

the nob hill
MARINERS



Poems & Lyrics

Eight Poems That Became Songs

by Robert Lavett Smith

Song lyrics and poems have always been closely related, but very few lyrics can really qualify as poetry in their own right. Preacher Boy is one of the few contemporary artists whose writing consistently achieves the level of real poetry. I've known and admired his work since I first met him back in the 'Nineties, so when I was approached about allowing him to record an album of material with lyrics based on poems of mine, I granted my permission in a heartbeat.

Of the poems chosen for this project, all but one are old favorites that I've read aloud and honed for decades. The catalyst which provided the principal inspiration, however, is a new poem, "Tenderloin Nocturne," written not quite a month ago. Although it's more recent than the others, it harkens back, in tone and theme, to the poems I wrote when I was still new to the Bay Area, and seems to belong among them. The set provides, I think, a cohesive whole; it was a solid foundation upon which a song cycle, and an album, could be built.

I find the finished product thrilling. The garage rock vibe of these tracks infuses with a frenzied energy lines which, when I first conceived them thirty years ago, I envisioned as quietly contemplative. In the hands of a master songsmith, these souvenirs of my squandered youth have acquired a force and an urgency I could never have foreseen. And they are the fruits of what has been a collaboration in the truest sense. Preacher Boy's additions and edits often significantly improve upon my original text, but the finished product is greater than the sum of its parts, beyond anything either of us could have achieved on our own.

That said, these eight poems that became songs remain very much the product of our long friendship, and our shared experience. They reflect the neighborhoods we once roamed, on the edge of the Tenderloin, and the tough but always vibrant, dramatic, and deeply real community we saw around us every day. Though they have taken a long time to reach their present form, these songs were well worth the wait. Black Rain is a major achievement, and I'm honored to be a part of it. According to the lyrics to the musical version of "The Nob Hill Mariners," "If Preach won't do it, Bob will." I will indeed. And I'll be having the time of my life.

Together We Rise: The Story of The Nob Hill Mariners

by Christopher “Preacher Boy” Watkins

At first, they were almost two separate people to me.

There was the simultaneously oafish, yet balletic bearded lumberjackian fried pickle eater in the front row of my lonesome solo blues shows who was, at that time, the only other man in the Tenderloin to know who Robert Johnson was.

And there was the heartbreakingly sensitive, sensuous, soulful, and so alone poet of “Hesitant Light” and “Everything Moves With A Disfigured Grace.”

Gradually, these two became one—Bob Smith and Robert Lavett Smith. They came together and became my friend.

We listened to music together, drank together, talked writing together. There would come a time when we would watch his wife dying together. Bob and I wrote different, spoke different, felt different, lived different, but we shared a similarly complicated relationship with beauty and pain, and we both loved writing to the point of derangement. I had so much to learn still, and he already knew so much. I like to believe I eventually came of writing age, and if I did so, I did so with Bob’s poems in my back pocket.

Twenty years of writing later, and I don’t know that I’ve ever stopped trying to write the musical equivalent of “The Clockwork Farm.” Finally, I can do precisely that, with this project.

It all began with “Tenderloin Nocturne”; a new poem Bob had kindly dedicated to me. I read it and knew instantly I was looking at a song. I thought, almost immediately, of Lou Reed’s “New York,” and felt that, in “Tenderloin Nocturne,” I had discovered San Francisco’s answer to that album. I had the audacity to attempt revisions to the poem, to try and fit it to a simple song form, and as I began to introduce those new words to my guitar, I tried to play something I thought of as Lou Reed-ian, to see if I could get that unique combination of raw, garage rock, and sophisticated, urgent poetry.

Before I knew it, I’d done this process with two more poems, and at that point, I decided to share my secret with Bob—that I wanted to make a garage rock album of his poems. He was excited, and off I went—into his books, and under the headphones.

