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Cinema Universale

In those days, there were continuous showings;
you simply went to the movies, whenever you liked,
noon to midnight. An usher with a flashlight

and wearing a uniform would walk you down
the aisle, the flashlight forming an ellipse across
the figured carpet just ahead of his feet,

and people would stand up in sequence;
“excuse me,” you were expected to say,
the movie, *in medias res* and Technicolor,

was directly in front of you, and in
that awkward moment, leaning slightly forward,
sliding your feet sideways so that you wouldn’t

step on the toes of people whose fronts your back
was brushing against—“pardon me,” “excuse me”—
trousers, jackets, sweaters, blouse fronts, ties

whispering, you seemed about to fall into it,
the movie, that is, those monumental
faces, a bosom rising, lips drawn up

into a famous pucker, kisses as
real as Monument Valley, the sudden
brightness of bright places flashing all around,

Frank Sinatra and Doris Day, for example,
his cigarette and her smile, and Gig Young,
completely out of his depth, as out of place

as you were, tilting toward them, not yet
part of the audience, a participant of sorts
in the same way someone edging across

a high window ledge participates in air.
Sitting, taking your seat, was like being
pulled back into the shadowed safety

of the ordinary room inside the window,
and the picture became, in short order,
a story, its middle proposing a beginning,

a world of commonplace occurrences in
which Doris Day moved about apparently
unaware that she was Doris Day

and Sinatra was eased into town
like a gunslinger, something only he
and Ethel Barrymore knew from the start,

and loving them both equally, regretting
Gig Young's broken heart, you knew with Ethel
that it would come out badly in the end,

that, in time, song wears away at its singer
as death unsteadies the gunslinger's hand;
how many cigarettes and how many saloons,

how many fingers of red-eye, how many
Dorothy Malones, town after town?
You wait for it, then, her sorrow and his

moment of sacrifice, each ennobling
the other, then sit through the credits,
the newsreel, the previews and the cartoons,

wait for the curtains to be drawn across
the screen, for the opening, rippled there,
first, on velvet, then, as the velvet retracts,

shimmered on a pale, riffling scrim.
And it begins again, the song swelling
as the picture clears, the dense, certain

Sinatra of the fifties, "if you are among
the very young at heart," the sleepy town,
Elmwood, Lynchfield, Tombstone or Vera Cruz,

waiting as green felt awaits the turning cards.
Is he the jack of diamonds or the knave
of hearts, the singer whose liquid song

moves now along the unsuspecting streets.
The opening is what you had imagined,
each character held briefly in the light,

friendship betrayed for love, sense for song.
This is where you came in, so you stand up—
“pardon me,” “excuse me”—lifting yourself

into the moment when her mouth tilts toward his,
moving sideways across their faces, their
brief kiss briefly shadowed by your sleeve.

Outside this Orpheum, where the marquee
jitters above the sidewalk’s random quartz;
you hunch your shoulders against the cold

and move into the continuous city,
streetlights evenly spaced, the first traces
of snow wisping across damp brickwork,

the same snow Sinatra, knowing he was
wrong for Doris Day, drove himself into.
Buses chatter by, like film, their windows passing,

one frame at a time. Lives move along,
each one storied in its own way, each
set of causes briefly joined here, between frayed

pasts and improbable futures, in one moment
as coherent as snowflakes joined in lamplight,
their swirl and drift ordered into bright circles.

Continuous showings continued behind you;
the continuous, causal world went on
framed windows moving their silhouettes

homeward, the squared sidewalk reeling forward,
snowflakes spun like dust mites dancing in arc light.
It was 1954, the year stop signs went

from yellow to red, and the Russians got
the Bomb, and the heart, at least according
to Sinatra, was what mattered most,

the place where love found its home or the place
it threaded its way toward like film
sprocketed, turn after turn, into the light.