

OPEN SKY

BY JASON KOO

I

I head out to my car in mid-morning, when other residents
Have gone to work. It's summer. Hell is a parking lot in Houston.

The birds are going off like cell phones as I approach, disrupting
The library quiet, tiny, black and pocketed by the trees, all business.

II

Birds do not sing; they practice. During the day, they crowd
Into trees like jazzmen into Thelonious Monk's kitchen, piano wedged

Against the refrigerator, jamming in their tuxedos. At night,
They go on to their separate gigs, testing their songs, getting it right.

III

Sonny Rollins on the bridge, the open sky his studio.
The wind engulfs his horn. Just a muted speck to boats below,

Only he can hear himself, and to hear, he must keep playing,
Forcing out the music, fighting for a sound, making notes.

IV

Singing in the car, I make my way down Richmond Avenue.
My voice stinks, it cracks, makes people laugh, but in my moving

Studio, I'm unembarrassed. That is, until we pull up
To an intersection, and everyone can see me through the glass.

V

The road must be long enough, long enough and slow.
Not the furious highway, a tyranny of speed. Go down that road

And soon you're taking nothing in, only jockeying for position,
Storming past semis without the relaxation of the drive,

VI

Car chugging, *I've gotta go, I've gotta go*, as if trying to get off
The phone with the day her suitor, so damn ordinary,

No enjoyment in the going, only a mild relief when it's over,
Now we can get back to watching TV and smoothing our hair

VII

Which is usually what we're doing anyway, so why not opt
For the gentle avenue, the great, wide-open Houston avenues

That steer the cars like cattle westward, Richmond, my street,
And big daddy Westheimer, panoramas of broad daylight,

VIII

Road seemingly endless, enough road to accommodate however
Far you want to go with still more, as Keats would say, still more

Road and then some, canyons of sky, the sun like Lester Young's
Tenor sax kicking up dust in Kansas City, porkpie hat a-tilt, bent

IX

Swagger in the big band afternoon, *nice eyes, kid, nice eyes*, easily
The coolest motherfucker in the land, who swung his saxophone

Sideways and played it like a flute, too light for Fletcher Henderson
But hard enough for me, head bobbing to the side stupidly

X

As I speed ahead of the other cars so I can look stupid in peace,
But always watching my speed, never going too far over forty,

Obeying the law, the framework for freedom, enjoying the easy
Camaraderie of cars friendly in the spaces, the natural give and take

XI

Of soloist and rhythm section, Rollins improvising on the melody,
Departing further from it with each chorus but always coming back

To the song of starting out, car drifting apart but collecting itself
With the rest at the next light, light like the end of a musical bar.

XII

Sometimes you go through the intersection, sometimes
Through many in a row, a string of lights green, and this is always

With the feeling that you've just gotten away with something,
Lucked out, have perfect timing. But most of the time the light is red.

XIII

Rest along the way is welcome, time to stop and catch up,
Leaning forward at the dashboard for a desk, a student of the sky.

But it's hard to keep looking up; soon you're forced to look right
And left, amidst the purring company of life, mysterious people...

XIV

Cellphone America, why can't we just shut-up and drive?
The moto-conversationalists are growing in shocking numbers.

Hey, Jabberhead. "Could you call back later? I'm on the other line.
Thanks—Hi, I'm back. No, that was just my neighbor, Nobody."

XV

Planet Smoothie, on the left, and on the median, there's my man,
Dressed as a banana, holding up the Smoothie sign, dancing away.

He must be hot in there, should just stand still, but he can't help it,
The work is irresistible, celebrating himself, a dancing banana.

XVI

Some more sights of our town. Edwards Cinemas,

A mall of a movie house, 24 stadium-seating theatres, red carpet
Ruined with comets. Houston Shoe Hospital, where white sock
Nurses roam. Ragin Cajun Seafood, featuring a giant red crawfish

XVII

Salted with Christmas lights over its door. Tuesday Morning,
Sound of a Hopper painting but dealer of fine furniture.

James Coney Island, 1923 Original, "SUMMER ON A STICK
TRY OUR CORN DOGS." The Pink Pussycat Cabaret,

XVIII

Centerfolds, The Men of La Bare, "America's #1 Ladies Club."
Billy Blues and Wild West, more like barns than clubs.

Polly Esther's Culture Club. Shock Radio-Active Dance Factory.
And Town 2000, lit up like a space shuttle. Not much to see,

XIX

And most of it's junk: nail parlors, tanning salons, hat shops,
Gun shops, cigar shops, luggage stores, convenience stores

(Are these shops or stores?), gas stations, Exxon, Shell, Conoco,
Things passing anonymous and crooked as telephone poles

XX

But over it all, the pure alleviation of blue, constantly
Fresh, a wash of cleanest color, clearing the rough edges, the

Corners, the wires, clearing the clutter, all the pokings, the
Juttings, working with the ugliest locality, improvising beauty.

XXI

In a flat land, the blue sax rises. Approaching Billy Blues,
You see a giant blue sculpture of a sax emerge over the buildings,

Hooked tensely in the air, a snake that slides down like a 7

Into the opening blare of an elephant trunk: any minute now,

XXII

Kids will leap like notes into the air. The saxophone colossus
Will come trundling over the land (a little late for work today),

Tripping over some telephone wires and smashing in the roof
At Barry's Pizza, and with slices now peppering his sleeve,

XXIII

Snatch the sax away from the kids and say, "This is my Blue 7,"
Turning it over and emptying them like saliva out of the bell.

He solos everyday atop his little hill, attempting to master
The weather, to blow through all the clouds and open up the blue,

XXIV

Freeing one space for light; and though he's sending blasts of song
Throughout the sky, he's like a whale in water, we can't hear him,

Except in fragments of melody broken off into our own songs,
Whole tunes created out of a single note of the larger improvisation,

XXV

The pop songs, symphonies, operas, all the tiny melodies
Scattered throughout the trillion cars each day, a chaos of music

Orchestrated by this massive musician, whose song is clear
And wide as the sky, whose sunswept tone reverberates as blue.

XXVI

Stopping at an intersection, I watch the cars pass by
For just a second, and then I go past them, for just a second.

A simple change in perspective, and the slowly opening avenue
Is just a line that moves across, everybody passing, quick as rain.

XXVII

A thin house, the car a corridor, stuffed with chairs—
No room to pace. But this is the proper posture, chair fastened on

Like a backpack, eyes locked on the view; from here, one
Starts to expand, takes on more rooms, huge sun-filled additions.

XXVIII

I love to be inside the lines, the parallels, car fitting snugly
In its lane like a book into its slot on the shelf. Where I am not,

The lines begin to narrow, run down to a vanishing point.
I love how, with all that wide day ahead, I am where it is widest.

XXIX

A blue monk in a blue train, I'm opening blue lanes, blue
Canals for blue canoes, blue avenues for blue shoes, I'm dumping

Blue pails of blue light from blue heights in the blue night so
Blue wells of blue morning blue brim at blue noon, I'm building

XXX

Blue houses on blue shores with blue floors, blue doors, climbing
Blue stairs to blue sleep in blue rooms with blue tunes, I'm chopping

Blue chunks of blue keys around me in blue debris, erecting blue
Columns, blue cubes, hearing blue notes and blue news, I'm smashing

XXXI

Blue tanks over blue gates, shedding blue stars and blue states,
Sailing out on blue decks of blue ships with blue sex, blue hips,

Of blue body and blue mind sailing for blue country, a blue kind,
Leaning out on a blue mast, away from the blue past, toward a blue future.

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