

Detroit (while I was away)

Even though I know the air hangs
like a dead dog's ass over River Rouge,
I still miss you. Your fenced in gardens
filled with sustenance and Saturday

evening draped over a back alley porch.
The September stench that creeps
slow as a Woodward bus on Sunday.
Black tires crawling in summer heat.

Your acoustic guitars and amplified hair.
Your rows of long thin buildings,
arranged on a young man's head.
Last time I saw you, a woman stood

on a corner conducting traffic.
Her own sunken opera.
A crack pipe baton. Car horns joined
in like a bad man cruising a dream.
She stood on the stage of Cass and Mack

dying to reach Joy Rd. The moon left
its spotlight on a backdrop of burnt buildings.
Yellow police tape posed like velvet rope.
Do Not Cross.

A picket line of teens careened down Cass
past broken glass that spread
like urban sprawl, a Diego Rivera mural
painted across the DIA wall.

Another time I saw you,
steam barreled out of your manhole covers
like you were about to explode. A soul imbibed
forty ounces of courage so it could head back to the axle plant

on Lynch Road, Jefferson or some other
conveyor belt street that gets everyone moving
in step like a Temptation line dance.
22 ounces of sweat and iron hidden in a bathroom stall.

Away from the plant tours and fat cats,
shop stewards and snitches. I remember you
old friend. I'm in another city now.
But Martin Luther King St. always looks the same.

It just doesn't intersect with Rosa Parks,
12th Street where '67 fires started,
named for a woman who chose you beyond
a boycott in Montgomery, then rode

the front of that big old dog
straight home to you Detroit, I love you...

from your basketball sun, that hangs in the sky
then falls, only to bounce back up tomorrow. Down
to your alligator shoes. I'll kiss you on the river.
Meet you in the middle of a suitcase and wonder

do you think of me this way...?
Do you even know I've gone? Say my name, Detroit.
I pray you claim me. A small town boy.
Born in New Jersey, but made in Detroit.
My heart beats like tool and die for you.
like horse power and pistons for you,
while mechanized, lumpenized robot
zombies haunt Mack Avenue.

Here they come, a gang of buildings in tank tops,
Mack Trucks in do rags, marching
down to Hastings Street.
Though I never knew you back when
you wore your onyx necklace
like a tire around your neck, I witness

the aftermath. Dipping your blue black hands
in electric currents of music and art. The circumference
of Outer Drive. Moross and Joy.
Paris of the Midwest they called you.

And every time '67 fires or Halloween came around,
you lived up to it. The year I was born, you blew up.
I heard it. I came when I could. I've never left.
I stay, even when I go. Chosen heart.

Adopted town. From Belle Isle to Eight Mile.

Chocolate city where the mothership landed.
Late night downtown and the peacocks are out
on Fourth Street, calling to billboards
that hover over highways, telling stories to streetlamps.
The moon is a plate full of soul food, Mexican food.
Pierogies and paczkis. Kafta and curry
We mix and separate, mix and separate.

Each Prentis stoop is a garage rock chord
strummed and banged, like a car mechanics sledge.
A man screams beneath the Ambassador bridge.
Another drums on plastic tubs for tourists.
“Will work for food” is a piece of poetry
scribbled on an art house wall.

Festival wizards, Saunderson, Atkins and May.
The Big Three. De trois, of three.
Black panthers, white panthers and Lions, oh my.
Tight boys in rock pants, the hustlers in Palmer Park.
Lovers, thugs and blues men with axes
sharp enough to cut down another forced overtime shift.
The sun dresses flowing like the Detroit River. Supremely
turning, bending with the weight of the city. Detroit,

your beautiful hair woven women, putting on gloves
and grabbing tools next to me on the assembly line,
teaching me what perseverance and being a brother is
all about. Overtime fists clocking. These are the hands
that braid hair and lock dread, cook meat that falls
right off the bone into fat, black pots of collards working harder
and harder...
and harder still...

...so step on, Detroit,
dribble and shoot,
pass and play,
struggle and fight,
darken and light,
drive and impel,
riot and quell, pick the steel burrs
off the cross members at the front of the Jeep Cherokee.

Look what we have made you. Steam and steel.
Still, that's how hard I love you.

- David Blair