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The Reverse Biography of Bix Beiderbecke

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A small granite grave marker, on a little crop of grass sits in quaint cemetery in Davenport, Iowa. It reads, 'Leon Bix Beiderbecke 1903-1931'. A stone mason and his apprentice whistle as they use a crowbar to pull the stone from the dirt. They heave the stone into their squeaky wheel barrow. They walk backwards down the hill and disappear behind the church.

Three weeks later, a crew of three black workers, begin digging with shovels and carefully placing dirt and tufts of grass to the side of a hole that is forming. As, the sun comes up the men stop. Their shovels are clean and they walk backwards, down the hill.

Four autos, and a hearse, appear along the road, driving backwards, and parking near the hole. Doors sound and people make their way to a small gathering next to the hole. Among them are eleven mourners and a priest. Water from the ground flies up into the eyes of the mourners as the coffin is raised. Flowers are tak-

en from it. The priest speaks briefly, beginning with ".nemA"

Then five men and the priest, surround the coffin. They grasp its handles and walk it backwards into the back of the hearse. The steel door swings shut. Then, each mourner and the priest walk backwards into the four autos. One by one, the autos form a line behind the hearse. They drive backwards out of the cemetery together. The hearse is the last to leave.

At the mortuary, the coffin is opened. Bix Beiderbecke is placed on the mortician's table. His hair is combed backwards and his makeup is brushed off and put back in an attaché case. Eventually, a detective and a mortician place Bix Beiderbecke in a plastic sac. Six days later, Bix Beiderbecke is driven backwards to New York City, in the back of coroner's truck.

At a building on 46th St. in Sunnyside, Queens, two policeman and a coroner's officer carry Bix Beiderbecke up to a sixth floor apartment. They drag Bix Beiderbecke from the plastic and place him in a bed. Then they leave.

A doctor takes a cigarette butt out of an ashtray. He sucks a cloud of smoke out of the air and breathes it through the cigarette. Tobacco and paper materialize as he blows smoke into the flaming cherry. The fire moves

from the cigarette to a lit match. The flashing sulfur disappears as the match is unstruck. An unlit cigarette dangles from the doctor's lips. The doctor opens Bix Beiderbecke's eyelids slowly. Speaking to the landlord, who is present, he says, ".mih stol ev'eW" He presses the stethoscope against Bix Beiderbecke's bare chest. Then he quickly packs up his stethoscope and touches the forehead and wrist of Bix Beiderbecke. The doctor races out.

Bix Beiderbecke's landlord shakes him violently on the springy mattress. The landlord screams, "!tner shtnom owt em ewo uoy hctib a fo nos uoY."

The landlord shakes Bix Beiderbecke again. He yells, "!dratsab uoy pu ekaW"

Then, the landlord lets go and steps back. He pauses and says, "?xiB"

Bix Beiderbecke is bluest pale. He is silent. He wheezes from deep within in his trachea. The color of life appears. His body warms as his heartbeat pumps blood throughout his extremities. His chest rises as he draws a breath.

Bix Beiderbecke says, ".deb ym rednu lived a si erehT" The landlord runs backwards out of the apartment, slamming the door shut. He hammers his palms on the mahogany from the other side. "!pu nepO !!pu nepO"

Bix Beiderbecke springboards off the mattress and stumbles across the bedroom. He stupors from wall to wall, until he comes to rest on the piano bench. He begins singing backwards at the top of his lungs. He is de-hammering feverishly at the piano keys. He plays nearly every note on the eighty-eight keys; sometimes all at once. There is however, one note he never plays. That note is the lowest E flat. He leaves that note for the devil.

The sound of the piano reverberates throughout the apartment, before it is struck by the piano hammers which trigger the fingers of Bix Beiderbecke. A swell begins; a wash of notes as Bix Beiderbecke takes his barefoot off the pedal. With his hands free, liquor in his stomach rises from his throat, and jumps into a fifth of vodka. His eyes are sunken black hearts. He is lost in a frenzy of madness. There is pounding at the door. The landlord screams, "!doohrobhgien elohw eht pu 'nikaw er'uoY"

The landlord begins pounding his knuckles on the door. The knocking stops.

Bix Beiderbecke sings backwards over top of dissonant piano chords. He stops periodically to fill the empty liquor bottles littering his apartment, with liquor from his stomach. Bix Beiderbecke spends the entire day pacing

around his apartment backwards, picking up, and filling empty bottles. He collects all the bottles together, and puts them all in a great big box with a Rheingold beer label on it. Bix Beiderbecke is quiet now. He carefully balances the box in his arms while opening the door with his foot. Keys jingle and fly from the kitchen counter to his hand.

Bix Beiderbecke walks backwards from Ludlow's Liquor Store to Golding's JK Pawnshop. The pawnbroker shakes his head. Eleven dollars and twenty three cents float from Bix Beiderbecke's sweaty palm to the pawnbroker's fist.

Bix Beiderbecke raps his knuckles impatiently on the pawnbroker's glass case.

The pawnbroker inspects the brass cornet, as if it were the barrel of a gun. He puts it back in the felt case. Bix Beiderbecke closes it and locks its metal hinges. He walks backwards through the pawn shop with the cornet case, close to his heart. The glass door swings shut as Bix Beiderbecke pulls it such. Bells on twine jingle. The pawn shop door is still. The pawnbroker reads his newspaper backwards.