

Excerpt from *LOU BLUE*

An extended allegorical meditation on love, loss, anger and redemption, LOU BLUE is written almost entirely from the perspective of lobsters and is abstracted from the myths surrounding the Greek metamorphic god of the ocean, Poseidon. One of the ways it does so is through structurally morphing, the plot unfolding within a parade of literary forms by assuming and shedding the stylistic nuances of various authors, including Margaret Mitchell, the Grimm Brothers, Ovid, Hemingway, Shakespeare and, as in the case of the following excerpt, Faulkner.

BO

I'm thinking it's about that time when I see him come down like them gulls all smooth and gliding about them sunrays. His claws out before him and not moving none he come down in big loops and his feet touch bottom real quiet. I reckon he's one of them surface lobsters. I reckon so. Not just cause of his swimming and prettyboy looks but cause he's all nerves. Christ it's some funny the way he come over, all shaky-legged and antennae swinging about and eyestalks rigid as stiffies but pointed straight down at the ground like them sunrays. Christ ain't it some funny. I could look more friendly-like and not be opening and closing my claws real slow but I'm getting a good laugh inside seeing him shake so. He stops a ways off and mumbles at the gravel and I says, "I can't hear you boy with all them pebbles scuttling about." So he inches closer some and I make a smile and says, "Don't fret none, I don't bite," and his feet leave the gravel like he trodden on a stingray. But he keeps side-edging forward real slow like until he's a claw length away. And then he tells me about her. "And I looked and I looked but I

can't find her," he says. And I see all the gloom there behind his scaredness. And I should tell him What you holding on to so long she's probably now scuffing up her back this minute. I should tell him the truth that there ain't nothing and nobody out there for you and it don't do nobody no good to pine away for what ain't ever there. But I figure let the young be young and you believe in all that sop while you can pretty boy cause it ain't no fun seeing things as they is. And it's about that time anyways so I says, "I'll take you to my place to see Fey and Iris. They know a lot of folks and could have seen your girl."

FEY

He stands behind Bo in the entrance slivered with light and I think Glory to you Lord for he is the image of Lewis descended from heaven. And when the boy says his name is Lou I bend down and kiss the seafloor and I know it true when He says Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted. I hold back my tears so as not to scare him but Lord when he tells me that he is a year now looking for a lost sweetheart I cannot help myself and a wave rises through me and folds me over and the convulsions take me. I cannot collect myself and through the watery shaking I see him draw away in consternation along the tilted gravel. But the wave passes and now emptied I say to him, "Wait, forgive the outburst. You remind me of my Lewis whom I lost years ago and I know you are a message from the Lord telling me that Lewis is still with me even in

heaven.” He is hesitant. “Come in,” I say. “It is but a humble and sparse home but please come in. Tell me more about her. Maybe I have seen her.”

Bo has gone to his corner, shaded behind the steep ramp of haze flooding through the entrance. The tips of his antennae flicker, occasionally breaking through the illumined curtain. Please be good, Bo. For the Lord has graced our abode by sending us one of His children. So let us be good.

BO

I wouldn't have brought him over if I'd known his name was Lou. Christ I wouldn't have brought him if I'd known he shared his goddam name.

FEY

Loobeeta he says her name is. I've never heard of such a name. “My daughter Iris will come soon and I'm sure she knows something of her,” I say. For truth is I have seen little of the outside since Lewis went on. Lord these have been trying years but I wouldn't complain. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction. My tribulations He gave me that I might iron out the vanity and self-righteousness from my soul. For He gave Himself for us and it is not for me to grieve my lot. When they tied Him up and drove nails through His hands and left Him with the thieves He did not

curse them. What is my loss held against that Light. Iris be blessed for standing by me through the long years. And Bo too. I don't hold it against him that he takes that juice. I only wish he would stop for those poisons ill him. Lord how many times have I said to him Eat some meat from the fish but he says No I ain't hungry and then he brews poison from the heads and saturates and mars his God-given flesh. He has started already. The dark hides him but I smell it. It does him no good. But I don't begrudge him. He has stood by my side and he was close to Lewis and I don't begrudge him. For we must all somehow deal with our tribulations. But it does him no good.

IRIS

They better not be rotten like last time. Because Bo will look at me again with those eyes like senseless fire and the yelling and Fey crossing herself and prostrating and then it'll just be me. Because he isn't there and she isn't there. Just me and the murmuring words of God in the furious air. They better not be rotten.

“Don't worry they're all fresh,” Gom says.

“Then why won't you show them to me,” I say.

“You'll see them soon enough,” he says and begins.

I see it lurching aslant through an opening in the clouds of disturbed sand, the silver tip of a fin jutting from the seaweed pouch, lurching aslant with the gravel and the sandy water and the pebbles like boulders.

