

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Jack Grapes: Three Poems

Jack Grapes · Thursday, December 13th, 2018

RESUME THE RESUMÉ

Some nights I sleep in my tuxedo.
My fingers untie the bow-tie
in my sleep as if I were
swooning to the tune of Begin the Beguine.
The pain in my hip goes away,
a rapture divine
of fried chicken in a roadside diner
where a song of tropical splendor
comes from an old jukebox
straight from the 1930s.

Powell and Astaire appear
on a winding staircase.
The threads of my dreams
take me back to the two-lane highway
on the way to Baton Rouge,
snaking through the swamps
and cypress trees,
swearing my love would last forever
in that smoky bar where we met
over a bourbon and Coke.

I've seen people die from clutching
gold coins too tightly. I'd rather fling them
from the caboose of a train
crossing the Mississippi River
over the old Slidel Bridge, and there,
tap-dancing on those steel girders,
Eleanor and Fred
dancing at the speed of light
and the world surrounding all of us
shrinks to the size of a peppercorn.

I join them for a moment, tap-dance

between them, an apparition
 they hardly expected,
 an ember between the fires of their love,
 and then, in my tuxedo, I dive into the river,
 swim the Australian crawl
 like Johnny Weismuller
 promising the girl (that's you, sweetheart)
 in the bar
 never never to part.

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HOTSPUR

A line that goes nowhere
 starts in Spain where bats
 through the low trees
 make morning needles
 in my hair but I'm relent
 less about austerity something
 you can cry forever and it fails
 to absolve you like the unfamiliar
 cross on that hill where travelers
 like you having found what was
 lost and lost what they'd found
 dream the distant cries of yokels
 looking for a handout right there
 where the woman lifts her dress
 on a dare and dusts off the park
 bench she's been sleeping on
 all night and nothing you say
 to yourself or anyone can
 replace the notion you
 had of yourself growing taller
 in that chevy bel air with
 blue seat covers stopped
 at the red light on Earhart
 Boulevard at 2 o'clock in
 the morning on your
 way to see the cajun girl
 who promised you
 her body as ransom
 for the prisoners
 you denied the king

*

Any Style

*Lord, I'm 500 miles from home,
you can hear the whistle blow a hundred miles.*

– “Five-Hundred Miles”, Peter, Paul, and Mary

Driving west out of El Paso,
the sun coming up behind me,
I look for a diner or roadside café
off the main highway.
Maybe I'll just follow those dust clouds
that cars coming the other way
leave in their wake.
Maybe it'll be
just a scratched formica counter
and a waitress wearing
jeans and a T-shirt.
“Eggs any style,” I tell her,
waiting to see if she gets it —
the joke, I mean — but she doesn't.
“Anything on the side?” she asks.
“Yeah,” I say, studying
the menu as if it were
that calculus final I barely passed.
“Yeah, gimme the bacon,
the hash browns,
. . . . you got grits?”
I look up from the menu
and admire her frontage.
After seven hours driving
in the dark, then heaving away
from the sun, the mouth waters
for the old breakfast roadside
standbys: toast, butter,
greasy bacon and eggs.
And frontage.
The urge rises from my toes,
through my stomach and into my chest,
the urge to reach out and touch them,
those well-fed breasts
inside that hefty bra
inside that white T-shirt.
“Yeah,” she says, moving the eraser
of the pencil back and forth
behind her ear, “we got grits.”
“I'm up for grits,” I say,
making the word grits sound
like I'd already eaten a mouthful.

She shifts her weight from one leg
to the other, writes on the pad,
then says it,
— what I came in here for
in the first place,
not the food,
but to hear her say the words:
“Three eggs,
any style,
side a bacon,
side a hash browns,
side a grits.”
I almost swoon,
almost lean
across the counter
and place my head
between her breasts,
almost blurt out that I love her,
that I’ve been loving her
all night long —
loving her as I drove through the darkness
on this two lane highway
filled with nothing
but tractor trailers
and 18-wheelers
and tank trucks and boom trucks
and freight liners and box vans,
two-ton stake trucks
and Scammell ballast tractors,
not to mention the flatbeds
and the pick-ups,
all heading west,
just like me.
I want to tell her
that I love her
right now, here in this diner,
thirty miles west of El Paso,
and will always love her,
love her to my dying day,
love her any style,
side a bacon,
side of hash browns,
side a grits.
But I don’t.
The sun’s already breaking
the water glasses on the counter,
rousting the silverware,
dashing the flies to the floor

where they languish in the heat.
Five-hundred miles to go
before I hit L.A.,
before I take the big curve
where the I-10 turns north
under the overpass,
and heads up the Pacific Coast Highway,
white beaches to my left,
brown cliffs to my right.
Five-hundred miles to go.
“Yeah,” I say, “that should do it,
and gimme an order
of wheat toast, butter, jelly,
jam, marmalade with those
little pieces of citrus fruit
and rind, and coffee,
thick black coffee,
coffee that’s been sitting
in the pot for days,
just bring the whole pot,
and sugar, lots of sugar,
and cream, lots of cream.”
Then she sticks the pencil
in her hair behind her ear
and looks at me, finally.
“Mr. Poet,” she says,
smiling as the sun
begins to creep up
across her face.
“Yep,” I say, relaxing
onto the stool
and putting both elbows
on the counter,
“I’m Mr. Poet,
and I got
lots of poems,
any style you want,
side a bacon,
side a hash browns,
side a grits.”

(Author photo by Alexis Rhone Fancher.)

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