

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA

from The Last Bohemian of Avenue A

After a gig I'd circle these streets
to air the smoke from my clothes
early mornings, as a light snow
fell in my black beard. I felt
klezmer leapt out of my alto
back there at the Village Gate,
tangled in the Southern accent
of a trumpet, the piano & bass
daring me to slay a whole forest.

These days, I lean into a tune,
unable to forget I was almost
the man with the golden arm.
But I could hear Lady Day
outside the Five Spot,
a gardenia withering in her hair,
saying, Do you know what
you gotta bring, Loverman?
Some nights her blown kisses
floated through my mouthpiece
as if an apparition craved a body,
for Bogart to say, Play it again,
Sam. I'd summon a voice asking,
What makes you wish to walk
upright on a morning like this?
But as streetlights struck brass
I didn't have to answer the dark.

Sometimes one craves an epic
to unravel, to untangle the years
& follow tributaries into the cave.

I'm only another ragged footnote
to a blues crossing the Atlantic.
I'm here to unlock the shackles
holding skeletons under the sea,
& I can't say how this happens
when I'm sweating up there.
If I did, I could never blow
jubilation, saying, Hush, child,
don't you say a mumbling word.

Now, with my body on the block
I say to all you youngbloods,
I dig playing the Candlelight,
how everyone listens to what ties
gutstring to hidden rafters. The struggle
of Being stripped down & stood
against a wall, left humming, singled out.
I play everything I know,
as if the whole pulsing thing
pulls everyone together—
four hours in a temple where I
rock like a struck bell
in afternoon light, & I say to myself,
Rabbas, show the belly, & play
her water broke
to ferry me across
the great divide.

Once someone told me
Miles was gigging in Paris,
& I said, I think I'll fly over
& corner him at Jimmy's
in Saint-Paul de Vence.
I thought the two of us could talk
sense into him, & we'd record
some spirituals & gospel tunes.
I planned to take boxing gloves
to grab his undivided attention.
He knew I could still drop

the hammer, & my footwork
true as my chord changes.
If I had followed my mind
to the sacred & profaned
in a simple sentence, three
black men talking till dawn
about the shape of things
to come & gone, sipping Jack,
& gazing at a half-friendly sky,
my idea would now be legend.
Miles said he loved ballads
too much to keep playing them,
but some nights I can't sleep
because I can't stop listening
to a recording we never made.
Can you feel where I want to go?
I believe it is good as *All Blues*,
the mother & father of rhythm,
but I still have four damn gloves
hanging on a hook in my closet.