

Charles Cantrell – Three Poems

Improvised – 1962

Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue* on my transistor radio
in a junkyard Pontiac behind sheeted tin.
My first whiskey. No girl, no moon and its milky halo.

Back-beat and snare drum.
Low trumpet, then high, flat to sharp. The sting
of bourbon. I think about my Blake assignment

for class. What is a tiger burning bright enough
to eat you? Why is their fur so soft? Why did Blake
walk naked in his garden? To the delight or disdain

of neighbors? Picture a hedge row, trellises and vines.
I do get that London's suffering upset Blake.
My work can wait. Davis and Coltrane now, sax

coming behind trumpet. I rarely go to church.
This music is my religion.
I hate the preacher sweating and shouting

about how hellfire-bound we are, unless, unless, unless...
I watched my friend from English class once moan
into glossolalia—a word I looked up. She fell,

and one breast almost popped out.
I wish she were here with me in the car.
It's easy to climb the fence. The watchdog, an old hound,

hardly ever wanders around.
Horn again and bass guitar,
soft, like mist in the goldenrod.

some as tall as the cars' windows. I can't help but wondering if
some of these junkers hold condoms, candy wrappers, pint bottles,
maybe lacy things and a stray button or two. And good God,

there's the blue Ford that spun off a hairpin last June,
killing our school's best lineman, who had just graduated.
He would take my lunch milk. His muscles scared me.

If he and I make it to heaven, I'll avoid him. How close is this music to God? Was God ever blue? Purple loosestrife and blue chicory nudge my Pontiac's wheel wells. A Chicago station is playing

the full album. The next track starts high-pitch trumpet and fast-fingered piano. I'm almost drunk. Loon calls in a nearby lake, almost the way a horn can cry or wail. The trumpet slows

and the piano fades to a few notes. The horn stops, but the piano again. Flat tires, no tires, sour-smelling upholstery. Music and a world in a grain of sand.

I love it. Moonlight and fog in an empty bottle, swirling. I could dance naked in the weeds. Jesus wouldn't care—the real Jesus the preacher rarely talks about.

It's after midnight. My mother, a widow, is somewhere drinking and carousing. Who knows how long she will be gone? I know how to cook, but beans, soda crackers and sardines,

with soda pop will do. Piano's low tunes back-up quick riffs on the horn. Maybe life, or at least some burning phrases, is improvised.

A two-note and a passing over to a complex crescendo, then diminuendo. I could dance, even though this music makes me sit still for the surprises.

Come home with me, poetry-loving girl, and I won't have to contemplate Blake and how he dealt with his kind of blues: awful blue,

full moon blue, head-spinning blue, seeing those with "mind-forged manacles," who care less about the poor or the weak—forever blue.

Polio Summer

Because polio floated its crippling demise,
I leapt over rainbow-colored oil-slick puddles.
No more barefoot in the rain. And though
I didn't drink rainwater in the barrel
behind an abandoned bar, on a dare
Eddie did, swallowing mosquito larvae, I guess.
One day, trying to pop pigeons on the bar's roof with rocks,

we watched a woman in a tight red dress
stroll by, mumbling. Eddie yelled, "She's speaking
in tongues, and she's crazy." "You boys goin' to hell,"
she shouted and stuck out her tongue.
I asked my mother if the red dress woman
could get polio. "Don't know," my mother said.
"But she is a kind of disease."
Paula, next door, ended up in an iron lung.
I laced my sneakers tighter and tried not to
be afraid. "Even the rain is dangerous,"
said my mother. I didn't believe her.
Red dress woman, this time jet black,
limped by our house one Sunday. "Prostitute,"
my mother said, "always working."
"Pros-what?" I said. "You don't need to know,"
said my mother. I looked up the p-word
and tested it on Eddie, who barked,
"You mean *whore*. I hear she'll do it
for a cigarette or a stick of gum."
I wondered if polio made you limp.
I looked up polio and wrote it down.
I looked up nearby words and liked the feel
of pen in hand, liked the whorls and dips
of letters, loved sounding out those words:
prosaic, protagonist, protean...

From the Porch

Chet and I were munching candy
shaped like stars. The moon grinned
at us, but it had no teeth.
My mother, who thought she had
cancer, yelled from the screen door,
*Go easy on the candy, or you'll get
sugar teeth.* "She means rotten," Chet said.

The beards of the live oaks needed trimming.
I don't know why I noticed things like that.
A bulldozer in the lot, where a laundromat
would rise beside Vito's Pizza,
looked like a yellow rhino.

A man sprinted down the street
in an orange jumpsuit, his face painted
like a jack-o-lantern, but it wasn't Halloween.
Art, he screamed, *it's all for art*.
The moon disappeared, but I think
it electrocuted itself on the power lines.

My mother smoked too much, but cancer
was decades away. I wanted to follow
the orange man and ask, "How do you know?"
My teeth started to stick together, and Chet
was almost too late for Bible study.

I thought if I blew breath straight up,
I could resuscitate the moon.
Wasn't the moon immortal?
I thought about drawing a picture of pumpkin man
beside the moon, shaped like a candle,
above a few clouds, and hand it in for art class.

Charles Cantrell has poems in recent issues of *Mudfish*, *Confrontation*, *UCity Review*, *Free State Review*, *District Lit*, *Exit 7*, *Citron Review*, and *Seven Circle Press*. A full-length manuscript, *Wild Wreckage*, was a semi-finalist in the 2016 Brittingham and Pollak Awards from the University of Wisconsin Press. He's been twice nominated for Pushcart Prize in poetry.