

Lester William Polsfuss, 1915-2009

When he was 10 years old he devised
A harmonica holder from a coat hanger
Soon afterward he cut open the back
Of a Sears acoustic guitar
And inserted, behind the strings,
The transducer from a dismantled Victrola.
The phonograph needle was wired to the radio
So his guitar came in loud through the speakers

Later on he built a pickup
From ham radio headphone parts
A recording machine from a Cadillac flywheel
With the belt from a dentist's drill
By then he played semi-professionally
Underage in the roadhouses in Waukesha,
And later Saint Louis, then New York City
Where he made a name for himself

He met country western singer Colleen Summers
In nineteen forty five
When they began working together
She took the stage name Mary Ford
Throughout the fifties he played his guitar
On increasingly innovative recordings
With echo, reverb and multi tracking
Which he invented. They topped all the charts

After rock and roll came in
He was known less as a star
Than as the man who created and played
His eponymous guitar

When he died in August of 2009
Luminaries spoke reverently
And attended a private funeral service
And burial at Prairie Home Cemetery
But in Milwaukee's Discovery World
A public memorial service was held
1,500 attendees were given free tickets
To the Les Paul House of Sound for the day

I Wanted to Tell the Story of My Life

I wanted to tell the story of my life
So I wrote a poem about a river
How else could I say what I really mean,
And hope to be forgiven?
History will reckon by its own sleight of hand
What I did, what I said, what I meant, who I loved
But when the truth is mine to tell
I have to make things up

*My heart is a thrush singing on the wire
It's a burning bush and a house on fire
My heart is a wheel where the water flows
My heart is a red red rose*

I walked into the river at Cape Roulet
I wanted to let the water carry me
To surrender choice and will to its power
And feel the pull of my mortality
The river took over, took me under then it let me go
Tossed up with storm debris thinking – oh, I guess I do still have work to do
And if the river was a highway, a bottle of whiskey and a close call
Would my story be any more true?

*My heart is a thrush singing on the wire
It's a burning bush and a house on fire
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Girl in the Ruins

She was brushing her hair in the ruins of the coliseum
Remember that, Bernie?
We were there with Alice, seeing the world
Just three lost souls on a journey
After Rome we went to Paris, saw towers and arches
Then Amsterdam, flowers, barges
Switzerland, cows, cars
And that hostel in Heidelberg where Frau Ehrlich overcharged us
But after all this time, the only thing that still matters
Is the girl in the ruins of the coliseum, brushing her hair

It was long hair, she threw it all to one side
Shining gold like the sun on her skin
And I looked at you, Bernie, I noticed for the first time
How gray your hair had become, and how thin
And Alice's hair was coiled against the sweat of her neck
Like a poisonous snake
My own hair felt like weeds growing out of a gravel pit
Of a headache
But after all this time, the only thing that still matters
Is the girl in the ruins of the coliseum, brushing her hair

Must have been a hundred tourists that day
Maybe two hundred, I don't know, a crowd
Strolling past with their tourist maps
And their ooh, ah, oh wow
But only one of them, and it had to be you
Staged a gladiator reenactment and caused a fracas
Alice said, pretend you don't know him
I said, hey, it's the summer of love, you jackass
But after all this time, the only thing that still matters
Is the girl in the ruins of the coliseum, brushing her hair

How many years has it been, my god
That girl must be in her middle ages
The Roman sun must rise and fall
And cats run wild in the lion's cages
Swallows stir the hemispheres
Earthquakes shake the ground
And grain by grain through the hourglass
These walls are crumbling down
But after all this time, the only thing
Is the girl, brushing her hair

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Adam's Ribs

There were no other women, at least not yet,
Just the one that was made for him. He was not lonely
Still he eased himself to sleep at night, counting his ribs
Thinking he could spare one or two more, if only...

He tasted the apple she held to his lips
What I wouldn't give, he thought, counting his ribs

She was fruitful and she multiplied, drew from her body
A tiny man. A miracle! Such alchemy!

Might he draw from his body tiny women to keep him company?
No, God in his wisdom made anatomy

He watched her weave bull rushes into a crib
What I wouldn't give, he thought, counting his ribs

His first born fought the second, tiny hand to tiny hand,
Their perfect little bodies bruised and bloody
What daring! They terrorized him by growing strong and manly
Would his role be overtaken by his understudy?

She gathered her sons in a sheltering kiss
What I wouldn't give, he thought, counting his ribs

All you love can be taken away
Only your longing is yours to keep
His first born a fugitive; the second buried deep
He counted his ribs to ease himself to sleep

Her grief was a fortress, and she was lost to him
What I wouldn't give, he thought, counting his ribs
He tasted the apple and heard the snake hiss
"What I wouldn't give..."

