

The **Blues** MAN (!) & other... poems...

By Pete Madzelan

WHY I LIKE IT: Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes... *Pete Madzelan is prolifically poetical, stringing words like cords. His pieces are beautifully written but I can help thinking his words would have more resonance spoken. Here's a sampling: "Suddenly, he breaks off a chord change that rattles the ground and has / me dangling off the guitar's low E string." "The cook works the flat top grill / whirling a spatula / like a gladiator's weapon." "The land is a dry throat, desolate and parched / unable to imbibe the inertia of bloated / clouds" "And now me, with a multitude of like strangers, / sip bourbon and memory" Madzelan is a narrator extraordinaire. (To maintain poet's spacing each page is published on its own page.)*

The Blues Man

The Blues Man sits, plays within a trance that cannot be understood. His fingers strut a sashay along the guitar strings. Suddenly, he breaks off a chord change that rattles the ground and has me dangling off the guitar's low E string. It sends a grinning grimace of satisfaction up the shaded side of his face that no law officer or overseer could ever touch with all their gaudy authority. I watch his fingers, listening as chord changes turn back the pages of time, rippling a gusty breeze through this no breeze day. I listen and watch, seeing history unfold in blood and bleeding. Feeling the trapezius heat from a Delta sunset at climax time. Feeling it burst, running streams of sweat across the legacy's brow, then down into twig baskets and cotton bags draped over nameless shoulders through the saliva lust of lynching and the peonage of sharecropping. The Blues Man's playing comes to a sudden stop. He removes his sunglasses. His staring expression falls into another world. He sings a cappella, "The blues always been. The blues always be."

Minimum Wage Grill

The cook works the flat top grill
whirling a spatula
like a gladiator's weapon.

With a grunt, an inarticulate exhale;
he flips burgers molded by hand
not perfectly rounded.

With finesse, an agile click of the wrist;
he flips a pair of eggs over easy,
landing perfectly, ready to burst a flow.

With frenzied motion, spatula blurring,
he minces already diced onions.
The onions are translucent,
looking like crystallized diamonds sizzling
as steam rises a mist of sorcerer's heat
from the flat top grill.

Burgeoning sweat bubbles
explode in a salty binge
from the cook's forehead,
dripping an annoyance upon his cheeks
running penniless down his neck,
plastering t-shirt to skin like molasses glue.

The cook grinds on as minutes become hours,
continues cracking eggs and flipping burgers
in numbers only his sweat could calculate.
He continues mincing onions, though the onions
have lost the allure of crystallized diamonds.

He will do it today, as he did yesterday,
and will do it again tomorrow,
even if another faceless compadre
is holding the greasy spatula.

Heatwave 2021

The heatwave is unblinking,
is called extreme; a climate emergency
where the Arctic warming has picked up the tempo
while here, the temperature hits 100 before noon;
sweltering flames of stagnant air
strangle escape routes to nowhere,
sticking upon the black top's tongue
as governors plead residents to pray for rain.

Outside, on a bench of time,
an old man holds his sweaty head
in the cupped palms of his hands,
wishing to cash in his chips for a cloud burst.
And then, the rain came, a drizzling wisp of drool,
a throwaway spit, all clammy and thick.
Didn't do a damn thing to alleviate the heat,
while here, in this home,
the AC's evaporator coil said adios.

Outside, streets are melting,
motorists are flummoxed by the huge hummock harvest
while crops wilt in a Dust Bowl rewind;
the drought has taken up permanent residence,
shows no sign of letting up,
reservoirs and rivers are gagging, drying up;
the fear of wildfires has increased,
livestock and wildlife are suffering,
birds fall dead from the sky
as people wobble and faint;
heat-stroke victims are packed in ice.

While outside, on a bench of time,
an old man holds his sweaty head
in the cupped palms of his hands,
as the dog days tiptoe between
tar bubbles and perpetual burning,
encased in an earthen frying pan
where the fat is sizzling.

Waiting For the Rains

Waiting for the rains...

The land is a dry throat, desolate and parched
unable to imbibe the inertia of bloated clouds
searching for direction, looking for a home
like a barn swallow needing to build a family nest
searching for a patch of mud only to find
that mud has become a lost companion;
a lost companion waiting for the rains to thunder,
guillotining the lumped throat of maybe
to flow into arteries;
into the intestines of the land.

Still waiting for the rains...

