



Tom Russell
"Blue Wing"
The Long Way Around
05/1997
HighTone Records

Blue Wing

Matthew Woodman

I can't decide. Sometimes it's an oak tree, and sometimes it's an owl.

The moon phases a horizon across my shoulders. Or a vertical stripe down one or the other of my arms.

The "Blue Wing" in question could be any one of at least three distinct but related blue wings. The opening line establishes the first: "He had a blue wing tattooed on his shoulder." Tattoos function as a form of nonverbal communication, the blue tattoo pigment originating as copper carbonate, sodium aluminum silicate, calcium copper silicate, cobalt aluminum oxides, and chromium oxides. From crushed azurite, lapis lazuli, and turquoise, flight, ascent, and freedom.

The otherwise unnamed "he" in that line becomes the second avian anterior limb, a man distilled to the appellation Blue Wing. What do we know about this man? That, having been found guilty of an unnamed crime, he has been sentenced to Washington State Penitentiary, a.k.a., Walla Walla. That he dreams of running free. That, near the song's end, he dies. What do I know about myself? That I'm drawn to assemblage... that I'm drawn, too. It's all a series of boxes; if we're not living in one, on one form or another, we're marking through one with an X.

The third is "Blue Wing," the song written in prison by Little Willy John about Blue Wing the man and/or Blue Wing the tattoo. This in turn becomes the "Blue Wing" chorus: "They sang, it's dark in here, can't see the light / but I look at this blue wing when I close my eyes / and I fly away, beyond these walls / up above the clouds, where the rain don't fall / on a poor man's dreams." Indeed, William Edgar John—a.k.a., Little Willy John—best known for his classic 1956 No. 1 R&B hit "Fever," having been convicted of murder died at the age of 30 in Washington State Penitentiary on May 26, 1968.

There is also, of course, the bird to whom the blue wing belonged. As the song's second line indicates, "It might have been a blue bird, I don't know." To which bird is this tattoo meant to allude? In terms of place, the song references both Seattle and Los Angeles, so the bird in question would need to be from the Pacific coast. Perhaps the western bluebird (*Sialia mexicana*) or lazuli bunting (*Passerina amoena*). More likely a jay. Could be a Steller's jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri*), a Piñon jay (*Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*), a western scrub jay (*Aphelocoma californica*), or, of course, the blue jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*). I prefer to think of the wing as belonging to the garrulous black-billed magpie (*Pica hudsonia*), an avian trickster whose call can best be described as cursing in verse, a conversation, poetry. I watch the blue blurs in the backyard and try to whistle back. I even purchased a crow call online, but nothing seems to come of it. They seem to ignore me in that, to mangle a Leonard Cohen line, they don't want to compare mythologies.

One's heart distilled, the anthem, an unwieldy stone in the mouth. Synecdoche refers to this concept of comprehending the whole by detailing and coming to know a single one of its components, William Blake having inked the Platonic Ideal in "Auguries of Innocence": "To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour." There are so many strata on which to etch, before which to read, by which to hear an anthem: in blood, on paper, in vinyl, on cinderblock walls, as a digital series of ones and zeroes.

According to the 1913 definition, the anthem must be sung in alternate parts, one half-choir answering the other. We all have our strengths. Mine do not include musicality in any form other than whistling through parking lots and empty halls. This might explain why a song can transport me so viscerally. I'm not sure *vicarious* is an accurate label for this experience, though I understand how it could be seen as such. A live recording, my favorite version of "Blue Wing," is a duet between Tom Russell and Dave Alvin from Russell's 1997 *The Long Way Around*. Their alternating time-worn voices accompanied by a subtle acoustic guitar, it sounds dark in there.

According to Scott Sillett, a wildlife biologist at the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center, blue birds do not exist; the "blue" we see on a blue wing is a structural color that results not from pigment but from the wave interference between light and the feather's keratin structures of protein molecules. That makes sense, but not really.

Though I still haven't gone under the needle, I do have a wing-sized patch of skin, and I do sing in my ragged way at the blue shapes streaking the sky.