



Preacher Boy

The National Blues

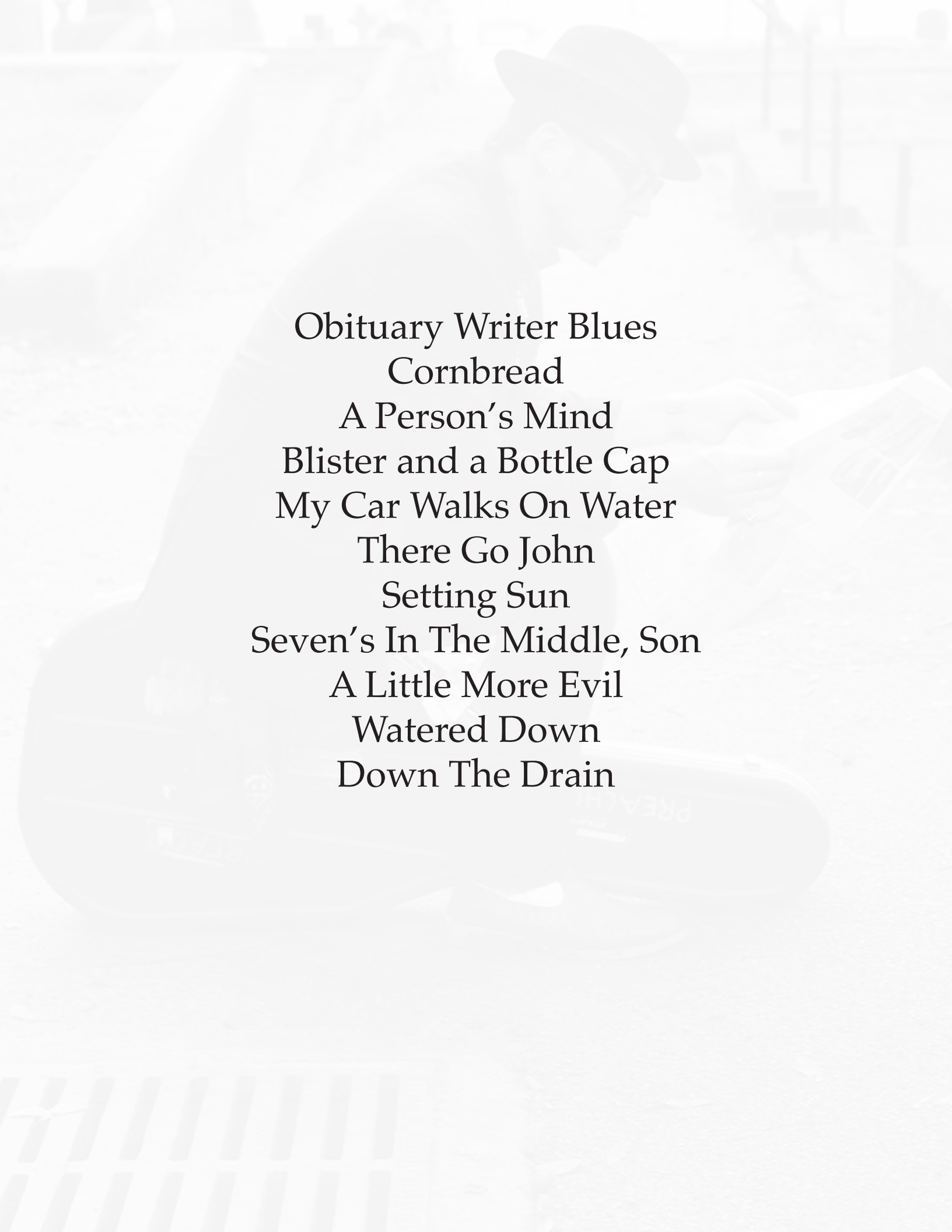


Preacher Boy The National Blues

Lyrics

by
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Obituary Writer Blues
Cornbread
A Person's Mind
Blister and a Bottle Cap
My Car Walks On Water
There Go John
Setting Sun
Seven's In The Middle, Son
A Little More Evil
Watered Down
Down The Drain

Obituary Writer Blues began with two things: a visual idea, and a musical one.

