

Barbaric Yawp Big Noise Blues

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MARTÍN ESPADA

## Barbaric Yawp Big Noise Blues

*For David Lenson*

The Professor played saxophone for the Reprobate Blues Band, rocking the horn like an unrepentant sinner at the poet's wedding. I was the best man, and the band howled at my punch lines about the president while the bride's family made Republican faces at me. Later, in the dark, The Professor passed a joint to the harp player, remembering a thousand gigs in the firefly-light of the reefer, a night of saxophone delirium with John Lee Hooker, who broke a string on his guitar and chanted *Boogie with the Hook*.

That was before the poet caught his wife at Foxwoods Casino gambling away the rent money. That was before the harp player hanged himself from the tree in his front yard. That was before the stroke blacked out the luminous city in The Professor's brain.

I tracked him down at the nursing home on a hill hidden from the town. He labored to drop the jigsaw puzzle pieces of words into the empty spaces. The label on the door said *door*; the label on the bed said *bed*; the label on the window said *window*. The saxophone was a brass question mark leaning in the corner, blues improvisation banned by the nurses to keep the patients drowsing in sedation and soup. *The man with the white beard two doors down was born in 1819*, said The Professor. *You mean 1918*, I said, unscrambling the code.

I escorted him to the picnic table in the middle of the parking lot, slipping Whitman's *Leaves* from my back pocket like contraband. The Professor saw the face on the cover, and the words cranked the wheels of his jaw: *I. Celebrate. Myself*. Blues improvisation broke out in the parking lot. I would read and he would riff: *Yes. Right. Fantastic*. I read: *I am the man, I suffered, I was there*. The Professor hissed: *How does he know?* as if the bearded seer in the poems could see him sitting at the picnic table. I read: *I sound my barbaric yawp over the rooftops of the world*. The Professor heard a band so loud the neighbors called the cops. *That's what I need*, he said. *I can't make that big noise for myself*.

I left The Professor at the nursing home on the hill. I left Whitman too. Tonight, the label on the door says *yawp*. The label on the bed says *yawp*. The label on the window says *yawp*. The Professor swings on his saxophone in the parking lot, oblivious to the security guards who rush to tackle him, horn honking like a great arrowhead of geese in the sky: *Yawp. Yawp. Yawp*.