I think it was an odd experience for Bob to find his melancholic, wistful, quietly haunted words recast with such aggression. It was equally strange for me to attempt to tell such nuanced stories with such simple and unruly forms. None of this was intuitive for either of us, but somehow, it made sense to both of us.

Poetry is both inexplicably complex and perversely simple. It is an act of expansion and distillation to write a poem. I tried to do this with the songs. I tried to make them enormous by making them simple. Guitar, bass, drums, vocals. The flour, yeast, water, salt of music. And so together we rise. The Nob Hill Mariners.

THE NOB HILL MARINERS [poem]

All brass and varnished wood, the cable car,
from which we hang uncertainly, like sailors
from rigging, glows in the wet light
like an apparition, its antiquated
benches and poles almost unbelievable
against the chrome and dark glass
of the business district. We can

barely feel the mist, not really rain,
which dims the streetlights rattling past
to the softness of seamarks, as though
decades dissolve around us, leaving
only the night and the always-near
smells of summer and sea. And at the crest

of each hill the world recedes
as it must have once for the mariners sure
that every horizon was the edge of the earth.
Then down we go, laughing although
our fingers tighten automatically
around the handled edges
of our seats. And no one ever falls,
nothing is unsure. Yet we feel the wind
in some forgotten rigging, the clatter
of wheels like the straining
of lost, tar-darkened ropes.

the nob hill mariners [song]

all brass and varnished wood, just like a cable car
we'd hang on if we could, like sailors in a bar
the rigging glows in wet light
the apparition glows white

and if preach won't do it, we know that bob will
he's with the mariners, comin' down nob hill

benches and poles, they're unbelievable
against the chrome and dark glass, barely perceivable
in the business district
into another mystic

and if preach won't do it, we know that bob will
he's with the mariners, comin' down nob hill

we can barely feel the mist, it isn't really rain
dimming the streetlights, spackling the dirty drain
years dissolved around us
when sea and summer found us

and if preach won't do it, we know that bob will
he's with the mariners, comin' down nob hill

every horizon, the edge of our earth
and down we go laughing, falling headfirst
wheels clattering down the slopes
like lost, tar-darkened ropes

and if preach won't do it, we know that bob will
he's with the mariners, comin' down nob hill

JESUS IN BED BETWEEN US [poem]

For Ruth Ann Nelson

We've just seen a movie
in which angels walked real and alive
through the streets of a modern city.
Now we're sitting in your car,
late, the engine idling.
You're talking about Africa,
how there is work to be done there.
Light seems to gather around you:
the headlights a gentle fire,
your pearl necklace and earrings
flaring like stars.

The years of my life
tremble on the brink of love,
as though on the lip of a chalice
from which I cannot drink.
When you mention faith I imagine
Jesus in bed between us, blood from His wounds
spreading its wings like a dark moth
on the sheets.

jesus in bed between us [song]

we've just seen a movie, in which angels are alive
they walk through the city in which you and i drive
and you talk about africa, that's where you want to go
but all i can think about is san francisco

i prayed for the rains to clean us
but the heavens had already seen us
with jesus in bed between us

it seems like light is gathering around you
just like the very first time that i found you
our headlights, like a fire, flaming from our car
your necklace and your earrings, flaring like stars

i prayed for the rains to clean us
but the heavens had already seen us
with jesus in bed between us

the years of my life, tremble on the brink
of love at the lip of a cup from which i can't drink
you speak of faith, out here on the streets
i see blood spread its wings like a dark moth on the sheets

i prayed for the rains to clean us
but the heavens had already seen us
with jesus in bed between us



tracking set-up for electric guitar

harmony h78

fender bassman

akg c1000

SHE ARRIVES JUST AT DUSK [poem]

The February wind
rattles the windows,
and she stands in front of them
framed by the falling night.

Behind her glasses her eyes
are trembling light;
her knuckles whiten
around her purse strap.

When she speaks
a silence lingers
like winter starlight
on her lips.