Visually, it was the parallel imagery of a murdered black body lying on a white sheet, and black letters being laid onto white paper by a writer at a typewriter, charged with drafting an obituary for the murdered.

Musically, the song began with a slide riff, borrowed fairly wholesale from Son House, but by way of Will Scott. The thing was then reshaped into a 15-bar cycle—a kind of country blues counting. Two other sections came together later; the 2-chord minor-major interlude, and the chorus, which also quotes from the country blues, borrowing from Sleepy John Estes about knowing right from wrong.

The “rock, paper, scissors” image in the final verse came from our daughter, who at the age of 7 has determined that this game is the solution to the problems of violence in the world. I put it in the song because she’s right.

obituary writer blues

**well now, i'm gon' quit writin', i'm gonna lay down this pen that i use 2X
and you know by that i got them obituary blues**

**well now, i been at that typer lord, honey, 'til my fingers sore 2X
well now, i ain't gon' write no obituaries anymore**

**well now, black was the color, one after another
they lay down on sheets of white
well now, time may erase me, but i ain't so crazy
that i don't know my wrong from right**

**oh sweet mama don' 'low me to stay 'round all night long
well, i might act like i'm crazy, but i do know my right from wrong**

**it was rock, paper, scissors, 'til the sword got the best of the pen 2X
i seen it printed in the paper, somebody shot up some poor kids again**

**well now, black was the color, one after another
they lay down on sheets of white
well now, time may erase me, but i ain't so crazy
that i don't know my wrong from right**

**oh sweet mama don' 'low me to stay 'round all night long
well, i might act like i'm crazy, but i do know my right from wrong**

The seeds of this song have been with me for probably decades at this point; I think I first hazarded a demo of it when we were living in Brooklyn, though I believe the first time I tried to play a version of it was with Colin Brooks, during a songwriter's conference in Durango, Colorado that my missus and I drove down to from Denver.

Lyricaly, the song has changed little over the years, and it's the stories of the families in the verses that have kept the song with me across the miles. What finally clicked was the music. I wish I could claim it was a magical, revelatory moment, or the result of years of diligence and experimentation, but in fact, the click was a simple one. I changed the tuning on my guitar from Open D to Open G. That was it.

The characters are largely based on real people from my childhood; the names have been changed to protect the innocent, but I left the real names in for the guilty.

**peggy sat cross-legged in her tri-cornered hat
with a barbie and a gi joe, playin' ball and jacks
and the sun went from touchin' ground
to straddlin' north and south
to settlin' on the roof of mr. beckman's house**

cornbread

**and when the sun went down, peggy's mother put her hands
in the shape of a megaphone and she yelled hard as she can
she yelled "come on honey, come home now, i gots a big surprise
there's fresh butter from the dairy, and the cornbread's on the rise"**

**maxwell ran lap after lap around the ol' back-stop
with a baseball glove in one hand, in the other soda pop
and autumn sunshine and moonlight shared a dusky place
and there were shadows and a tan competin' over maxwell's face**

**and when the clock hit seven maxwell's papa pulled his pipe
from between his yella teeth so's he could holler into the night
he hollered "come on sonny, come home now, i gots a big surprise
there's fresh butter from the dairy, and the cornbread's on the rise"**

i like a little bit of butter, on my cornbread...

**jake drew orphan jenny motorcycle pictures everyday
and he passed 'em to her during class when the teacher turned away
at recess and after school and all the weekend long
they'd sit up together on the beckman's fence
and pretend they was ridin' on**

**and jake's ma would come around to fetch her son for supper
and she'd tell that orphan jenny she was welcome to come over
she'd say "come on honey, come home now, i gots a big surprise
there's fresh butter from the dairy, and the cornbread's on the rise"**

St. Christopher is a favorite lyrical symbol for me, and he has shown up in many songs over the years; he makes two cameos on The National Blues: here, and in “My Car Walks On Water.”