Because he is not there and she is not there and I am there. Not like soon when I will be gone. Because around Fey and Bo I am always there except for that one time that only I know because he does not remember. Only I know too much and only I am there and they are not. But soon now I will be like them.

I can no longer see the pouch. The agitated seafloor has become a grainy floating fog, hazed by the steep dwindling sunrays, and even the pebbles like boulders are misted mountains. Beneath me a scraping like a hacksaw running a steel pipe and above me the banging clatter and him saying things to me. His face bobs like a pigeon's head in and out of the sand cloud and his mouth clenching and opening and eyes knotted with hate but not looking at my eyes.

They better not be rotten.

GOM

I'll show her that I do it the hardest. That I'm better and stronger than the others. She's used to getting it so I go extra hard. And later she'll want it again from me like this. She'll crave the bang the bang the It hurts. I mark her so she won't forget. I grip her strong and her shell bows in under my crusher. I whisper hard to her. I say, "You like this don't you? You like getting it from me don't you *don't you!*" I watch myself there hit against her. Bang and bang and bang. Whenever my eyes pierce the sand haze I vaguely see her face in the lower corner of my vision and it's flat and empty. So I go harder.

IRIS

BO

There that's better. Plenty full ones here to get me through a couple more days. Iris just better bring no more of them rotten fish. It can't be made good when they're rotten. It fouls the taste and gets you sicker faster.

He ain't much at ease there waiting for Iris with his antennae all wrapped about him like he's trying to hug himself. But Christ, can't say I blame him seeing how Fey got all Lordly on him sobbing and whining on about him being a message from the Lord that remind her of— Christ Almighty how many times I say to her It don't do you no good hiding away from your troubles in some god who ain't even there and I tell you Fey even if he be up there we should curse him for having us beg at his stinking heels cause all he ever do is kick us around anyhow. But she don't listen none. Here's my god right here amen and cheers to that. Ain't no other god ever made one feel better.

Fey will preach me on the ills of the juice but she don't never listen to me when I got something to say. Nor she nor Iris don't stop to see how lucky they are that I'm here cause there's sick lobsters out there. Sick ones, I seen them with my own eyes. Chrisse, I gone laid with the lions, like Fey would say. I been there, I had to fend for myself among them. You don't never know what can happen when there ain't no male to protect a place. She and Iris was all alone and I come in here out of my own goodwill and what do Fey do? She turn me a deaf ear and lift her eyes up there. I try and tell her there ain't nothing after and nothing before and you just make good with what you got right here right now. Do like me and give what love you got here in this world and not in no dead made-up one. But she just clasp her hands and murmur her prayers and raise them eyestalks and damn you, Fey, damn you, he's gone.

FEY

"Iris should be here any second now," I say. He is shifting about, glancing now in the darkness at Bo, now at the entrance. He is a quiet gentle one like Iris. He would be good for her just as Lewis was good for me. In the evenings we would share the fish and I would look upon him and see in him the image of my Lewis looking upon me from heaven, waiting until He deem it my time to join him there at his side.

Had this Loobeeta lass cared for him she would not have upped and gone. Lord I only hope Iris takes to him for she has been too much inside herself lately and it would do her good to have someone to share herself with. For an invisible wall has come up

between her and me. Between her and everybody. Glory upon You Lord those were blessed days when Lewis and I first found her there just a stripling tangled up in the kelp, giggling as if there were something funny about it all. Lewis unclipping her and I saying Hush sweet child hush for there's codfish about, but she shrieking and wiggling, saying It tickles! It tickles! It was in the same garden of kelp where only months earlier I had lain, crying out warnings and farewells as our little ones detached from me and floated to the surface. So when we took her in it already felt like she was one of our own. Those were blessed days, praise them.

But what did happen to Iris I never could tell. Never laughing and rarely leaving the burrow and only speaking if a question was asked of her. At first I thought that like me she was in mourning for Lewis having passed on. But time only increased her gloom. I said to her Talk to me my child and she looked at me on the other end of that invisible wall with eyes far away and said What is it you want me to talk to you about mother and I said Why are you so solemn and withdrawn now and she said Because I am praying mother and I said Why are you praying and she said Because we die mother and I am laying up treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. And I knew not what to say to her. For though I did sometimes cross my claws and pray, I was not truly on the path of the Lord then and could not make sense of what she spoke. And when she disappeared for a spell, Lord how I grieved. It was then in my darkness of grief while she was gone that I found the Light and the Way. When Iris returned, Lord I praise You for that day, I rushed to her decked in the holy garments of my newfound faith but she had long abandoned prayer and would have nothing to do with my words of Him. And Lord it would not have vexed me so for she

again made company with other lobsters and groomed herself more than ever before. But she was still dark in silence and her eyes no longer far away but now far inside.