Long after she has gone
I will continue to picture her
walking alone down black streets
quivering with rain.

she arrives just at dusk [song]

the february wind
rattles the windows, pulled tight
and she stands in front
framed by the falling night

behind her glasses, her eyes
tremble and lighten
and around her purse strap
her knuckles whiten

she arrives at dusk
wearing a tissue-thin shawl
and it's gonna be a black rain
that's gonna fall

when she speaks
a silence slips
like winter starlight
from her lips

long after she's gone
her picture remains
walking alone down black streets
quivering with rain

she arrives at dusk
wearing a tissue-thin shawl
and it's gonna be a black rain
that's gonna fall

AN AFTERNOON BY THE CAROUSEL [poem]

For Deena Larsen

Unicorns and ribboned stallions
rise and fall silently on their poles,
their paint so thick it gleams like glass.
The sky's the color of a bruise, the sun lowers
uncertain ropes of light through the trees.
The animals' backs are nearly empty
except for a few old people, colorless and small,
who clutch the reins with unsteady hands.

Beneath the eucalyptus we stand watching,
our fingers linked although we are not lovers.
Tinny music settles over us like a bright pollen.
Your eyes, enormous through thick glasses,
memorize everything: the frail riders,
the horses' heads thrown back, their silent neighing,
the endless swirl of sun and shadow.
In the hesitant light your white cane
shines unbearably, a candle, a bleached bone.

afternoon by the carousel [song]

carousel beasts circle past
their paint so thick, it gleams like glass
the sky is the color of my bruised knees
the sun lowers ropes of light through the trees

carousel seats rise and fall
a few old people, colorless and small,
clutch at their reigns their hands unsteady
beneath the eucalyptus, we stand ready

in the hesitant light your white cane handle
shines like a bleached bone, like a candle
the carousel music offers us cover
our fingers are linked, though we are not lovers

tinny music, slowly falling
upon our heads like some bright pollen
through your thick glasses, your giant eyes
everything you see, you memorize

in the hesitant light your white cane handle
shines like a bleached bone, like a candle
the carousel music offers us cover
our fingers are linked, though we are not lovers



tracking set-up for electric bass
gibson "the ripper" (de-fretted)
fender bassman
akg c1000

CROSSES MADE OF FLOWERS [poem]

Hoboken, Easter, 1987

In this city of blind windows
where vagrants
drag shopping bags
down streets where forsythia
blazes its innocent gold
against the walls of empty buildings,
there's nothing to say about spring
which won't seem thin or false,
like a gin-soured kiss.
Old men retired from the coffee works
doze in the parks,
colorless heads nodding
in the striped shade,
their eyes enormous behind thick glasses.
The women who bob like sparrows
along the sidewalks,
wearing the black scarves
of Italian peasants,
file through the doors
of the parish church
as solemnly as statues.
They are promised miracles—
but the raised wine
tastes of vinegar and dust.
The priest kneels
before the Lord whose naked body
is a limp sail,
the breath of heaven
gone out of it.
Crosses made of flowers
shine in the hollow dark,
their petals edged with brown
as though on fire.

crosses made of flowers [song]

in this city of blind windows
bums drag dirty shopping bags
down streets, where forsythia
is always gilding empty buildings

like the thin, false bliss
of a gin-soured kiss

old men retire from the coffee works
doze in the park, and wait for dark
in the shade, they're all watchin'
as time passes through thick glasses

like the thin, false bliss
of a gin-soured kiss

the priest kneels before the lord
hung from a nail, like a sail
flower crosses, start shinin'
as though on fire, behind the choir

like the thin, false bliss
of a gin-soured kiss

a woman wears, peasant black
and tries to search for, the parish church door
she wants a miracle, from the raised wine
the gods have given her, dust and vinegar

like the thin, false bliss
of a gin-soured kiss

THE CLOCKWORK FARM [poem]

Insert a quarter, and tiny carvings
spring to life. A yellowed sky
encloses it all; invisible gears
animate a scene excessively quaint,
unreal even to those who built it.