This song was originally titled “Zen Blues,” which is a terrible name. But I wanted the song to be a mantra, a meditation:

The past is gone, the future is yet to happen, now is the only moment.

The past is here, the future is here, now is the only moment.

The past is gone, the future is yet to happen, now is the only moment.

Our daughter named it, ultimately. Where she got “A Person’s Mind” from, I have no idea, but I love it—possibly for selfish reasons. In my mind, Saint Christopher, Blind Willie Johnson, Macbeth, and all the other citizens of the song; they’re all bodhisattvas to me.

I borrowed the broken arrow image from Neil Young and Buffalo Springfield, and the moon in the water from both Han-Shan and Li-Po. I borrowed the main riff from Robert Pete Williams; from his song “I’m Goin’ Down Slow.” I say borrowed, but I’m not giving any of them back.

a person's mind

**well, the more you want, the more it hurts, and it only gets worse
still, everybody wanna go to heaven
just ask st. christopher, he know for sure
how it feel to fall from saint to legend**

**oh, people be so unkind, but honey, it' ain't none of mine
she gon' get hers, just like he gon' be gettin' his
and the past gon' have to 'low that we makin' the future now
cuz now is the only moment that there is**

**when the war took that one more step, and bled upon her doorstep
she broke the arrow into point and feather
and when the river was agitated, she just sat on the bank and waited
for the wind to put the moon back together**

**oh, people be so unkind, but honey, it' ain't none of mine
she gon' get hers, just like he gon' be gettin' his
and the past gon' have to 'low that we makin' the future now
cuz now is the only moment that there is**

**you got the mona lisa, you got mother theresa
billie holiday singin' stormy weather
you got king macbeth, you got malcolm x
you got willie johnson singin' 'bout god moves on the water**

**oh, people be so unkind, but honey, it' ain't none of mine
she gon' get hers, just like he gon' be gettin' his
and the past gon' have to 'low that we makin' the future now
cuz now is the only moment that there is**

I keep the memory of this song in a very special pocket of my suitcoat; it means nearly as much to me as the notes from my missus and my daughter that I pull from my vest and read before every show. It's the first new song I wrote after a very dark, difficult, disabling, and dreary separation from music.

It began exactly as it begins, with this line: "blister and a bottle cap, fetch my skippin' stone." Do I know what that means? Of course not. And, of course.

I wrote it with my space pen, in my moleskine. Everytime I finish a moleskine, my missus gets me a new one. Her faith is extraordinary. My efforts are not, but on that day, when I wrote that line, this album was born. I didn't know it then.

The citizens and scenes of this song are holy. John Fogerty's rock, skipped across Green River. Charley Patton's Alabama. Moses in the basket on the river. The coast road dunes on the way to Monterey. The forest of Nicene Marks, where the chosen women of my life grow. Bob Dylan. The Bible. Dead, Boy.

With everything above said, I'm shallow enough to know I'm proud of this song because someone once said to me, why don't you write songs like "Dead, Boy" anymore?

A man wearing a dark hat and sunglasses is looking down at a newspaper he is holding. The background is a blurred outdoor setting, possibly a construction site or a public area. The text is overlaid on the image in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

blister and a bottlecap

**blister and a bottlecap, fetch my skippin' stone 2X
get a bone, get a bone, fetch my skippin' stone**

**i went right down to the riverbank, mama, what you think i found? 2X
it's a little bitty basket-baby, and it's alabama-bound**

**i went sun-side up the dune-side, just to watch my shadow crawl 2X
well, i broke up all the driftwood, oh you know i broke it all**

**i sat down in the front yard, just to watch my daughter sow 2X
oh, water what you want child, cuz somethin' bound to grow**

**i went deep dark in the red bark, with a hike-stick and a log 2X
if ya don't know how to do it, i'll show ya how to walk the dog**

**i went right back to the riverbank, mama, what you think i saw? 2X
it's a little bitty basket-baby, and it's bound for arkansas**

**well, i didn't mean to do it, but i broke yer lookin' glass 2X
oh, it's blister and a bottlecap, mama, and the first one shall be last**

I think the idea for this song goes back the farthest of any composition on this album. I think the phrase “my car walks on water” came to me in 1994.

