Cuba

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“I,” said the little leather-winged bat,
“I’ll tell you the reason that,
the reason that I fly by night,
is because I’ve lost my heart’s delight.”

The Leather-Winged Bat, English, trad.

1. **A Dance**

The Caribbean felt like the world’s end that year of the blockade. Day, cumulus filled our theater, mushrooms of light promising intermission. Closing show. Evenings, my blanket a fleeting shroud, I read until the carrier dissolved in sound and I was back in Bedford-Stuyvesant with malted milk, or sneaking a skin mag from under mattress, dangerous and slick. Nickel cigars would make me puke my guts. Deep in the hull, what could endanger us? Anything. Flyers want their altitude, not a sarcophagus. At thirty knots—full ahead—our engines moaned so hugely I’d swear it was the axial hum of the globe, my sole reminder that we moved at all.

Gagarin’s orbit of the earth was stunning page two of the Times. Up through mesosphere I pictured my plane winking—a fruitless pip in waters bluer, greener than myself... Someone had shanghaid my desire, my wife-to-be, some cockamamie Irish prick from uptown. Sometimes I’d see his limousine as a hearse trailing in our stubborn wake.
Half a mile high in a Tracker, S2F, its twin propellers’ hypnotizing drone was a kind of opiate lucidity. Night sorties, phantom runways spilling across the gulf, we lost ourselves among the moonstricken clouds. Our nose would gloss, transform in seraphic floods of light, and I felt as one become the mere idea of himself:

hands automatic at the console; breath indifferent to strange volumes of lung. Gauges dead at zero. Who cared to catch Soviet submarines—anything, then, but some faint whiff of immortality? Drew, Driver, Zoehrer, Stoltz—co-pilots all alike to me, their voices equalized in earphones, distant, fuzzy, monotone.

May 1 at 0100. In the spectral void of the radar, one blip. Minutes before we had a visual, I understood: tropical cruise. Atomic holiday. Approaching low, god of my lonely hour, I aimed the searchlight eye and made a sun. Dancers burned suddenly across the deck. Nine million candles. Instant chandelier.

2. *Blockade*

Knew my fuel, the distance to Key West in case the Randolph should suddenly appear scuttled by torpedos—an extinguished match, dainty smoke scribbling up the sky.

Our battle group? Snuffed candles on a cake, the wish consigned to hell at the horizon.
For seven miles I'd tracked the merchant marine, 
eyes on the hammer and sickle testing its pole, 
the aisle of broadening white, rapid surf. 
Tongue dry as talcum, I replayed the brief:

snapshots of warheads—whole families—exposed 
amidst decoys of pipe and shoes. Behind

the Curtain, that foreign Foreign Minister 
thought we were upwind of such master ploys...

In fact, we were all around them. Semaphore 
flushing resolutely from the destroyer,

but he wouldn't heave-to: this generally blind 
and deaf—this dumb captain stuck to his guns,

his private channel. Dropping, my shadow sprawled. 
I buzzed him so close with the tip of my

seventy-two-foot wings, I saw myself 
The Reaper reborn in sunlit visor, come

to make the morning eternal where he stood 
motionless on the bridge, arms under chin,

relaxed against the coming—a regular 
Bikel: full beard and cap like Theodore—

as though the S2's roar were nothing more 
than an adoring crowd. Less than a mile

from something bigger than our hemisphere, 
I gave an order. Timmy, that godawful

gift-card poet in love with a nutty girl 
he'd found in a window on the Reeperbahn,
seized up, his bearings puddled in his seat.
"...the weapons." Sir? "I said, arm—" He had turned

greenish, the color not of uselessness
but liability, new pinewood boxes

sunk in the ocean. Raising the lip-mike
to spare my crew, I leaned over. "Do not
touch anything, or I'll shoot you." I broke
the wire, flicked the red peanut switch up

and came around for the opening. So much
depends upon a rudder snapping over.

He'd skid a half mile into death before
his engines could take hold and haul him back.

I radioed the lie: "Skunk 12 is still
approaching the line..." We'd ring in '63—

Theo, all of us, would read about
the bombs, our powers trading Powers for Abel.

3. Manhattan

The Finnish bombshell's lower Eastside digs
smelled of sandalwood, a fragrance ten
years later I'd start wearing as cologne.
"Fix me my usual," she said, as though

my months at sea were something she had dreamed
the night before this twilight of Saturday
through which we moved. I measured two martinis,
hers vermouth-heavy, mine three fingers neat.

On the coffee table, December's Vogue
lay open—a shampoo ad, her latest triumph.
For months the city had hung, an ornament, tremulous and hopeful, beneath our wings.

A thousand navy flyers. We came like snow, sparkling in the neon of arcades, eyes blurry from the wind. Never before or since has anyone called me an angel.

The Divine One having sold out Birdland, my dinner whites became our carte blanche—straight to Table One through schools of sharkskin blacks. I couldn't buy a drink to save my life...

And she now seemed already bored with hers. Her lips, a primary red, ran circles around the cocktail's rim, incisors delicately clinking crystal: that mouth was going to save the Western world. At first a musical sigh was all she would allow, but then tears welled, one for each eye. "Is the danger really real?"

A bead of mascara ran to her chin, fell into her glass. A sniff. Her accent flowered. "Vill New York really be the first to go up in a mushroom cloud?" She brushed my ribbons (did anything about me need a polish?)

and turned away to console the broken sky. Staring at her back, I wished my tongue could moisten a cleft between two vertebrae. They'll turn uptown into a parking lot...

I rehearsed the words, saw Central Park as rubble. But her skin so near, I gave away the stupid truth—"Never..."—and learned: never tell a girl what she wants to hear.
Suddenly better, she lit a smoke, was all babble and did I know Colonel so-and-so. “Marines, and such a doll—I’ll call him!” And so she did. He’d be right over. We’d have drinks...

Down on the street, a lousy trumpet tried I’m Always True to You in My Fashion. Rain, and I’d forgotten my topcoat. Cool drops spattered against my shoes to mar their shine.