

Lee Atwater's Apocalyptic Dream (1991)

Some nights I dream again of how it was when I was whole and hale, unhooked from this cancerous IV, untethered, unapologetic, when I was King of the 1980s, Iron Lee, World-Shaper Lee, whiteboy Lee with a gutbucket Telecaster buckled to my hip, because I'm real with the music, the blues belong to me because I desire their grace and humanity like a soul or the conscience I hear dripping all night but cannot still or tap, like the accents I slip into without noticing, talking jive with the brothers at the gas station, my beautiful soul brothers.

Even then I know the people will betray me, the president will not attend my funeral, as a master shies from the stench of the faithful dog lying dead at his feet.

I know because it is my providence to have gazed into the secret heart of the republic and seen the lies and the truths intermingled there, my genius to have understood that lies are a kind of truth if they get you what you want.

That's how the dream begins, with the wanting and the getting, the victory of stolen kisses in Times Square, already the miracle appliances whispering chromed proposals to the roost-ready gals and home-coming guys newly enlisted for the Great War of Material Consumption, boom-boom children now sprung and running loose across fulsome lawns and the finned cars evolving like prehistoric sharks backward up the ladder, Elvis emerging, the hillbilly hep cat, the GI, the rocker, the lounge act, the gold-suited Protestant apotheosis of the dream, there it was, pneumatic and buffered and fluted with rock and roll,

the world I would inherit, acquire, study, shape, a new world made literal in the atom-spray of democracy, the political fact of it amid the anticlimax of Cold War, which too would end in the uncertainty of victory, which way to turn, the disillusionment of hegemony, the anxiety of influence, sowing the soil of the conquered with golden arches and KFC, Elvis in the house of suede with his pills and vomit, sorrowing Elvis, in the end, no rhythm, only blues.

His death was a fraud, of course, a myth, a special op, top clearance, eyes only, though the clues were obvious, the charade of the misspelled tomb as empty as Christ's—suffice to say he slipped away, he was enabled to slip away, to escape the drugs and the boys and the underage girls—CIA, NSA, the details remain obscure, the agency unimportant.

He lived in a cabin in Montana, he lived in Nevada, a hermit in a hut of scrap wood amid the ancient bristlecones on desert peaks, exchanging secrets with Basque shepherds and Navajo shamans, absorbing their sere wisdom, wizened now, near-immortal himself, leathered and glorious and tried in the stony proving grounds like some Old Testament prophet returned to us, at that moment, for divine and exquisite purpose.

And so we dressed him in a power tie and put him on the stump and the numbers were insane, the polls unanimous, he was universally electable, any state in the union, red and white and blue, two uneventful years in the Senate and he was ripe for the top, bigger than Kennedy, Reagan, Lazarus.

Sometimes at the rallies we thought that the arena might collapse with the sheer immanent joy of his believers, a kind of love I have dreamed all my life of finding, dreamed of creating and refining to suit my purpose, and I made no mistakes, took no prisoners, he smiled and nodded his way to the White House and then he was beyond me.

Beyond the grasp of the agencies and cabals and interest groups and councils of power, beyond even the money that made slaves of us all.

He was pure and inviolable, emancipated, an embodiment of freedom and justice and of our lives and times and what we stood for, the chosen son resurrected and unleashed with power to rule the globe, to guide us or free us or save us—or what?

To push the button. To rain black fire from the sky. To command the waiting squadrons to rise from the plains of Nebraska, the Polaris submarines and hardened silos disgorging their missiles across the pole toward the vast Asiatic interior, vapor trail and mushroom cloud

our emblem, and more, still more, ever more, not just north and east but west and south, not just the Chinese and the Russians but the French and the Pakistanis and the Brazilians and the Saudis, Turks and Czechs, Fijians, Khmer, Masai, friend and enemy alike consigned to the flames, engulfed in the finale of tracer lines across computer monitors,

and it was real, it was our destiny, chosen and inevitable, and I was not weeping or gnashing my teeth there, in the black bunker, in the darkness beneath Cheyenne Mountain, I was mad with delight, tears like slot cars racing down my cheeks, not wishing it but nonetheless expecting it and believing in it, joyful and complete when Elvis begins to sing, in his white robes and long beard, in the cavern of Strategic Air Command, not kitschy, not sad or happy or good or bad but simple and just and true,

mine eyes have seen the glory, as the world explodes in the fire of our righteousness, he has trampled out the vineyards,

and I'm with him now, rising into a funnel of white light, rising from the pale and damaged body, giddy with the simple changes and progressions, humping out those blues chords like reverential moonbeams bounced off or ingested, rising from the hospital bed with the smile of a child, playing my guitar, free at last.