“Any second now my Iris will come,” I say, offering him a periwinkle. He nods and takes it. He cracks the shell quietly, serene as a saint. Such a lovely peaceful boy. He would be good for her. And she for him. For she has been faithful to His Will, saving herself all these years for the right one. And across his blessed forehead I can read it Lord that this boy is the one. I pray he sees she would be good for him. For Iris is a family unto herself, supporting me since Lewis passed on and bringing fish not only for me but for Bo too. And Lord have mercy on Bo’s soul. I do not resent him for he is sick with poisons.

I hear scuttling outside the entrance. It must be Iris. “Here she comes,” I say.

LOU

Something is wrong something is wrong and it’s not them it’s not them it’s me
it’s me but what is it what is it?

BO

She come crawling in through the whirring entrance, the pouch swaying from her pincher.

“Iris honey, this is Lou. He has been waiting here for you...” and they go on and on like that. Her back is to me and I see the white scratches zigzagging up and down her carapace and pebbles crammed stucked in her tail joints. I know what she been doing. I ain’t blind to it like Fey. Course Fey would be blind to it. She’s blind to everything now and won’t let nobody unblind her though she need it bad. The pouch is on the whirring ground. They better not be rotten.

“I don’t know of her,” Iris says outside the darkness and then I hear Fey talking all excited like. I move the rock aside and bend to it and drink and the juice rush down and sizzles my middle. It spreads heat all about me like when I’m crawling on rocks and a leg hits a patch of sand and sends it all exploding out. I do it again, drink up longer this time, so it make more heat and spread farer. Chrissie that’s good. I put the rock back and watch them out there in the whirring saying things and I start laughing cause they’re all serious the way they lean in looking at each other saying things. If they’d knowed better they’d see all the buzzing and relax and wouldn’t give no damn about being all serious. Cause ain’t nothing that matters none. And that too don’t matter.

I hold myself for a second so I’m like a rock in the whirring and then I come out and go over to them. I go straight and calm in the whirring like buzzing and I got fire in me and I see faces like covered with masks looking over at me and I could laugh and laugh at them but I keep it all in.

IRIS

He wants to leave. But he does not go, as if immobilized. Fey bustles about him, chattering, oblivious that something ails him. “You will stay and eat with us, won’t you?” she asks him. He looks at her with the big dumb eyes of that brief crushing upon waking from heavy sleep. “Of course you will,” she continues. “Iris brought us some fresh mackerel.”

But they are not so fresh and Bo suddenly materializes, congealing out of the formless shadows in the corner as if all along he had been watching us, patient and studious, like a freak behind tinted windows. He reeks of it. It will be another of those nights. He approaches slowly, too slowly, his composure betrayed by the mechanical self-consciousness of his gait and by his eyes, squinting out of his cocked face as if just doused by river water.

“What we got here?” he says, leering at the pouch. He peels off the overlapping kelp strands one by one, exposing the silver mound of scales and fins and rigid eyeballs. His flushed face descends into the fish.

“And how you got these?” he says, his face still in there.

“They were given to me by a friend,” I say.

“Oh, a friend,” he says. “That were real nice of her.” He lifts his face from the mackerel and laughs, spewing his reeking breath about the waters. He is far along already. They could be rotten and he would not know it. He snips the heads off with his pincher, gathering them into a pile on some loose kelp. Then he scoops up the kelp

satchel and returns to his corner where he can brew the fish heads and lie unseen and untouched, drowning away in his tenebrous retreat.

BO

I crush the heads up good along with the coral dust and oyster shards and bury them in one of the empty holes. I gonna leave it long so the juice gets real strong. I push aside the rock from one of the done ones. The juice is low so I slurp it empty. I lean my head on the wall and inhale and press my crusher to my mouth but my mouth don't feel it and I clench my eyestalks shut and open them and laugh. The buzzing now like them boats when they pass up above but louder like there's lots of them going all around me. But they won't touch me cause I is fire.

I see the three of them out there falling from the same spot again and again and I ain't moving none but the three of them and the walls and the water falling and falling in the same place up to down up to down skipping the from down to up part just falling up to down up to down not going nowhere. Fey's voice in the droning just words separate going round me and I hear my name called out. I move a rock off a fresh batch and take a long haul and put back the rock and the three of them buzzing out there swing with the walls in a loop around me but I catch them steady.

