

Two Poems: “Blues Knowledge” and “Plutonium”

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Blues Knowledge

Rain fizzles to electric portraits
of dazzling glitter and soot
as whorls of sparkled static shade
a flock of pigeons that circle
the cupola where stained glass
from a fire in the pews expanded
and blasted to the pavement
rosettes and shields
long since swept to the gutters
to grind in the silt of the Hudson
stirring now from a Southern hurricane’s
humid tumult of newspapers and necklaces
silhouetted against cherry trees
far above this unimaginable city below
where the worn yellow lines
like unboarded bathhouses
hold no one from leaning into death
as if our eyes could summon those lights
that always turn the same bend
before machinery blossoms
and children hold their ears
and the crowd shifts awkwardly
into this time of need
so desperate in its planetary pull
no one allows himself to feel
beyond the urgent discomfort of stream
that slicks hair to the skull
until despair becomes the steel bolts
blurring perfect circles to ovals and sinking
into paint thicker than most lives
and browner than cave paintings

or dogs from Lenox Avenue
and everything tenants kill
to purify apartments or boulevards
which is why this man dragging
tin and plastic knows for sure only that
his token had a hole in its center the way I
know this train will take me
not to my wife and child
but to the blues knowledge of departure
that makes everyone stand in sweat
and turn strangely now to watch
a huge woman bespangled
in a full-length dress and cushioned beret
the color of cranberries in ginger ale
as she loops her microphone cord
and clicks the cassette into its groove
of Mississippi guitar
over the backbeat of Aretha's gospel
singing Can't find nobody like you
to another who could be her sister
but stands with tears so full and fluid
her cheeks reflect the scarlet sequins
and beside me the man's black bags
bloom into silver stamens as he raises
both palms into fingers and fists
and fingers blinking amen
and honey you've got to believe me
when I tell you on this platform
of people all living
in this city of got-to-get-there-yesterday
half of us let our trains roll on by

From Sascha Feinstein, *Misterioso* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2000).

Plutonium

Shimmering Selmers in the window, Sabrett
umbrellas on the corner, purpled Henrietta
boogie-jumping with her silver-haired studcake.

I'd gone downtown to buy a box of Rico 4s,
a half-step tougher than I could handle,
but what kid who's just bombed a chem test doesn't need

to blow a tenor with a stiff reed? Girlfriends
came later, and, oh, how I wanted to *like*
chemistry, because my teacher hailed from Georgia,

wore sweaters that made little Jerry Steinbach
drop four beakers in three days. How he passed
I'll never know. Me? An extra-credit term paper:

"There's No Business Like Mole Business."
She loved me, but I learned nothing, nothing
except an olive-drab sense of failure that discolored

every incomprehensible question, not one of which
I can tell you now – but I remember the subway ride
home, bypassing the usual stop, heading straight for

my hole-in-the-wall, second-floor walk-up,
ordering Rico 4s with as much attitude as I had in me,
running my fingers across the waxy logo

to convince myself that, if I practiced long enough,
hard enough, if the yuppies in the apartment next door
didn't bang on the plaster like they always did

when I blasted *Tenor Madness*, shared a chorus or two,
maybe I could rub off depression like polishing silver.
I pocketed the reeds, then turned – *oof* –

into the belly of a giant clutching his black
sax case. Goatee and formerly-Mohawked skull.
Saxophone Colossus: Sonny Rollins.

He set his tenor on the glass case. *Check this out, Rod.*
Solid gold. Yamaha. A present from the Japanese.
Then, *Let me see your two best Mark VIs.*

Repairmen stopped banging out dents. I leaned forward.
And though Rollins didn't nod or say, *Hey there, kid,*
He must've known, as he pushed his mouthpiece

onto the neck, I had daydreamed his solos
until chalkboards became bass and bass drum,
that gray slate of a propulsive rhythm section.

He must have known, and dismissed it. This wasn't about
me. It was about action and sound, a test
drive that started with fourths, then pentatonic scales.

Bitonal, quadritonal, heptatonic arpeggios.
Overtones became chords, an intervallic series to
mirror interval progressions. Palindromic canons.

Ditone progressions that turned into themselves
like mercury. Minor sevenths: aluminum, beryllium,
then a nickel-plated series of triplets. Magnesium

and manganese registers. Uranium C sharps that
rattled the store's neon and countertops.
And although he left without buying a horn—

having walked in, I think, just to show off his gold—
I knew I'd just heard triple-tongued
the whole goddamn periodic table.

From Sascha Feinstein, *Ajanta's Ledge* (Rhinebeck, NY: Sheep Meadow Press, 2012).