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Careless Lover

The one whose legs were stout and strong like trees,
Tossed his limb across your back while he slept,
Pinning you powerless beneath
All through the sweet sleepless night you were kept
You can't ever forget him, not for a moment of peace,
You'll remember that night over and over
To hold on to the one who held you only once
Then left you searching for another careless lover
Another careless lover

The one who left you bruises on your arms, your back, your thigh
Left you no memory of being bruised,
So you can choose the story you'll remember him by
You were found, you were tossed, you were well used,
But the marks tell the truth, it's the burden of proof,
Under your skin, secret blood letting
You can feel the purple and wonder that the pain
Never hurts enough, but it keeps you from forgetting

It keeps you from forgetting
Another careless lover

The one who wore a crucifix around his neck and a wedding band,
Double negatives cancel out
You were fearless in his hands, and unafraid of dying after,
What about it do you still remember now?
Is it familiar disquiet of soundtrack tv laughter
In the flickering blue light
Was it almost ordinary, almost free, almost forgettable,
And therefore, maybe, almost alright,
Maybe it was almost alright
Just another careless lover
Almost alright

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Poets

Of the seven around the table at the Little Five Points Bar, only four are poets
The other three are just pretending
All wear their hair long, but only six are wearing black turtlenecks
The seventh is wearing a black corduroy jacket with a Nehru collar and epaulets
He has red hair and his name is Max. He has been sleeping with Sarah, the blonde to his right
Who is talking with her hands, even as she holds tightly to one of his.
And he has been covertly composing a love poem for her that cleverly revolves around a marriage proposal
and he is considering reciting it to her later that night as she lies naked in his bed.
She has just said "ailanthus, tree of heaven"
Spreading her hands, and his by default, to indicate sky and branches
Ailanthus makes him think of alimentary, and he holds that thought a moment
Remembering the garbanzo and collard curry Sarah made him for dinner
And imagining a brood of strawberry blonde children, conceived in love
And growing up strong and brainy from genetics and good nutrition
But then alimentary makes him think of alimony
And he is suddenly so tired he extracts his hand from hers in a pretense of scratching his face
And at that moment the relationship ends
Although Sarah will never understand his sudden change of heart
She will find him easy to replace

It is Nick, on her right, whom she will eventually marry. They will move to Indiana, have three normal children in record time before Nick runs off with an exotic dancer from the Kitty Kat club who is madly in love with him, so exactly fulfilling his persistent fantasy that for the rest of his life he will have a hard time distinguishing reality from fiction.
Nick, who is at this moment saying—
This denigrating attraction to archaic charm is a bourgeois affectation –
Proving that he is one of the pretenders.

But Sarah is impressed with his use of the word bourgeois, which makes her think of boudoir
And she has a moment's regret that she is coming of age at a time when black turtlenecks are de rigueur
instead of the catalog fashions that would show her figure to better advantage
And then boudoir makes her think of bourbon and she hails the waiter
Sarah is also one of the pretenders

Unlike Kate, across the table, with her dark cloud of hair, who is saying n-i-e-t-z-s-c-h-e
In response to a question from Harry who is actually taking notes
And making Rick feel a little like the family dog, Chump,
Who has learned the meaning of w-a-l-k and t-r-e-a-t
But who has also learned that spelling out words is an attempt to trick and confuse him
Rick however is not a pretender.
His poetry makes cognitive leaps that cause the poets to lose sleep
And that cause the pretenders to order absinthe, knowing it's unavailable
Rick is silent at these meetings, except for an occasional sharp percussive laugh,
Sometimes at unexpected moments, which makes the other poets nervous

And which fascinates Heather, who only comes to these meetings to be near Rick
She has a dangerous and inappropriate desire to lick his face
And she'll often follow him down the street after meetings
Paying close attention as he brushes the greenery
And covertly using the public washroom at the corner of Harrier and Spitz after he has come out
Heather is, at this moment, quiet but alert and restless,
Wishing she had come of age when absinthe was an option
Absinthe makes her think of Abyssinian and her pulse quickens
Her mouth falls open unselfconsciously and she pants a little
Then Abyssinian makes her think of abstinence and she settles back down
Feeling more like herself

In time to hear Max say – twenty years from now, we'll have our own press and Little Five Points will have a
place in history alongside the Beats, the Fugitives, the Bloomsbury group, the Language Poets. And they all
look around the table at each other, awed by the potency of their collective possibility. But of course the
group has already begun to break apart below the surface from the stress fractures of lusts and betrayals
and ambition and jealousy and suspicion and doubt, short sighted acrimony and ardent bad blood and in
twenty years they will, to a person, all be strangers.

