

An Altar For Uncle Joe

By Ed Frankel

I put out the photograph—a Jewish Chet Baker,
 your hair slicked up in a pompadour;
 stone gray eyes, a soul patch like Dizzy's,
 to protect your precious embouchure.
 You lean on the fender of that Buick Invicta
 with the overdrive and the dynaflo transmission.
 My mother said you had bedroom eyes
 and a cat-that-ate-the-canary smile.
let's go for a ride, Annie.
Let's get lost.

Where do I put your perfect pitch,
 the photo Tony Bennett autographed--
To the best horn player and session man in Philly.
 I'll hang your hip fedora with the feather in the band
 And your pork pie hat on this rusty music stand.

I wind the metronome with the mahogany front
 and listen to the thick seventy eight-- your solo at nineteen
 on "The Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy of Company C,"
 The Andrews Sisters and the Glen Miller Band.
 Then some bebop, Coleman Hawkins, Clifford Brown.
 The metronome ticks a hundred and twenty beats a minute,
 sixteenth notes fly all over the room
 at twice rate of a human heart,
 the sound of your fist beating on the door that night
 when you staggered through the house
 into the bathroom crying, *Annie, Annie,*
 and then the drop of dead weight.
 My father cursed and put you on the couch.
 My mother grabbed the pills from your trumpet case
 while the sirens moaned to a stop outside.
 The red and white lights flashed in the dark
 and the neighbors came out to watch.

I'll skip the food; you never was much of an eater.
 Where do I put the reds and whites
 the uppers, downers and all arounders,
 the theme-song of the man with the golden arm,
 your custom-made Bengie that Aunt Katy Rose
 the Fishtown beauty from Kensington

bent over your head, and where do I put
 whatever else it was that took you out of the life?
 Where do I put the punch-clock job you took
 with the City Department of Weights and Measures;
 your heart attack, those last years, watching daytime TV.
 You called it, *greasing the skids in No Man's Land*.

If the smoke from my yarzeit candle could curl back in time,
 I'd find that Buick Invicta and drive it back to sixties,
 park it outside City Hall with the motor running.

Let's go for a ride Uncle Joe.

We'd drive straight through, coast to coast,
 cat singing to Bob Wills' okey padokey Texas swing,
 while we drank bad coffee from styrofoam cups.
 We'd come into LA through palm tree corridors,
 to the sway of second winds and start-over dreams.
 When the sun went down we'd head for Central Avenue
 and I'd drop you at *The Club Alabam* with Charlie Mingus,
 Buddy Collette,-- west coast sound.
 Your embouchure will come back in no time.

But truth be told, you didn't have it in you.
 You would wish me well,
 kiss me on the lips the way men in our family do.
 I'd take you to the after- hours club across the river
 where the hipster skeletons lean at the bar,
 close their eyes, sitting in, laying out,
 snapping their fingers, bone against bone,

Let's Get Lost.

You would stroke your soul patch and nod your head
 And wait to jump into that circle of fifths
 to catch up with the music again.

Let's get lost: A Chet Baker tune

Yarzeit Candle: candle lit on the yearly anniversary of a Jewish death.