

Jim Murphy

Elmore James Steps Out of a Stalled Car

Careful not to curse the steaming pile of rust, himself, or the whole snow-blurred city of Detroit, Elmore James, true king of the bottleneck guitar, whispers something calm and noncommittal as he jams the floor brake down with style and force. He has time to shove back the sleeve of his long London Fog and look at his Timex before the real mess starts. This rearview vision of her body fidgeting—always too hard to please—at the moment about to break on cue into tears, soon as his arm comes over back of the bench and he slowly cranes his neck around to see.

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And none-other-than Elmore James runs a hand along the rim of his torn-up porkpie hat, wiping this winter scene all the way back to the fissured roads north of Mobile—shells and bright ceramic shards, flints and stray coins always catching eyes along every unmanned stretch of blacktop in the South.

Flat foot, flat top, rag top—evolution of the phony contract, trucking state to state. Always some blank face to look into, tapping fingertips barely in from the grasshopping glare. *You play that thing, hanh?* What bad news next? *Must not know how to work, I guess.*

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Steps past corrugated, flung-off roofs, rust-and rainwater-mottled ribs of some foundation, charcoaled apse of a burned church blown through as it struck by siege cannon, hiss of the grub worms working in the framework of a thousand family homes.

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Light that comes stealing up behind a rise, night and day
all rolled over—one morning like a boot in the back, some other
dawn when all the cool that simmers off by noon stays close
and straightens the thousand roads out with its blue kisses.

Opened the door on backseats stocked with stacks of zip guns,
baseball gloves and boxes of cigars—everything for sale
from new 45s up to works of Shakespeare, pocket-size, some nudie
playing cards, even dresses with a horse sewn on the pocket.

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And this was all he brought back to the city for his only girl.
Brought back in the icebound Buick from Alabama to Detroit
one horsey dress, white leggings and a pair of buckle shoes,
the reason why Elmore James steps out of a stalled car to the
sound of screaming almost happy, with no tricks to figure out but
what to say about the hour, and location of the nearest phone.