

The Blues Singers

The blues slows down time.

A quarter note sounds more like a two dollar bill. Cowboy shakes his bowed legs to the bass line, and a drawl rises from the crowd like heat. He orders,

Keyboard, come on now!

Below a ten gallon hat, Cowboy's hair puffs out like spun sugar. He's all in lemon yellow, save for a belt buckle the size of a fist and his name embroidered down his fringed chaps. A rat skeleton perched on a disco ball revolves above the dance floor.

The front row of seats is reserved for the ladies in sequined jackets and bright dresses. They fan themselves and smirk flirtatiously at Cowboy. I sit with their men at the counter next to a slushy machine churning red ice.

Behind the counter, the heavily pierced bartender wears their uniform black cutoff tee, its distorted band name resembling a pile of twigs. They wait in a wide stance with their arms folded, scanning the club. In the middle of the room stands X, slightly hunched, bobbing her head. She wears a hooded cloak, under which she fingers the keys of a baritone sax in time to the music. I know this because its brass tubing sticks out from the hem.

There are two patrons I'm not so familiar with. The hipster drives here from out of town. She always sits at a back table studying a catalog of 78 records. At the table beside her is a woman in a jumpsuit sitting cross legged on a stool.

No one can remember what stood before this house of blues. All I know is fifty years ago, the biggest man ever seen walked straight through Seventh Street. Some say he was navy blue all over, and to others he was made of one solid metal screech. Those holy places folks spent weekends — dear portals to closed eyes, suits touching floor length dresses, fingertips tapping pearl valves blowing sound so pure that on a still night you could hear it from the Embarcadero — and where they danced outside in summertime, their skin green in the mercury streetlights?

Razed. In his wake, empty lots sprouting oat grass, looking like they'd been there all our lives. A swarm of letters fluttered, mysteriously postmarked to the next day.

But the blues doesn't go away. That same year an earthquake split the pavement, and this club emerged whole, lights already on. Ever since you can find us in the evenings, this unlikely crew and the blues band and me.

Cowboy clicks his heels and the music lowers to a steady beat. One thing you should know about Cowboy: he speaks only in the blues.

Well well well well well well well.

Tonight we're bringin'

A-somethin' new to this establishment.

Welcome to the blue blue blue blue blues-off!

We got two contestants

Let's see if they sing the blues from their hearts.

Miss Hipster, you're on!

The hipster pockets her catalog and saunters up to the stage. She passes a hand through her hair, surveying the crowd. She flings her arms open and the band picks up tempo.

I took my baby golfin' and I forgot all my sticks

Yeah I took my baby to the golf course but forgot all my sticks

Instead I gave that pocked white ball one mean ol' kick.

Her voice is agreeable, gliding in the high notes. Cowboy rhythmically slides around on his toes. One corner of the bartender's mouth lifts in the world's tiniest smile.

My baby's named Mercedes, she took 'bout everything

My darling girl Mercedes, she took nearly everything

She's real high class but I might just park her on the street.

The front row ladies roar in laughter, their seats hopping up and down. A man at the counter starts playing a tambourine. The hipster grins, showing the back of her teeth. Her hips roll a dust devil that whips the tip hat into the air, and it flies onto Cowboy's own Stetson.

Oh Mr. Pillbug, don't play the blues no more

Hey there Mr. Pillbug, please don't play the blues no more

When you're rollin' and a pollin' you should be glad as an ol' screen door.

X gyrates with her hidden sax as if she's churning a barrel of butter. The ladies are humming lyrics to each other. The hipster dips the mic stand low, then leaves the stage. Cowboy turns and lifts his vest to wiggle his behind. He declares,

Yeooooow! Is she bad or what?
She loves to sing the blues
Right at this here club.
But wait a minute
Don't forget about our next singer
All the way from San Francisco, Miss Zoe T. Rope!

The other woman in the back hops off her stool and wanders through the audience. In the stage lights her jumpsuit materializes as green velvet. She places her palms on the mic, and a thin sound rings from all directions at once. We look around, startled.

I rode my horse down to the stream so he could get a drink of water
I rode my horse down once again to get a second drink of water
But that horse he did not drink, for he was no longer the same trotter.

The beat halts. Silence echoes through the club. Zoe doesn't notice, and all at once the band remembers where they are. They restart their groove, deeper than before. X sways with her hands clasped outside her cloak.

Down by the schoolhouse, I heard a flag moves in the breeze
I heard a school boy says no, the wind moves in the breeze
I say don't worry children, all that's moving is me.

Cowboy's arm juts out, pointing at the singer. The ladies rock in their chairs, their eyes shining green with memory. Zoe shuts her eyes and continues in a voice that is familiar to everyone.

You know a movie's just one picture played after another
Mmm, a movie's just one picture played after another
It don't move unless we're watching, but don't tell my great grandmother.

Cowboy removes his hat, revealing its imprint on his fluffy white hair. Tears run down the hipster's face and drench her catalog. I push my empty Shirley Temple across the counter and ask to close the tab. The bartender's mouth hangs open, their eyebrow ring winking purple light at me.

I step outside. It's eight o'clock in Oakland, and the sun's among crows roosting in an ancient pine. I walk past bearded palm trees, a blue eucalyptus, mallow sprouting from the curbside.

If you asked me how to play the blues, I would say to wait till sunset. Tell your loved ones you need the hour to yourself and find a place where no one can see you. Find somewhere facing west, a back porch, a fire escape, and sit. Just sit. Look out over the west, like my mama must have done when she first flew to California. There's the orange sun pooling into the bay. There're washed out rainbow colors splayed over the sky. A warmth will sneak over your chest, and then a cold breeze, and you'll catch yourself thinking about something. That something's the blues.

I pull out my phone to check the next train, and the map of MacArthur scatters pinned stars, some fallen: the former studio where I first got tattooed, an ex's room. I grip the golden weave of the highway interchange on my cracked screen. Sometimes I see this town more from above than at eye level.

I can't feel unless I'm moving. When still, I'm nothing but a heap of Polaroids. The painted slant of a Thiebaud freeway gives me vertigo. Up on the train platform, the sound of cars rips at the air.

When I was ten, the collapsed interstate loomed on every front page, draped like a curtain of black hair over a shoulder. At that age my legs swung from a blue BART seat, nose pressed into the cool window. While we were underwater I swear I saw playing cards flickering neon in the tunnel walls.

Fifteen years later, this still holds true: I've never seen a real horse running.

Author note: I credit *The Singers* by Ivan Turgenev for inspiring the story.