



The following poems by Lois Roma-Deeley come from *High Notes*, winner of the Samuel T. Coleridge Prize, Benu Press, 2010. This book provides the basis for "The Ballad of Downtown Jake," a contemporary music drama by Christopher Scinto (composer) and Roma-Deeley (poet). Against the backdrop of the Civil Rights movement, an interracial love story unfolds. You are invited into the shadowy jazz scene of the late 1950s, where music and language fuse into a road of longing and desire. Each of the main characters—drug dealer, jazz man, singer, waitress—and even the one hovering Angel who speaks to each of them—struggle with the addiction and redemption.

## Bird Talk

Jake is at the pawn shop. The door is about to close.  
His horn nests in a hole of torn wool, grown large under the left arm  
of the last wool jacket he owns.

This seemed like a good idea: buy a ticket  
for New York, Paris, Rome—

Across the street, birds talk  
among the leaves:

*be the rippling not the stone—  
be the whisper inside the ear  
be the train and not the station*

*be intention*

*be the green beneath the sun  
be the book and not the words  
be that rest between the notes*

*be fluid and harsh—*

*be large*

*be the rising within a moan  
be the step and not the shoe  
be the ringing of alarm—*

*the wind inside the throat—*

*be opened*

## Cover Story: Billie Holiday Traveling into the Future

Her world is turning negative white.

It happens.

To be left on the back step after ringing the bell all night—

she wonders what others seem to know.

A doorjamb filled with fire,

was right behind her a moment ago.

She thinks *duck soup*

flaming in a silver bowl might be the more appropriate way to go

before the King. Or through the nose of hot pink elephants.

A chain link fence rattles a definitive no.

Riffraff begin to drift in

as whole notes pack up outside the theater window.

Three spotlights blind her eyes.

Standing dead center, she bows from the waist, waves to Elvis.

The only one who sees the star hunted by a crescent moon

and chased into a tree.        A kite

with a metal key is said

to attract electricity: the language

between them scatters underground.

Neon calls from the marquee: *If Only*

*You'd Realize*. Blasphemy

is just what it is. Yesterday the television showed her

who was among the chosen—

she alone would bring him back. That face, like the snowflakes of late fall, vanishes

as soon as she hits the ground; eyes turned

to the white that once was

*Graceland*.

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## Confession: An Angel Answers Art Pepper

You lean both elbows on the sill.  
It's winter. The day is growing dark.  
Tracing a star  
into the circle your breath makes on the glass  
you stop. Something  
like the wind is reaching for you.  
There are no footprints at the front door.  
Snow is shoved against the sides of the street.  
Voices shout from another room.  
You think you know them—  
the familiar arc of speech, slurred words,  
the syntax of desire.  
If this were not your own life, it would be romantic:  
the sun setting into the snow,  
the snow turning orange in the cold,  
blue notes on a saxophone,  
tracks under your tongue, between your toes—  
You sigh—  
just outside this window there is a field  
which stretches to a small lake.  
There ghosts hang from winter trees.  
Their eyes are open. Their necks, broken.  
The wind confesses to the sky:

*So be it*

## Light from Distant Hills

A stack of paper falls to the floor.  
There is no other sound in the house. It is the midnight of winter.

Pearl cameos of two children fill the frame  
of this kitchen window. From the ceiling

I have been watching him for hours.

Light from distant hills  
flickers. Someone is about to sleep.

*Are we there yet? Are we?*

His boys' voices, rising and falling in the back seat of his Buick,  
were smooth as ice on the city road.

And he never did feel the wheels jump,  
the tires skim and float into the next lane.

Now, he smells the side of a whiskey-soaked cigarette  
and sighs. He decides to close his eyes

for just a little bit. The spike is still in his arm.  
Blood is staining the walls.

*Are we there yet?*

Tomorrow he'll play  
the last set. He'll step inside the high notes,

but his legs won't hold. The music will break  
and he'll fall into the crowd.

Then I will lean over his body  
slumped against the stage and whisper:

*come home.*

## {Perfect Music}

### *Angel*

The cigarette is floating in a glass of whiskey,  
and not far beyond it, the glimmering saxophone  
collects the gray smoke of drinkers.

It is near dawn.  
A waitress runs a rag along the bar,  
puts up the stools. Her apron smells

of rose water and cedar. I am remembering  
the day her voice gave out,  
how the doctor said

*what did you expect?* Her figure  
was next, the breasts and hips  
making a flawless pear.

The diamond around her neck  
was all that was left when her husband died.  
Suddenly she smooths her hair,

placing a strand behind one ear.  
There is music floating through the air.  
I am standing right here

but she doesn't see me.  
I am standing with my hand  
on the microphone.

The sirens in the street are rising.  
She recognizes the sound  
as something whole, perfectly round—

the ghost of high notes  
touching the face of a late night sky.