Wildfire Sunset

A plume of smoke and ash
scribbles the daily news
across the dry desert sky:
Wildfires blazing from state to state,
being shot-gunned by high winds.

At twilight dusk, the tumbling sun
is a ball of burning white heat
too hot for a prolonged stare,
but eyes stare nonetheless,
noticing a thin golden glow
circling the sun's perimeter
like a lavish necklace
full of pulsating life, throbbing—
giving birth to an array of reds,
shades of crimson and blood
are tossed into forever,
radiating the darkening sky,
bleeding a river after another day of fury;
another day of flame and smoke,
where the land has been stripped to the bone;
charred and weeping in a place where rain—
has become an orphan left lonely
with long forgotten dreams of youth.

Dusk fades with a despondent sigh
followed by a deep canyon inhale
of toxic carbons —the unending
scent of smoldering smoke;
the sun's golden halo of white heat
brightens a glaring adios
with its western descent,
promising nothing
during these days of flame and smoke.

Harbor

Riding rapids through the deep rivers of my mind,
tasting the slap from white water veins,
leading me to the hush of a quiet harbor
beyond the touch of this landlocked state of mind.

I'm not sure how to describe this tranquil sea of emotions;
this strange muffled moan of my repose
in this place that my mind is touching?
Where is this place? It could be most anywhere,
or it could be nowhere at all.
The hush of the quiet harbor and the tranquil sea
of emotions tell me the choice is mine to make.
Maybe it's south of here, along the Mexican Bay of Campeche
before the offshore oil rigs of modern man,
back before that, back in time to when the Olmec civilization
called this place—this place in my mind home.

In truth, this place is not back in time, it's now
with a slant of gliding light
stripping it bare to the bone; the glide
soothes with the sun's elegance
pouring its bleeding embers of contentment
with slow, ever slow deliberation,
spreading its wonder before
the genuflecting eyes of shrimpers,
tying up their boats then heading for a beer
and maybe, just maybe
a ruby scented wink masking the truth.

Along the quiet harbor, a young couple kisses
beneath a moon so bright with possibilities
that they have forgotten the wonder of sunset.
Gazing towards the stars,
they see moonbeams and diamond rings.
Farther down the harbor, an older couple holds hands
beneath a moon so bright with stories,
still remembering the wonder of sunset.
Gazing towards the stars,
they see stars, so many stars sprinkling the night sky
above this quiet harbor that is
beyond the touch of this landlocked state of mind.

Songs Became Like a River

—for John Prine

I hear him singing,
“I remember everything, things I can’t forget.”

We, me and the singer, talked one night
in the Earl of Old Town,
a Chicago bar along Lincoln Avenue.
It was only for a few minutes
but that scant slice of time
became years of songs; became like a river,
flowing through the canyons of my mind.

I remember everything from back then
from listening to albums
on a broke down stereo
to sniffing the scent of morning coffee,
percolating on a gas stove-top
of that old northside apartment.

And now, during the spring of a bad year,
the news was delivered on late night television
that the singer was gone,
leaving no forwarding address,
only lyrics—words to his songs
are things I can’t forget.

Songs that brought a twirling shimmy
to a pair of dancing boots
worn during life’s calendar seasons,
a roller-coaster ride of ups and the downs,
when the singer’s words were needed rest stops
along the tunnel of time,
and I remember everything.

And now me, with a multitude of like strangers,
sip bourbon and memory
with the stale haze of closing time;
a slow waltz of chairs turned over on table-tops
lingering long after last call,
shaking a fist at circumstance
waiting for the red dawn,

hoping that day's opening licks
strum a familiar song; a three-chord melody
to resonate in the mind; to become like a river,
to flow through my canyons
right down to what are now
a well-worn pair of dancing boots

I hear him singing,
"I remember everything, things I can't forget."

Between Drinks

I finish my drink and turn
to see who is behind me.
There is nobody there,
only a moon without stars
illuminating a puddle—
reflections beyond transparency
mirroring what was ravaged
on the way to this circus
where a band of gypsies
slipped coins into the jukebox
of history, tinkled in the past currents
of a forever dusty parking lot.
Again, I turn to see who is behind me.
There is nobody there,
only the image of myself
on this moon dot night
illuminating like a diamond,
sinking into the fat
of a mired lagoon
somewhere out there.

Hope, Awareness & Simple Living

Hope also nourishes us. Not the hope of fools. The other kind.
Hope, when everything is clear. Awareness.

