

SONG FOR MY FATHER

**SEAN THOMAS
DOUGHERTY**

1.

Home from work my father would slump
down in his chair, take the bottle of Bacardi
and a can of coke, pop the tab and fill
the glass to the rim with rum. He'd sip,
then pull the Horace Silver record from its sleeve,
hold it tenderly as if it was a cool hat's brim,
and place the needle to the first track,
the vinyl's crackling hiss, and then the trumpet.
It was 1972, a small apartment in Toledo, Ohio.
My white mother was gone to night school.
He drank his tall glass until his eyes half lidded
the chords carried him out of the walls.
What is the song that can save you?
Beneath every old record a kind of spin

where I can hear my father's quiet hum.

You are asking for this blouse
of rain
these notes
to never stop

to tell your name
inside the letters
of the song.

2.
a song to arrive
in an embrace.

3.
For with each chorused chord
we are searching the grooves
for an untranslated sound
cannot reveal what is behind
the veil's hem

The way Coltrane reached
as if the inside of every note
were a new shade
of blue. Or how the body
stretches

to touch another body
and in the inter
course of telling
makes
a mouth
new.

4.
Suppose never sleeping
without one's name or one's age
passing without a wave
of wanting anything other
than the face of the falling
light across the floor
you've never crossed

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an unmade memory
waits as if an accident
travels up
your spine.

You are asking for this blouse
of rain
these notes
to never stop
to tell your name
inside the letters
of the song
you are asking
for this blouse
of rain
to never stop
to tell these notes
to spell his name
inside the letters
of his song.

5.
Speechless is the act of listening.

6.
Is your father a cantata
the air blows in off the coast of Kalamazoo
a cantata made from the flames of Flint

made from blacktop and porch rocking,
a cadence of boot laces and concrete slabs

a cadence of yardwork and slaughterhouses?

A concerto of the UAW Hall
and the old neighborhood?

And who will compose the symphony
for my father and the long hours

he traveled selling toilet paper, candy
whatever money paid he took he gave

driving through the cornfield small towns
of Ohio from supermarket aisle to aisle

in his corduroy jacket with his neatly trimmed
black beard afro tie tied and wing tipped, he was my father,

brown skinned brown playing Miles on eight-tracks
he sold, he spoke polite to rude white managers

to keep his job he ate his anger, he rolled
his left sleeve up and the window down

let the rain brush him lightly like the hush

of a brush across a cymbal rim, the job

is not my father, but the job
could eat my father, the men

who tell your father

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what he is, and the money

that isn't enough to fill the hand (now the horn bellows)
that holds the glass when he comes home

as he drinks, the other
on the shoulder

of the boy watching the war on TV
the child he has taken as his own. (push the tempo push the tempo)

what song is an unmuted trumpet
blown against labor spent, a part of you

to never forget in the falling hour

of the poor the dishes washed by hand
not a reverence that revels when he left

but when he arrived

inside these notes

of rain

to never stop

inside the letters

of your name

this song

you are asking

for this blouse (the piano speaks)

of keys pleads for work this is your telling time
for your father mending his hem
this litany of fathers not just mine (let the drummer drive)
and your father hammering the drywall,
or driving the diesel down the highway,

or cutting the birch board, or lacing up his boots
(the piano decrescendos) to step
so each must will a wanting
song that swallows the way your woman
might open, like an iris
after a long day of work
and how her hands tell
how little you have died (the bassline slides)
or your man whose hands
are gentle as your father swinging
you through the air.

7.

your father, and your father working in the mines,
rising to punch a clock, in some southern town, or you in Chicago
washing the blood from his smock at the butcher shop, or
your father fitting the pipe, holding his asthmatic chest,
or yours who never took a vacation, or yours who fixed
or mopped or bent of late night trains and jackhammer drills
father shoveling coal head shaved close shaved cook or caddie
or cab driver file clerk mailman studying Dante, the arithmetic
of blowing a fuse, night man outside the iron gate, ball player
after the game swinging your sister over his shoulders
smoke hushed ghost colored orange light long corridor
your father on a hospital gurney pushed and pulled
a song of late night dives, buttered grits and black coffee grinds—

a tempo so tender
it's as if looking
into the inside
of a face
far away
from any fist

wrapped around a glass of rum

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as the ancient vinyl spits,
my silver-haired old man
listening to Horace Silver
in his chair, worn down
his brown face creased
like a record's groove.
Soon I'll have to carry him

to bed and change the pan.
Your father holds your fingers.
What dream does the blue rain
speak inside the trumpet's solo
of his snore? When I was small,
no matter how tired or drunk he was,
he never raised his voice, he tucked me in.