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Serenade in Blue

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Three Poems · Christopher Buckley

SERENADE IN BLUE

*Where is the sea, that once solved the whole loneliness
Of the Midwest?—James Wright*

Because my father knew that loneliness, that tedium in a breeze slip-streaming behind his Oldsmobile as it bent back sleepy heads of blackeyed susans along the interstate each time he moved around all those years—station to radio station, remote broadcast to broadcast—he brought me to the Pacific where the sea's blue notes scaled the cliffs and salt air, where white birds lolled day-long on the spindrift light as wind pulled apart the surf and offered it up—foam-flowers and song as signs of grace, as means and end—into my arms . . .

But I should begin with silence and with 1942, the sky over the Atlantic at dusk, two swaths of blue—deep water and dimming air—banded like an Ohio Blue Tip Match, one that he keeps in his shirt pocket and flicks to light his Lucky Strikes, which is appropriate, for he is from Ohio, steaming east at 4 knots tops on the John C. Calhoun, a *Liberty Ship*, meaning some sorry freighter over-loaded with men and supplies. He knows they're virtual sitting ducks for U-boats though they zig-zag 48 days to Takerati and the African Gold Coast—but feels almost fortunate, knowing they carry lumber below and above deck, figuring they might float if hit. Sitting out on deck as night comes down, lights out, no smoking allowed, he sees clear to the curved horizon where ships are going up like the flare of matches struck against the dark.

He's not thinking now of the life behind, of his father wearing down in a shoe factory in Washington Court House, or those boys gone off to college and football in Columbus or Ann Arbor, gone to Pensicola for Air Cadets, he doesn't even give a thought to that neighbor girl with a solid backhand and tennis court, the balmy aroma of grass splashed and hovering on the air as his first serve *thwacks* in . . . He's not even envisioning wings—the wings on the Sphinx because they are headed for Cairo, wings on human-headed bulls at the Assyrian gate because the beard he will grow

in the desert will have him looking like an Assyrian, and because the bulls are said to bring good luck;

no, he's humming one of Glenn Miller's sweetest orchestrations, remembering where the vocalist comes in, thinking of bands he sang with in Miami and Chilicothe. For the whole war, he's got it in his head, even while he and Howard, his one home-town friend, swim untouched amid schools of barracuda in Takerati Bay, bounce their DC3, landing *with* the wind, or navigate to Ascension Island so they can refuel on the round trip to South America—a rock in the South Atlantic others knew they'd missed when that big bass beat in their engines died and they headed for the soundless center of the sea.

He'd never heard of Clarinda, Iowa before Miller's plane sank into the blue between London and Paris. He was state side, in time for Christmas, calling home with a telegram that said Howard was killed on a last instruction flight, a day before discharge; and his mother, who had never heard of such things, had gone to answer the doorbell, and there was Howard in his astral body, floating in an azure light, and so she said she knew.

He began then to think about the future, a family, decided to study radio and give up singing. Yet I see him, the way I think he will always see himself, after that last time he sang with a band—stepping up to the standing microphone, his right hand cupped over his ear as he picked up the trombone's fading cue to croon, *When I hear that Serenade in Blue, I'm somewhere in another world, alone, with you . . .*