

Art Tatum: Harmonium

Here Comes Art Tatum!

Who was more than half-blind already
when the boy cornered him in the back-

alley, hit him in the good eye. Art just
noted the length of the boy's fingers,
long, lean, white,

good for playing, he thought, except

that he wrapped his thumb, risked
injury, dislocation, a fist drawn back

breaking shards of night. Everything falls
like cigarette butts butting heads on
the pavement, the broken curb like his
cataracts, milk spilled onto the roadside.

Tell them New York Cats to Watch Out!
Tell Willie "the Lion" Smith and Earl Hines,

tell Fats Waller playing the harmonium
to his father's street-preaching on the year

of Art's birth, throat coated with peach juice,
pennies, nickels, dimes that fall into
the open jaw of his instrument case.

Hear Comes Art Tatum!

the blind pianist of Toledo,
above style, above air,

each key raised, hovering,
his fingers the only things
weighting music from flight.

Art Tatum: Art Plays a Myth

Why am I blind? You know the story so well
I'm betting you cats could tell it as well as I could
but anyway, there I am, running, running, 35, 30, 25, 20,

and God almighty there's the touchdown. There's
Two-Ton Tony running me down like a mad dog
chomping at the bit—falls on me like a mountain

and when my head hits the grass it's gone. Just like that,
but there's more, you know, the boy with the blackjack
and we're in a back-alley and he looks a little more

transparent than the keys. I see his fingers, flirting
with clarity, then the blackness like my body
that falls to the pavement. There's my mother, buying

me my first car, a Chevy that's red with a white stripe
that collects near the fuel tank like a bowl of milk
where I run my hands, imagine the colors, the look,

then sit in the driver's seat and make sounds from my lips
like a trumpet, like the scoot of a piano bench, a man
getting up for me. For what? The slow fall of a Pabst can

that drops a B-flat when it hits the linoleum. Drop it again,
flush the toilet—I can hear the key of all things—of the man's
heavy, incredulous breathing or that of a scared boy's whisper

in the dark because the touch of Braille on his fingers makes him
think the tips are bleeding but they aren't. I can't see the black
keys and that makes me blind but I can hang with the best

of 'em in bid whist, I can tell you every damn statistic
there is because you know that Two-Ton Tony shit's not real (right?)
but here, get up, let me show you what's real and what's not.

What's possible. Give me cards to turn, give me the keys
beneath my fingers. I won't always have steady hands
or a woman in my bed or the taste and the smell and the ferocity

of being alive (my mother telling us how lucky we are
to be the *named* ones 'cause Pops is out by the highway
burning a shoebox in the snow) so I guess being blind

isn't all that bad. There's the music, and I know this:
that it comes from the deep wells and vibrations of a laughing man's
black belly, from the taste of skin and hair pulled taught,

bouncing hammers, clack of nail against bone. I don't say
that I'm blind because music's meant to be heard and not seen.
I say that I'm blind because I think there's no such thing as a wrong note.

Art Tatum and Fats Waller: The Panther Room

It's Fats Waller up first, of course,
'cause he stands from the piano and
dances with his own songs, takes it in
his palms and waltzes with it, boogies
with it, big bright smile turned away
from the crowd, the shadow of his wide
plaid bottom that blankets screaming women,
chuckling men. They call him *The Cheerful
Earful* (but Art calls him *Mr. Piano*),
so comfortable, such a crowd pleaser
that the men and women speak about him
even three acts after he's gone backstage
to cuddle up (with man or woman?)
wouldn't matter who because this isn't Fats
but the music still coursing through his
body, straining for release, for something else,
for God maybe and then
young Art fills the doorway, a shadow bigger
than himself. He hushes the room already, his
long fingers dancing in the air
like animals but it's Fats of course
who stumbles to the microphone and hands off
his melody to the next man, keeps
Art from turning his back on the music,
back towards Toledo saying
I ain't ready for this,
for the stench of alcohol and the smoky haze like
sheet music, like driving, like sex
'cause that's all easy when you've got the senses—
try using your nose for that, your ears, mainly,
'cause when you look at the keys it's just one big blob of ivory.
But listen to this, to what's turned everyone to the open
door—the man who's scheduled last because
his fingers can show you what lies beyond
the realm of possibility—'Cause
Ladies and gentlemen, Fats whispers,
God is in the house tonight.