

"Words' Worth" Poetry Readings

Poets at the Culture, Arts, and Parks Committee of the Seattle City Council.

Blowin' Tattoo by Bart Baxter

Hackles cracked, buckled glass,
rain worked against the window,
my head held low at some angle
appropriate
to being ripped off and jacked up
by some union disciple,
some cackling hack idiot,
with a beer-belly brain
and an attitude let loose
bent me double,
beat me down,
scared me penniless,
sheep-shanked and burned out,
ripped up like the ratty old rags
in a yellowing sofa,
and my head felt the aches
of the bad crapped out gambles
and rotten mistakes,
backed out and backed down,
with bad knees and bad knuckles,
drawin' faces to twelve,
dealer sittin' on twenty,

and then from out of the blues,
from the bedroom upstairs,
comes a B Flat staccato
blowin' bebop and Dizzy,
blowin' Maynard, blowin' scat, blowin',
barkin' and bitchin', and bootin' up
with the low moan o' Dixie,
like a psalm in cut glass,
like an arc welder's torch,
burnin' in and come blistering
long linear notes reaching higher and higher,
like a tracer, like a flare set off,
my boy was upstairs,
he was blowin' the roof off,
he was blowin' the doors off o' Jericho.

He was blowin' Tattoo
to an old buoy tender,
blowin' Tattoo, at a bunk in the bow
of an icebreaker, at the floor of the flight deck
in the wake of a steamer,
in the wake of a cutter,
at the wake of a flyer
gunned down like a driveby in the fog over Aniak,

gunned down at the ice floes
where fishing boats heeled,
faces with failure, fatigue,
and we drank till we fell over,
knocked over bottles,
and felt up the XO's wife, I say, Gabriel,
get down, she was blowin' Tattoo.

And I come undone
in the whiskey wet winters,
beggin' mercy, forgiveness
for unprincipled actions, unspeakable agonies,
brought down on myself
like a seven day rainfall,
unbearable, unending, unhealing
from old injuries that seem to be lethal,
all the ills done to others, unimagined atrocities,
like a big piece of broken glass
eaten by accident, but nonetheless fatal,
when from out of the blues,
from the bedroom upstairs,
come an angel on horn,
come a cirrus high note
like a wire between me an' the Lord God almighty,
between me an' the archangel.
He has saved me, forgiven me, takin' up crosses
in the wash of a jazz riff, he has given me Pentecost
in a pitiful world, come a boy on horn,
come an angel in turtleneck
from the bedroom upstairs,
blowin' Dixieland doits like salvation,
he was blowin' Tattoo
like a Gospel evangelist,
like a riverbed baptism,
he was holding me under,
where the water and blood rush
come speaking in tongues,
come together, come, Gabriel,
I was crying Tattoo
because I love him so much,
so be kind to my boy, I say,
Heaven help the horn man,
keep him safe in dark alleys,
keep him paid by the hour,
keep his embouchure holy,
and his luck at the shoe
hittin' twelve, drawin' nines,
at a soft seventeen,
Heaven sure to be kind,
he is blowin' Tattoo.

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