

# IMOGENE

A Retrofuturist Song Cycle

## PART I: USA

### 1. Blue, White, Silver and Black

Here are three things that I have seen against the blue sky:

1. a white house with a blue door.
2. a silver toy rocket.
3. a black dragonfly that I momentarily mistook for a terrifically fast and distant helicopter.

I can't remember seeing skies so wide since my childhood.  
Sometimes I feel like buildings rise up from the ground to block my view —  
But that isn't logical.

My family has a great love of contrasts.  
When I was nineteen and in college,  
They moved to a town in the Pacific Northwest where it is always cloudy.  
They painted their house blue, with a white door, against the white sky —  
A negative image.  
They are always reversing the things I remember.

I have no love of contrasts.  
I work in an office building with mirrored windows that reflect the silver sky.  
At night you can see a bulb or two.  
The building's constellations.  
This is how I avoid contrast.

There are hidden algorithms.  
It should be easy to live an organized life.  
But there are always certain irregularities.

Every weekday morning, at 8:55 AM,  
I check my mailbox at the office.  
This apparently regular and systematic ac  
Is in fact the point of entry for an irregularity.

It is also where this story begins.

## 2. The Letter

There is an letter.

The stamp on the envelope is German.

The image on the stamp is a silhouette of an airplane.

The signature on the letter is blurred and illegible.

The smell of the letter is familiar.

“The smell of the letter”:

A seven-part process.

1. Particles travel from
2. the surface of the paper to
3. cilia on the inside of my nose,  
causing
4. chemical reactions that trigger
5. electrical impulses in
6. my nervous system,  
causing
7. a pattern of activity in several parts of my brain.

This pattern of activity

Is what we call a memory

In casual conversation.

To be more specific, it is a memory of a face.

To be more specific, it is a memory of the face of a woman.

To be more specific, it is a memory of the face of a woman named Imogene,  
Who I have not thought of in five years.

Between Imogene and myself there was a high degree of contrast.

Perhaps this is why my brother introduced us,

And why I now picture her in a hard, reflective orange raincoat against the soft and  
absorbent blue sky of my hometown.

That is an image.

The colors of the image are vivid.

The meaning of the image is unclear.

The outcome of this situation is becoming increasingly apparent.

This is what I mean when I speak of “irregularities.”

### 3. How To See Two Things At Once

If this were a novel,  
I would have trouble concentrating.  
But thoughts of Imogene run parallel to my work —  
A train that runs alongside a highway.

Every object on my desk is doubled, haloed with meaning

How to see two things at once  
How to see two things at once

A map of the U.S. —  
Blue routes of distribution,  
Like her divergent style of conversation.  
Red routes of distribution,  
Like the color of her car in the shade of our house.

A rubber stamp smiles at me wryly,  
Amused at my diligence.

How to see two things at once  
How to see two things at once

I work late Wednesdays.  
Yesterday, at 7 PM, as I looked out the window at the spot where the highway meets  
the field, I thought I saw something moving quickly in the grass.  
But it was just rain moving slowly across my window.

It's hard for me to tell how far away things are.  
When I was young, I was afraid to cross the street,  
Because a car three blocks away just looked smaller.

# PART II: Berlin

## 4. The Airport

Lufthansa  
Brandenburg  
Flight delay  
Magazine  
Place marker

I've always liked airports.

“The exception proves the rule”  
doesn't mean what you think it does.

Routes of distribution for people.

Delays and cancellations only affirm  
The more basic truth of the map and the schedule.

Airline map  
Envelope  
Firmament  
Imogene  
Bartender

A man in a white suit stands on a moving walkway.

If they were the norm, we would not call them cancellations.  
We would simply call them the way things are.

Imogene's letter, trucked into the complementary magazine:

“Dear 12”

(a nickname I've had for years)

“I'm sorry that things turned out so unpleasantly.”

(no mention of my brother's role)

“I'm working in Berlin,

At a club called Firmament,

As an assistant bartender.

That's why in—”

(no, I can't repeat this part yet. You're going to have to wait.)

## 5. A City of Rectangles.

How long have you been in town?

About two days.

Do you like it?

Yes very much.

Could you describe your experience, please?

