawg became utterly present, appearing in the morning before my eyes opened, bending over me, our bodies joined. I didn't know if he was phantom disguised as memory, or just the mind's insistent conjure. I didn't care. I'd been given back a piece of my life I didn't know was missing, reunited with a real love. It had to be, or else why would its return be affecting me so?

It shattered me to realize I'd buried him so deeply, he could remain unvisited for so long. Unable to staunch the crying jags, or the sense of loss that drove me to my knees, I wondered if I was depressed or possibly going mad. Truth is, I'd never mourned for him, not for Deputy or Blaze, not for our break-up nor for his death. Now I'd been summoned, of that I was certain. Like a *dybbuk*, a wandering spirit, he'd come back to finish what was unfinished between us.

Larue's recent death became so enmeshed with this pent-up grief for Deputy that at times I had to ask myself, *which dawg am I grieving for?* And now there's a third dog in this wagging tale: the big silver greyhound painted on the bus I'm boarding this morning to take me back to the tree house after an absence of twenty-six years. A thousand miles lie between New York and Georgia, and all I want to do now is travel them as quickly as I can, as if by doing so I can return time to its old familiar order, where past precedes present instead of inhabiting it.

I never intended to take the bus. But as I had no car, and no money for the train, the film company had sent me the means to rent a vehicle. Which I set out to do until, at the last moment, life conspired to relieve me of both my credit card *and* my drivers' license—and I ended up riding the dog. This unexpected twist to this unforeseen odyssey—emphasis on the *odd*—mirrors Blaze's exodus from Chicago after we parted there in 1977, as described in his song "Clay Pigeons":

I'm goin' down to the Greyhound station
 Gonna get a ticket to ride
 Gonna find that lady with two or three kids
 And sit down by her side
 Ride till the sun comes up and down around me
 'Bout two or three times
 Smokin' cigarettes in the last seat
 Try to hide my sorrow from the people I meet
 And get along with it all
 Go down where people say ya'll
 Sing a song with a friend
 Change the shape that I'm in
 Start playin' again

Call it karma, poetic justice, or coincidence, I've surrendered, if not to the inevitable, then at least to the absurd.

Rain is making silver slits on the bus' glass panes as I slide across the rough upholstery to sit by a window. I picture Depty Dawg crowding his large frame into these small seats, leaving Chicago and our life behind.

A young man, crowned in headphones, comes down the aisle and sits beside me. I smile and turn away, trying to hide my sorrow.

The bus leaves New York in a blur of fog and haloed lights, and my mind is traveling too, willing to go anywhere answers may hide. Say it is possible to unravel the past. How far back in time must I go to make my present circumstances make any sense at all?

By nightfall the bus has grown quiet, the only sounds the rumble of the engine and the ringing of cell phones. Up and down the aisle, passengers are holding whispered conversations with someone who isn't there. But that's no different from what I've been doing for weeks.

In the darkness I press Blaze's songs to my ear like seashells, hoping to receive some echo beyond sadness. His music has stunned me—not because it's so good, that does not surprise me. What I can't understand is how these songs could be around for so long and I'd never heard them. Who was he beseeching with this plea in "Oh Darlin"?

Nights are lonely so lonely
 All by myself all by myself
 Want you only want you only
 Nobody else nobody else
 Come back to me come back to me
 It's been too long it's been too long
 Got to soothe me come and soothe me
 Hear this song got to hear this song

Decades later, I am at last hearing his song. In this and others I feel his longing and regret. Without knowing a thing about them—when they were written, or for whom—they speak to me anyway. And the flip side of my regret is jealousy. Lyrics I once knew have been altered. In an early song, "Big Cheeseburgers and Good French Fries," Depty Dawg had written, *Got an angel of a woman with big brown eyes*. Somewhere down the years, those eyes became blue. When did he change them, and for what sweetheart? I know jealousy when it bites me, but these pangs are for a woman who was in his life lifetimes ago. They have nothing to do with the fact that I broke off with him, or that I had other loves after him. They are simply further proof that I am going out of my mind.

In his last live performance, Blaze dedicated “Picture Cards Can’t Picture You” to a married mother he was clearly in love with. Remembering a note he once left me in Austin with that endearment in it, now the same words stung:

Win or draw, no chance to lose
Picture cards can’t picture you
But I can see like you are
When I just close my eyes

My eyes open. It’s nearly dawn, and I’m on a bus somewhere in the Shenandoah Valley. In another hour I’ll be getting off in Roanoke to visit my parents’ grave.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see my present seatmate’s handsome profile, silhouetted against the opaline sky. I took the seat beside him in Washington, D.C., a black-skinned man with long hair in a white suit and orange shirt. The moment I sat down, he informed me that he has a gun in the fanny pack on his lap, that he is a federal marshal on (literally) busman’s holiday. These days they’re everywhere.

“We don’t look like the guys in gray suits anymore,” he told me. “But we’re out there, don’t you worry?”

“Great,” I reply. “You’re either the best or the worst person to be sitting next to.”

During the night, while I pretend to sleep, I listen to him calling frantically on his phone, looking for his wife. There was an emergency but at last he’s found her, sitting up with an overdosed friend.

“I was panicked,” he whispers into the phone. “Where’s my girl?” I asked myself. “Where is my girl?”

The longing in his voice winds around me in the dark. It’s been seven years since my last lover. After so much time alone, I guess I can’t help falling back in love with a ghost.