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1000 Miles Away

You had cause to be frightened, I'll give you that
But that's all I'll say
You held your telephone up to the window
So she could hear the spring frogs sing a thousand miles away

And oh you were drawn to her beautiful body
In your mind you filled page after page

But if she was drawn it was to your body of work
Which means something halfway polite at your age

And on the night you might have claimed her
As she lay undisguised on your floor
Your heartbeat pounding like steps in the hall
Her body so perfect and unexplored

So why did you stop with your hand at her knee
And a dark ambition to break her?
Did you bring her so far just to prove to yourself
That you had the power to leave, or take her?

And oh the sound of her step in the hall
And oh the trouble she took
And if she left something like nothing at all
That won't be the story when you write the book

You had cause to be frightened, I'll give you that
And a history of turning away
You held your telephone up to the window
She could hear the first snow fall a thousand miles away

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Speed of Light

Looking at an object from extremely far away
Is the same thing as looking into the past
Said my lover, who was an astrophysicist
He took my face in his hands and tipped my head back
And I thought he might kiss me but no he was saying --
See that star honey, the blue one in the south?
And though I squinted up at the blurry heavens
All I could see clearly was his beautiful mouth

My lover brought a vintage 1970 merlot
Same year he said from which the light from Arcturus fell
Thought we'd sit beneath the stars, raise a toast
But the night was cloudy and the mood went to hell
So we lay on my floor in the dark
Watched the light from passing cars cross the ceiling like shooting stars
And he turned his telescope around the wrong way
Pretending I was a long way away

My lover caught a flight to Vancouver
And he sent me a postcard with a picture of a schooner
It said – I see these tall ships sail out across the bay
I can almost believe that I'm back in the day
Well history is passing at the speed of light
Past the planets and the galaxies, it all goes so fast
And looking at my lover from extremely far away
Is the same thing as looking into the past

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Movies

If I didn't remember my dreams I might go to the movies more often
I'd watch policiers, film noir, and the psychological thrillers
Where somebody knows what somebody doesn't and the story lets trust bleed suspicion
'Til there's terrible language, harrowing editing, a violent soundtrack, or a silent killer

If I didn't remember my dreams I could sit in the dark with a critic's detachment
But in dreams the terror on the screen comes back and I am cast in the lead
The stories are strange but the feelings are familiar, and deep
And still true when I wake trembling and alone, to remember my dreams

In the same way that I am alone remembering you, since you're gone
Gone and never seen again, just a flash across the screen
Once you knew something I didn't, suspicion bleeding the truth from deception
I am never more terrified or more in love as when I dream of you

Last night I went to a subtitled thriller, black and white movie, a man and his daughter
He knew something she didn't. I knew her watchfulness
As her trust bled suspicion until he died dreaming the words she whispered
Then I went home fell asleep in my bed and dreamed you had a secret

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Vanity Fair

I remember you in that hotel room in Vegas, Davis
On this night flight to New Orleans
There is a stranger on the aisle who has hands like yours

He's holding a copy of the same magazine
That you left on the nightstand, open to where that page was missing
You said – Jane, bless her heart, makes me cards with pictures she tears from magazines
Of couples kissing
Yeah, it's sweet and yeah I love her
But oh Vanity Fair cover to cover

Somewhere over Texas when the cabin is dark
There are stars and a glittering city we are flying over
Stranger on the aisle sighs in his sleep like a child
Then turns and rests his head on my shoulder
Scent of vanilla
It's too familiar
To be so wrong, wrong, wrong
I wish this moment would just go on and on
I wish he was the one I wanted
I wish you were free to be my lover
Vanity Fair, cover to cover

It you think in contradictions you can make it all make sense
If this flight is over soon that will not mean it never mattered
Stranger on the aisle will wake with a start and I'll
Look out the window, give the moment some grace
Then after time goes by Davis, and this airplane lands
I'll remember you in Vegas, just like a stranger, with your hands
And that's all
But oh the secret way we knew each other
Ooh Vanity Fair, cover to cover

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All My Old Lovers

All my old lovers
All the ones who ever hurt me
Came to my dream last night
Such a handsome crowd
But they argued with each other
They saw through the other's jive
They knew how to twist the knives
They were ruthless and loud

All my old lovers
They were at each other's throats
It was dog eat dog
It was dusk to dawn
But I slept through the commotion

I slept deeply on and on
And when I awoke this morning
They were gone

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