

What is it you feel I asked Kurt

What is it you feel I asked Kurt when you listen to Ravel's String Quartet in F-major, his face was so lit up and I wondered, "the music is unlike the world I live or think in, it's from somewhere else, unfamiliar and unknown, not because it is relevant to the familiar and comfortable, but because it brings me to that place that I didn't/couldn't imagine existed. And sometimes that unfamiliar place is closer to my world than I realize, and sometimes it's endlessly distant," that's what he wrote in an email when I asked him to remind me what he'd said earlier, off the cuff, "I don't recall exactly what I said," he began, a sentence written in iambic pentameter, and then the rest, later he spoke of two of his brothers who died as children, leukemia and fire, his face, soft, I'm listening to Ravel now, its irrelevancy.

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<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/what-it-you-feel-i-asked-kurt>)

Self-Portrait: My Legs

If these legs could talk they'd tell you about Munich.
They'd say 'Paris. No one says Paris anymore.'
They'd take you on a slow voyage across the channel
from Hoek van Holland to Harwich, drinking all night
with a red-faced East German man who couldn't hear
nor speak. And the British soldier, his narrow
bed and the smell of the pomade in his hair
which marked me for days.

If these legs could talk. All those late night walks
from E. 7th St. to Sammy Wo's for a whole
steamed fish split between the two of us,
and its eyes, and its lips, and our lips,

and back even further to the summer
I worked as a cocktail waitress on the island.
I was eighteen. Sometimes I'd take the midnight ferry
to the mainland because I could.
I'd sleep in my sleeping bag near the big lake, on the ground.

And the night, as I made the crossing,
it was just me and the hotel magician below deck,
and he offered to hypnotize me for free.
The floor of the ferry was covered in dead Luna moths.

That trance he put me in lasted for hours, days.
Maybe he never brought me back, maybe I never woke up
and all of the years since have been an illusion,

as when my right leg shattered like a mirror
and they had to put it back together with titanium
rods and screws. You'll always be in pain,

the doctor said, and yes, my legs would tell you
if they could talk, it's true.

(Pank, December 2014)

Past Tense (things were, but it's all a blur)

There was watermelon but it wasn't red.
Very little was read, but there were stories.
They acted themselves out as if in dreams
but there were no dreamers. It's hard

to explain to a cat like you. You see,
there were places. It was as if there were
playrooms but there wasn't money
or architecture. Things weren't divided

that way. Everyone did everything.
Let me explain it through summer
Bible school. The minister sang,
played the trumpet, did pantomime,

popped popcorn, could throw
his voice into the mouth of a dummy,
was Lucifer, Lazarus, and all the beautiful
Marys in the puppet show jamboree.

Yellow watermelons and roosters,
and anyone could whack them
with a hatchet. In this way there was dinner.
The utensil drawer was like mercury. Silver

and it flowed. No divider. Things were tense
when the sky was tense with rain. A field
wasn't called a playground. I guess
that changed with the merry-go-round.

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Self-Portrait under Janis's Shoe When She Sang "Ball and Chain" at Monterrey Pop, 1967

The sky was gold spangles, the wind a smoker's cough and typhoon. Shade between her shoe-sole and the floor of the stage, a good place to tent-camp, our little fire and pan of Rice-a-Roni. An inch for my boy and me to live in. Like the dark between apples at the fruit stand. Like the inside of a muskellunge. Like what went on under the big belly of the water tower. Like the word "like" coupling the train cars of words so they don't run off on their own down the track of the sentence. If Janis's face was not pitted like the moon then her face was only pitted and there was no love to be had. "Like" links the iron ball to the leg iron and love to the whole contraption. Without "like" there is only love or no love to be had. It's like I found my boy in a pile of dirty laundry with a needle in his arm and his lips blue as cornflowers stuck in the middle of Texas. It's like I grabbed his hand and pulled him out of death like a tent worm from its tent in the wild cherry tree. I did find him blue-lipped. I did grab him. Held him like a baby. I held him, my baby. Then Janis stamped her foot and lowered the boom.

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