

REMEMBERING CHET BAKER

John Field

1952 was the year Chet's junkie friends
Helped him forge a permanent relationship
Between his habit and his horn.
After that he spent the rest of his life
Filling empty spoons with his expensive muse.
Proud of his photogenic face, his shiny helmet
Of slicked back hair and cool persona,
America's sad-eyed troubadour
Drove the ladies wild
Each time he sang their favorite songs off-key.
Neither awake nor asleep when he walked on stage,
He'd coax Little Girl Blue out of her cage
And then paint the lyrics of her broken heart
In dark and somber shades of gray,
Bruised colors he borrowed from his long disease.

A few years later his looks began to fade
And there were nights
When the lights went out in his veins
Because the last vestige of his afternoon fix
Had dissolved into too much of nothing in his blood,
A problem he solved
By borrowing short term loans from death
And sticking them in his arm.
Safe in the certainty of oblivion for an hour or two,
He'd blow candlelight
Out of the shimmering flame in his horn,
But on other nights when the lines of sex and love
Weren't intersecting in his ballads
He'd play Mood Indigo with a jaded neon glow,
Or croon My Funny Valentine
As if it were a dirge instead of a song.

Sometimes a beautiful girl in the front row
Would thaw the lunar ice in his soul
With a come on look, and for a moment or two
He'd forget the needles in the alleys
And the fresh-dug graves
And consummate their love affair with his microphone
By wringing a little honey out of Sweet Lorraine,
Something no other trumpet player could do,
Not even Miles.

Friends who saw Chet just before he died
Said his face looked uninhabited,
Like something left behind after its owner had moved away.
They believe he accidentally fell out of his hotel window,
Only this time there wasn't a featherbed of dope to land on.
Critics insist that he committed suicide
Because reality finally outed his inner nobody,
And when he held his messy rendezvous
With a sidewalk in Amsterdam
There was no one left inside him death could kill.