Berlin is a city of rectangles and bright colors.

Could you explain why you say that, please?

Have you seen the Charlottenburg stop on the S7?

It is red, blue, silver, aerodynamic, with clocks that have no numbers on them.

What else?

Have you looked at the subway map?

Every line feeds into a central ring.

What else?

Berlin is further north than I expected.

Why is that?

I thought it would be the at same latitude as Washington State,

But it is at the same latitude as southern Alaska.

What is the importance of this fact?

At four o'clock this morning I found myself in the Schlachtensee district,

And the trees were already alive with the songs of unfamiliar birds.

How did this make you feel?

As the light slanted on the square stucco houses,

I felt that I must be in Southern California.

Wherever I go, I find myself in places I've already been.

But I still haven't seen that wide sky again,

And trees still seem to rise up to block my view...

What else?

Nothing else.

Have you been to East Berlin?

Not yet.

Do you expect to see rectangles and bright colors in East Berlin?

Yes.

You will not see rectangles and bright colors in East Berlin.

Why not?

Take the U1 to Hallesches Tor. Take the U5 to Frankfurter Tor. Take the U2 to Schönhauser Allee. You will understand when you get there.

## 6. The Signs

I went to East Berlin today.

It's true: the streets are dirtier, the buildings in worse repair.

But there's a different sort of organization at work.

*IT'S YOU, IMOGENE.*

In Kreuzberg, a poster for a band called The Assistant Bartenders — in English, of course!

In Prenzlauer Berg, a thrift store mannequin wearing a hard reflective orange raincoat!

In Friedrichshain, a wall with graffiti. Its your letter!

“Dear 12

I'm sorry that things turned out—”

STOP!

*Here are three things that I have found in the last six hours:*

*1. your job in the name of a band on a poster.*

*2. your letter in the graffiti on the side of a building.*

*3. a mannequin that represents you as I imagined you last Wednesday, privately, unremarked.*

*HOW DID YOU ARRANGE SUCH A THING?*

If this were a movie,

These signs would mean that I was in love with you.

I didn't even like you.

From the moment we met, I could tell that you would bring trouble to my family.

They had been courting chaos my entire life,

And in you they had found its purest form.

# PART III: Firmament

## 7. Violent, Illuminated

Just after midnight:  
Squat, ugly warehouse,  
Alone in a vast parking lot.  
Blue and pink light.  
Distorted, washed-out bass tones  
Heard through six feet of concrete.

An enormous glowing sky built into the ceiling.  
An entire day in one room:  
A disco-ball dawn at the entrance;  
A simulated sunset on the far wall.

I'm climbing a ladder to a catwalk  
I'm looking down at the crowd,  
Violent, illuminated.  
A larger shape — your shape.

I'm under the unobstructed sky  
I'm listening to the music  
A larger sound — your sound.  
The words of your letter in the tone of the synthesizers:

“Dear 12,  
I'm sorry that things turned out so unpleasantly.  
I'm working in Berlin, at a club called Firmament, as an assistant bartender.  
That's why in all of this time that you've been looking for me,  
You haven't been able to find me—”

All of this time that I've been looking for you?  
I hadn't thought of you in five years!

(The calls to your parents...  
The lookout across the street...  
The hours in libraries,  
Compiling lists...  
You are always reversing  
the things I remember.)

I hadn't thought of you in five years!

From here that disco ball looks just like the sun.  
From here the figure in the grass  
Looks just like rain on my window.  
Wait —

The signature on the letter was blurred and illegible — *because the paper was wet.*  
The stamp on the letter was not canceled.

Where are you, Imogene?  
Your shape is in Berlin,  
but you are still in the U.S...

There are hidden algorithms.  
There is no such thing as an irregularity.

It's hard for me to tell how far away things are.  
(A terrifically fast and distant helicopter...)  
But I never knew why until now.

## 8. The Reason

1. If I had seen you in the grass,  
I would not have believed your letter
2. If I hadn't believed your letter,  
I would not be under such a sky, wider and brighter than any real one.
3. You have given meaning to a defect in my brain.
4. You have given back to me the wide skies of my hometown.

You have committed an act of great kindness, Imogene.  
Thank you.