I am always trying to write a great road song, a great driving song. Like Bruce Springsteen’s “State Trooper” from Nebraska.

I am always trying to be Robert Johnson.

I am always trying to write lines like “the rain may soak time’s swinging braids, but my car walks on the water.”

I am certain now I have done at least one of these.

my car walks on the water

**its rainin' hard, and i cant see
even the shadows move in front of me
and the wind is blowin' in from the west
across the st christopher that's upon my chest**

**but i am safe in here
no need to worry any longer
the rain may break the forest's bones
but my car walks on the water**

**the storm is comin' in from the sea
collapsin' down upon me
and i am skimmin' across the roads
just like a well-tossed skippin' stone**

**but i am safe where i sit
oh no, i am not bothered
the rain my drown some city's child
but my car walks on the water**

**under the wild sky, past soakin' fields
i swear with my hands on my own wheels
and the radio is deadly silent
as the storm screams wet and violent**

**but i am safe in here
the smoking road stretchin' farther
the rain may soak time's swingin braids
but my car walks on the water**

The question of what John is meant to conquer has possessed me since I was 16 years old. John the Conqueror root.

I was certain it had something to do with trees. I was wrong of course, but in the California of my mind, it was the trunk of a holy redwood sovereign, troubadour, knight, minstrel, monk.

Musically, the song started out much like “The Cross Must Move” did, in Open Dm. And much like that wishful Wiseblood song, it moved to California. Thus the contrapuntal swinging walk in the instrumental section that precedes every verse.

Ultimately, the song is a meditation on the bonds of family and the bonds of nature. The three women closest to me in my life—my mother, my wife, my daughter—have all emerged from the sea, somehow to find me, in the forest with my river and my roots.

there go john

**all ye who are lost
you must return to the seashore
you can't be lost as long as you can feel
the ocean's holy roar**

**and there go john, with a black root
there go john, with a black root
there go john, with a black root
aimin' to conquer somebody's soul**

**the wheel of life keeps turnin'
just like rings inside the trunk
of a holy redwood sovereign,
troubadour, knight, minstrel, monk**

**and there go john, with a black root
there go john, with a black root
there go john, with a black root
aimin' to conquer somebody's soul**

**the river of my baby
the ocean of my lover
the farmland of my father
and the sunlight of my mother**

**and there go john, with a black root
there go john, with a black root
there go john, with a black root
aimin' to conquer somebody's soul
and there he go...**

The defining guitar riff of this song is something I played for decades as what's called a "warm-up lick"; something you play before a show or a recording, to get your fingers warmed up. I always start shows in Open G. It's an Open G lick.

One day, I realized it ought to be a song somehow, so I sat down and wrote one. "Setting Sun" is actually a fairly rare example of me trying to deliberately write a song. I always work very hard on songs, and with great deliberation, but very rarely do I ever mean to actually start writing one.

Lyricaly, it's virtually a collage on the torture of faith. Biblical by way of getting right with God, Marxist by way of getting right with Gramsci. I quote Blind Willie McTell, Marshall Berman, and Dr. Dre. I quote Blind Willie Johnson, Lucinda Williams, and Charley Patton.

As with "My Gold Canoe," it is my reminder to myself that I want to be kissing my wife's lips when the world ends.

A man wearing a dark suit, a fedora hat, and glasses is sitting on a bench outdoors. He is looking down at a newspaper he is holding in his hands. The background is a bright, slightly blurred outdoor setting with a fence and some trees. The overall tone is somber and reflective.

setting sun

**i tried to pray like jesus, i tried to preach like paul
but i could not get right with god at all
i was raised to rise for the risen one
but all i see is the setting sun**

**now, what the dyin' gambler knows, the sinner sells
and we gon' revelate upon it, ring them bells
get straight and meditate upon it, 'til it's done
i seen the halo below the setting sun**

**now, all that's solid is gon' melt into air
but honey, i don't care
just kiss my lips 'til they split, 'til my red blood run
then put your arms around me
like a circle 'round the setting sun**

The first time in my life I stole from the YMCA for a song was for “Dip, Dip and Swing” by Hoi Polloi (The REAL Hoi Polloi). This is the second. When I was a boy at YMCA camp on the lake, we were woken at dawn for Boondogle with what is now the chorus of this song.