—Manlio Argueta

Hope is simple living, where you smile
at a songbird's heart at dawn
chirping melodies of winged hope
upon your window sill—being aware.

Hope is simple living, where you stare
eye-to-eye into the salmon hued breath
of the setting sun without blinking
then bathing within its spawning.

Hope is simple living, where you speak
face-to-face to the moon's dark side
while listening to the faintest whispers
from ribbons within the Milky Way.

Hope is simple living, where you listen
to the desert's bare-boned rhymes
blend balance with the coyote's serenade
through the dry canyons of time—being aware.

Mist Beyond the Rapids

...raining.

I saw the images as I sat in winter:
rum and tea served
with a never felt Caribbean breeze.
Alone—sixty-watt bulb
lighting the thorns in the room,
searching through self-vacuums
as a bright moon is
lighting human sorrows draped on the dock,
searching through someone else's declarations
for one ideal
that has been seen within the mist
but missing since the flood.

I still saw the images as I sat in summer:
rum and coke over melting ice,
witnessing in my glass—
the dying sycophant
reproducing in reverse
vanishing like a politician's words.
I wanted to call warning
but was not a seer
and in the end, it did not matter

I woke to the sounds
of Corinthian temple bells
ringing in my night time mind.
I knew it was time to seek the mist.
I left in haste,
catching the current of yesterday
searching for something—
moving slowly over whitewater rapids
guided by ancient rocks
whose eyes were empty sockets
until...

...washing onto a South American shoreline
with sixteenth century ocean spray in my face.
I reach for the hand of my guide—an unknown Inca,
following through the Andean Highlands of Peru,
touching yesterday's mud-brick walls and terraces,

mesmerized by the empire's wealth.

Lead to Cajamarca,
and two ransom rooms of gold and silver
collected to save the hostage, emperor Atahualpa:
 saw Francisco Pizarro baptize him for God
 saw Pizarro strangle him for Glory
 saw Pizarro rob the wealth for Greed.
Giving birth to servitude,
seen in the death mines of Potosí
into an everlastingly nighttime strained
within the depths
of their sanctuary Vilcabamba.

Truth in a mist beyond the rapids,
twisting on the vines of time;
culture crying horrors—
people lost in a valley of melting ice.

It was time to leave...

...traveling north into sixteenth century Mexico,
where a holy man, Bartolome de Las Casas
introduced me to Hernando Cortés—
 one hand raped the land
 the other hand held a cup;
 the blood of the Black Legend, *La Leyenda Negra*,
 running down his chin.
Las Casas told of the suffering,
then pointed my way
through the desert dust of centuries
to revolutionary fire of the early twentieth century.

In a barroom, music played off-key
as I looked for my guide.
There!
Beyond the misty haze
was senorita Adelita—
heart of steel in her rebel cause;
still soft in her caramel beauty
saying, "*Esta lloviendo mucho.*"
She then whispered in my ear,
directing me to Cuautla, 1919,
where I dined under the afternoon sun of April
on tortillas, beans and piss warm beer
while communicating with the passionate eyes of a farmer

whose bullet belts crossed his heart.

Suddenly—

the air smelled like
a cold betrayed death.

The farmer disappeared.

My mind realized backdoor escape
before my host, Guajardo,
asked me to stay for eternity.
I mumbled, "*Hasta luego*,"
as mythical hoofbeats began
echoing through the Mexican landscape,
taking me back in time;
stepping back—to step forward.

Truth in a mist beyond the rapids,
twisting on the vines of time;
culture crying horrors—
people lost in a valley of melting ice

escaping...

...to North America,
arriving in July's heat seventeenth century
to see the Hudson River red
from the Jersey side,
running wild with Hamilton's blood,
flowing south from Weehawken into the Atlantic,
where waves pumped the shoreline
into the twenty-first century.
The waves ebbed, leaving—
delivering a treasure chest of legacy
filled with jewels and stories
from the pages of time.

By noon, the chest had been ravaged
by modern day grifters and speculators,
who pocketed the jewels,
whitewashed the stories—
discarded native bones;
claimed amnesia to the shackles of slavery.

With the larceny accomplished
these depraved tongues of political persuasion,
distributed counterfeit currency,
calling it truth and justice

to a ne'er-do-well caravan
willing to carry the chest up the streets
into the side alleys of distress
where the treasure chest of legacy,
once filled with jewels and stories
from the pages of time,
was abandoned—empty.