And what else was given you by your friend I should have says to her. I should have gripped her strong and spunned her around so her back was thrust in Fey's face. And then I'd say, Look here at the fresh scuff marks. It's a sign, Fey, a sign from the

Almighty, that your pretty little girl is facing heaven. That's right, Fey, her pretty little face to the sky, back to the ground, getting whored.

Now they making bigger falls up to down and the buzzing roaring through me. And who the goddam asked him to come anyhow and Fey in such a fuss over him *oh you are the image of* damn you Fey cause I protect you and I protect Iris and I get nothing.

I heave the rock and plunge my whole head in and thrash and yank out my eyestalks all burning and dodge the ceiling that try and fall on me and I stand in all the spinning and roaring and I is fire and I howl cause I is fire.

IRIS

Out of the mad raven silence, Bo shrieks again. Unaware she is mouthing frantic prayers, Fey forces Lou a smile, as grotesque as the painted grin on a weeping clown. But Lou is elsewhere: I see it in his eyes. "Excuse me," Fey says, setting down a half-eaten fish. She crawls towards Bo. She could ignore him. Because steeped in that juice, he will soon shriek off into unconsciousness. But not if she goes to him. Because in pity she goes to him and her pity fans him livid. He loathes her because it is not compassion he wants from her. Not compassion.

Lou his name is. No wonder Fey took to him; no wonder Bo reeks so. He looks worse. His antennae are limp, his eyes hazed over as if steamed from within. "Something is wrong," he says, looking down, the uneaten fish falling from his claw. "Something is wrong." He crawls towards the entrance, then sluggishly turns and

retraces his steps, his feet slogging within the two deepening grooves dragged out by his antennae. A red tint in the membrane of his joints lusters against his dull green shell.

Suddenly I know. But it is winter, the wrong time for it. Yet it is happening to him. His carapace has lifted and a pink gap glistens between carapace and shell. It is happening to him and he does not know and Fey is fanning Bo into eyes like senseless fire.

“You are about to molt,” I say.

FEY

I crawl to where the shadows begin and cross myself. I look inside but cannot see him in that myriad darkness.

“Bo?” I say. “Bo?”

“Fey,” he says in that wasted drawl.

“Where are you?” I say.

“You come here,” he says. The Prayer poised on my lips I put my head into the shadows. The water is colder. My eyes adjust and I make out his outline. He is propped up on his back legs, his carapace sagging back, crooked, supported by the wall. “Closer,” he says. “Closer.”

“I can’t. The smell is too much.” It’s cold. I whisper the Prayer.

“What’s that you says?”

“I said the smell is too much.”

“No,” he says, “what’s that you said after that?” He goes into a sputtering laughter and, his back legs faltering, he topples, sliding and scraping down the wall. He lands on his back, his slumped legs hanging over him.

“Oh Lord!” I hurry towards him, through the shadows, into the smell. “Bo!”

He lies inert as if the Almighty called upon him before his natural time. Then he shrieks, only his mandibles moving, and goes quiet again.

“Please Bo, we have a guest—”

His body still motionless, he shrieks again, even louder. Then, flailing his legs suddenly, he rights himself and uncovers one of those wicked holes.

“Please,” I say, “that’s enough.”

“Don’t play games,” he says, bending into the pit.

“Please, that’s your last one for the night.”

He lifts his head and turns slowly. He stands there for some time then crawls towards me, a faceless silhouette in shadow.

“Long as I can see out mine eyes there ain’t gonna be no last one. You got that?” He comes at me slowly, his legs wobbly and uncertain each time they leave the ground. The pale contours of his face come into relief and I see his eyestalks, swollen and ruby red. Lord I pray you, please, not tonight. Not while Lou is here.

“I just want you to come eat with us,” I say.

“I ain’t hungry.”

“But you never eat. Why won’t you eat?”

And then his face goes mottled and I know I shouldn’t have said that. I know he tells me Don’t you never talk to me about food and Don’t ask me no questions, though

it's a mystery why he flares up so when I mention it. But I say it for He told us to pray: Give us this day our daily bread. My telling him to eat is my way of saying Come Bo, kneel alongside me and let us pray. And though He also said we shall not live by bread alone, He did not intend that we forsake it but that we eat within His presence and our acknowledgment of His Glory.

He comes at me with that mottled look all because I asked him to leave those juices and come share supper with us. Lord I pray You, keep Bo from raising a claw to me. Stay the Devil from him, just until the boy leaves. Then You can loose him on me and I will turn the other cheek and pray for him.

IRIS

He drops and rolls onto his side, bending himself into a V, drawing his head to his flippers. The cuticle stretches at the bend and finally bursts. And there in the breach of the severed cuticle, where his new shell should glisten spinach green, I see sapphire.

He molts doubly, out of both shell and color.

[END OF EXCERPT]