I was once told by a music publisher that one of my songs was obviously influenced by Townes Van Zandt. She then said, “but you’re no Townes Van Zandt.”

This song is obviously influenced by Townes Van Zandt. And no, I am no Townes Van Zandt. But I am the inventor of the ambidextrous, eye-patch switching, devil-at-the-crossroads guitar tuner. And I am the inventor of the bone-rattling, hand-chilling, children’s song singer. And I am the inventor of the ears emptied of sound.

seven's in the middle, son

**made a deal with a strange man, he could deal his deck with either hand
winked at me and he said goodbye
then he switched his patch to the other eye
so i did my best to play my song, but he stopped me before too long
took my guitar off my lap, tuned it up and then he gave it back
rise and shine, and give god the glory, glory
rise and shine, and give god the glory**

**wrapped himself in an overcoat, silver necklace 'round his throat
rattlin' keychain in his pants, sounded like bones when he danced
so i faced myself in the mirror glass, swear to god i heard him laugh
felt his name rise in my gut, seven years of bad luck
rise and shine, and give god the glory, glory
rise and shine, and give god the glory**

**he said "seven's in the middle, son, so pick a side and ride that one"
like jewels hangin' on a vine, it's a pendulum that's drowning time
so i lay my head down window-side, neon lights like a reaper's bride
tried to sleep beneath the black, of the space behind that devil's patch
rise and shine, and give god the glory, glory
rise and shine, and give god the glory**

**he put a shiver in my soul, shook my hand and froze it cold
walked me 'round that endless shore, 'til i knew i'd never been before
now i hear him singin' from the road
it's a children's song he knows i know
i lay myself down on the ground, emptied both my ears of sound
rise and shine, and give god the glory, glory
rise and shine, and give god the glory**

This is about a friend of mine I can no longer talk to, because he chose to be a junkie even after he went blind from a bullet in his head. It's about people who romanticize self-destruction. It's about terrible songwriters who write about Marias from ivory towers.

It's in a weird tuning. Open G, but with the B string tuned down to G so that it's in unison with the third string. This way, the tonality is ambiguous; it's neither major nor minor, because there's no 3rd. The guitar is capo'd at the 4th fret, so it's actually in B.

I took a Greyhound from Denver to New Orleans once, to become godfather to a boy in Louisiana, to become his Parrain. His Dad is the subject of this song.

That was my last Greyhound. The driver wanted to make time, so he told the passengers they could smoke in the bathroom if they kept the little window open. We had to leave the bus in Baton Rouge so police dogs could sniff for drugs. I had a guitar and a camping backpack. Some family fell asleep on me in Texas. I couldn't afford a plane ticket. There was no one named Maria.

a little more evil

**jesus christ, look at you, you lookin' like you dead wrecked
I wish I had a way to pay for you to get yer head checked
you so fuckin' strung out, man, it's time to face the music
you ain't got but the one life and you're about to lose it**

**and that isn't opportunity that's knockin' on the door
it ain't fire that you playin' with it's somethin' that's a little more evil**

**it's always a maria gettin' suckers like you laid up
tryin' to live the myth the ones that came before you made up
I hate to break it to you but her name is not maria
she might look ya in the eyes but I swear she doesn't see ya**

**and that isn't opportunity that's knockin' on the door
it ain't fire that you playin' with it's somethin' that's a little more evil**

**I ain't gon' to be the john to baptize you in the river
and you're too old to be a baby that I'm called on to deliver
there's a train to judgment and you got a ticket to go
but it ain't gon' be the lord that come to meet ya at the depot**

**and that isn't opportunity that's knockin' on the door
it ain't fire that you playin' with it's somethin' that's a little more evil**

This is a song about the Kickapoo Cemetery in Leavenworth, Kansas.