The journey was to continue
but night rains fell hard on the land,
sounding like the clash of boulders
upon my roof, and castanets outside my door.
Night time in the valley of time,
where truth is still in a mist beyond the rapids,
where the empty socket eyes of ancient rocks
lay with ice melting under the heat of rum and my grip
with me thinking that *afuera sigue lloviendo...*

Notes:

Cajamarca—Peruvian city where Spanish conquistador, Francisco Pizarro first encountered the Inca leader, Atahualpa, in 1532.

Potosi—location of silver mines, where Incas were enslaved.

Vilcabamba—The Inca's last sanctuary against the Spanish conquest.

Las Casas, Bartolomé de—Dominican missionary, who held the Spanish responsible for Native mortality.

Cortéz, Hernando—Spanish conquistador.

Black Legend (*La Leyenda Negra*)—Spanish committed genocide of Natives.

Adelita—Woman revolutionary 1910-20, depicted in a photograph by Mexican photographer, Augustin Victor Casasola.

Cuaulta—Mexican town where Emiliano Zapata was murdered.

Farmer—Emiliano Zapata.

Guajardo, Jesus—the man who was paid to murder Zapata.

Hamilton—reference to the 1804 duel between Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton, held at Weehawken, New Jersey.

THE POET SPEAKS... *I write poetry for the same reason that I read poetry. It's to nourish the echoing ache inside of me which mimics the moan of a blues song. When nourished, it resonates—touching everything from daily habits to working; from observing the planet Venus in the black dawn to a morning cup of coffee; from walking along a river trail to being mesmerized by the glide of a red-tail hawk; from listening to the sounds around me to the silence of solitude.*

Simply put, reading poetry is special. There's a connected communion with the writer, who has opened his or her heart on each page. You can feel its pulsating rhythm from each line; from each word. Writing poetry is the same. It exposes your heart, and begins with the initial relationship with a blank page. But that blank page is never really blank. It's alive with a thousand thoughts communicating with a thousand tongues, hoping to come together.

History and current times played leading roles in these poems. As usual with me, they began as scribbled ideas written on that blank page in a notepad or maybe a cocktail napkin. Anything, so the thought wouldn't fly away come morning. Through personal experience, observation, and listening, I've attempted to convey the ordinary spirit of the everyday; of life & hope, attempting to give visual imagery to the words. I studied history in college, and the subject never left me, constantly pulling me into stories of time and place. The historical poems here are rivers with many tributaries, realizing that time isn't linear. That the past and the future are happening now.

Living in the Southwest has gifted me an appreciation and awareness for the spiritual nature of the land. This awareness is an ongoing process of discovery that easily finds its way into my writing. Now, the land finds itself in serious peril from the tight-fisted new normal—a never-ending drought, the constant fear of wildfires and excessive heat. The fragileness of the environment cannot be ignored. Though, I suspect, some of our limp leaders will do just that.

There's a poem here to John Prine, who passed during those early dark days of the pandemic. Prine and fellow songwriters like Bob Dylan, Guy Clark, Townes Van Zandt and way too many others to mention, have been influences on me. Striking a chord with their storytelling. Listening to the way they construct a song; listening to the unique crafting of a line or a phrase has often turned my head around, and it doesn't matter how many times I've heard it, the response is the same—I get quivering shivers.

Poetry books are always within reach. Poets have been stylistically influential—being both inspiring and thought provoking. Reading poets like Carolyn Forché, Joy Harjo, Simon Ortiz and Lucy Tapahonso, will find me doing what I always seem to do. Pausing for a moment to absorb their words, cadences and nuances. Attempting to grasp the gracefulness; the evocative force of imagery. And then, I read on...absorbing the way their wisdom and insight depict the contrast between poignant beauty and haunting despair. It's absolutely stunning—breathtaking. They and other poets are always within reach, just an arm's length away.

AUTHOR BIO: Pete Madzellan is a writer and photographer who lives with his wife in New Mexico. His works include a novel, *Blues From the Mirror*; photography exhibits in Albuquerque: 2017 Shades of Gray Photography Show and 2018 Annual New Mexico Photographic Art Show. His writings and photography have appeared in *Sky Island Journal*, *Bellingham Review*, *Blinders Journal*, *The Boiler*, *Cargo Literary Journal*, *Four Ties Lit Review*, *Foliage Oak*, *Gravel*, *New Mexico Magazine*, *Off the Coast*, *Photography Center of Cape Cod*, *Poydras Review*, *Reservoir Literary Journal*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Switchback*, and many others.