

Dock of the Bay

The day I heard his last song I was in Woolworth's,
13 years old, pacing up and down the aisles.
I can't think of what on earth I was looking for.
The floorboards creaked. Sand dragged under my shoes.
From a bin I lifted a white candle, and scratched
my initial with my thumbnail along the side,
then laid the candle back down with the rest.
Months before, Otis Redding's plane had gone down.
There came news of other deaths, an undeclared war.
The clerk went on shelving blue ceramic angels –
he was keeping an eye on me. The register closed.
I drifted past toy guns, drapes, packages of seed;
here was all available, a nation of goods;
here I thought I'd find what I always wanted.
Another clerk behind a red badge scurried past me.
Over the loudspeakers came the whispering of waves
and the resigned bass line, then Otis singing.
A large, convex mirror fixed high up on the wall
made the whole store look like a world on sale.
I was dreaming of the other coast, the one Otis sang of,
the coast where you arrive when it's all over,
and nothing's going to change. I stood out of sight
and slipped a thin notebook inside my jacket.
Who knew if loneliness would ever leave me alone?
I stepped into the stunned air of the parking lot,
with my blank book, and my American secret safe.