This is a song about the blues three different ways, when two say go, and one says stay.

This is a song about points and pointlessness. The points of a compass, and watered-down-liquor.

This is a song I wish I could have played for my Grandpa. I didn't start making the music he would have loved the most until after he died.

He was born in Kickapoo. He is not buried there.

watered down

**i trace my line back to wichita
i'm the ramblin'est man that you ever saw
i'm the kind that moss never grows on, i sleep with my clothes on
my shadow and me, you can't jump us**

**them two lanes tight like strings on a mandolin
feel like reins from a bridle on my face again
i'm the kind that moss never grows on, i sleep with my clothes on
got a birthmark on my neck shaped like a compass**

**i get up in the mornin' with my mind three different ways
i got two said go, but only one said stay
got my travelin' boots on, and i'm gone
couldn't go no quicker
i got as much use for you, as i do
for watered down liquor**

**there ain't never been no graveyard for my kinfolk
cuz the ones they leave behind always been broke
even dead, the road just goes on
for the ones that no moss grows on
from where you pick us up, to where you dump us**

**i get up in the mornin' with my mind three different ways
i got two said go, but only one said stay
got my travelin' boots on, and i'm gone
couldn't go no quicker
i got as much use for you, as i do
for watered down liquor**

I wrote a whole essay about this song once. It traveled from 16 Horsepower to Ann Peebles, and met up with the likes of Shane MacGowan and Bill Justis along the way. I think one of the best performances I ever gave of this song was in New York. I had an incredible pick-up band for the show, including my old friend and colleague (and champion Telecaster man) Jim Campilongo. We were on the bill to support our friends in Miller's Farm, who were releasing an album that night. It was at the Knitting Factory. Bryan Miller joined to sing harmony on the chorus. I loved that night. Eric Rasmussen played sax. Tim Luntzel played bass. Brian Fay played drums. I found out, in the process of trying to make sure I spelled names right for this story, that Brian Fay passed away last year. Beanman, this song is for you now.



down the drain

**you find love, you a lucky man
treat it as precious as you possibly can
don't let a good thing slip through your hand
'else your chardonnay sky will go black and tan
and the rain...will wash you down the drain**

**the lack of love will drive a man insane
send little tiny devils runnin' 'round his brain
he gon' cry like a baby, then just crawl like the same
soak hisself good in the pouring rain, it's a shame...
goin' down the drain**

**everybody need that lovin' touch
i got friends who deserve so much
they not gettin' nearly enough
of that good sweet kind lovin' stuff
they in pain...they goin' down the drain**

**the lack of love will drive a man insane
send little tiny devils runnin' 'round his brain
he gon' cry like a baby, then just crawl like the same
soak hisself good in the pouring rain, it's a shame...
goin' down the drain**

Recording The National Blues

The sessions for the album took place over the course of two days. We recorded in a little shed, high up in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Zack Kirk Olsen played drums. I sang, and played my Nationals.

We went in with a plan—no overdubs, no edits. I had eleven songs in mind. We committed to three takes for every song. No more, no less. Whatever album emerged at the end, would be as long as however many songs we ended up with. We recorded all eleven, and we used all of them. No overdubs, no edits. Just vocals, National, and drums. Zack and I set up about six feet from one another. Jeremy Cross engineered the sessions from an arm's length away. He was perfect—not a moment missed. Zack was otherworldly. He hadn't even heard half the songs before. The album was a haiku, recorded completely in the moment.

A man in a dark suit and hat is kneeling on a sidewalk, reading a newspaper. A guitar case with the name 'PREACHI' written on it is on the ground next to him. The scene is outdoors, possibly on a street or in a public area. The man is looking down at the newspaper with a focused expression. The guitar case is open, and the name 'PREACHI' is clearly visible on the inside of the lid. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a building or structure in the distance.

**for Amy
for Clara Bay**

Preacher Boy

The National Blues



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