I remember the rough country of pain,
a wilderness of crutches, braces and canes.

The awkward dance of those days
is mirrored in these dusty miniatures,
bound by an awful gravity through which
everything moves with a disfigured grace.

clockwork farm [song]

put in a quarter and a miniature carving
springs up to life with the grace of a saint
the yellowing sky, invisible gears grinding
the scene so unreal, so excessively quaint

i remember the rough country of pain
a wilderness of crutches, braces, and canes
the clockwork farm, my reflected face
and everything moves with a disfigured grace

the dance of those days, the ungainly sparring
mirrored in miniatures circling around
even those who built it found themselves doubting
by an awful gravity, bound

i remember the rough country of pain
a wilderness of crutches, braces, and canes
the clockwork farm, my reflected face
and everything moves with a disfigured grace



tracking set-up for drums

- 1 nady dm-80
- 2 samson c02
- 1 akc c1000

A CYANIDE LAKE IN AN OLD MINING TOWN [poem]

Victor, Colorado

A blue more faded than the frozen sky,
the water is the color of an eye—
blind and unblinking among the talus mounds,
it broods above the freight yards outside town:
too perfectly round for anyone to mistake
for either a sinkhole or a natural lake,
sheltered by slag heaps from the winter wind.

Here in the mountains, where the air is thinned,
the weak December sunlight seems to drain
down through the gravel filters like old rain,
as though the poisoned waters could extract
this metaphorical gold, as they in fact
once drew the true gold from the rock and rubble
back when the exhausted mine seemed worth the trouble.

cyanide lake in an old mining town [song]

a blue more faded than the frozen sky
a blue more faded than the frozen sky
the water is the color of a clouded eye

blind and unblinking among the talus mounds
blind and unblinking among the talus mounds
it's dark above the freight yards, outside of town

and you can come with me, and i'll take ya 'round
to a cyanide lake in a mining town

sheltered by the slag heaps from the winter wind
takin' shelter in the slag heaps from the winter wind
where the mountains are heavy, and the air is thin

and you can come with me, and i'll take ya 'round
to a cyanide lake in a mining town

once there was gold, by poison water, drawn
once there was gold, by poison water, drawn
once the mine was worth it, but those days are gone

and you can come with me, and i'll take ya 'round
to a cyanide lake in a mining town

TENDERLOIN NOCTURNE [poem]

For Christopher Watkins

City of ghosts, city of grieving ghouls,
city of glittering bridges spanning sorrow,
see us safely through this night.

Once the streets shed their rags of gaiety,
the most trivial things can turn deadly.
Then, swiftly, a savage silence settles.

At dawn, while drunks doze in doorways,
the moon seeks sanctuary in the sunrise,
a lozenge dissolving in lurid light.

tenderloin nocturne [song]

city of ghosts, city of grieving ghouls
city of mansions and empty schools
city of glittering bridges over sorrow
see us through this night, so we might live to weep tomorrow

tender is the night
tender is the night
tender is the moonlight
in the tenderloin tonight

once the streets shed their gay and gleeful rags
the trivial turns deadly, and the sewer suction drags
gates come off the taverns with the ugly wrench of metal
see us through the night before the savage silence settles

tender is the night
tender is the night
tender is the moonlight
in the tenderloin tonight

drunks doze in the doorways in their camouflage disguise
as the moon seeks sanctuary in the sunlight's open eyes
like a child pale with fever, like a death mask done in white
like a lozenge slow dissolving in the lurid light

tender is the night
tender is the night
tender is the moonlight
in the tenderloin tonight



tracking set-up for vocals
akg c214

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The White Peacock's Throat: Feh! Press (1990)
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The Nob Hill Mariners: The Monkshood Press (1993)
Jesus in Bed Between Us: The Tomcat Press (1994)
Everything Moves with a Disfigured Grace: The Alsop Review (2006)

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