

John Doe No. 24

Mary Chapin Carpenter

I was standing on the sidewalk in 1945
In Jacksonville, Illinois
When asked what my name was there came no reply
They said I was a deaf and sightless half wit boy

But Louis was my name, though I could not say it
I was born and raised in New Orleans
My spirit was wild, so I let the river take it
On a barge and a prayer upstream

Well, they searched for a mother
And they searched for a father
And they searched till they searched no more
The doctors put to rest their scientific tests
And they named me 'John Doe No. 24'

And they all shook their heads in pity
For a world so silent and dark
Well, there's no doubt that life's a mystery
But so too is the human heart

And it was my heart's own perfume
When the crepe jasmine bloomed on Rue Morgue Avenue
Though I couldn't hear the bells
Of the streetcars coming by toeing the track I knew

And if I were an old man returning
With my satchel and porkpie hat
I'd hit every jazz joint on Bourbon
And I'd hit everyone on Basin after that

The years kept passing as they passed me around
From one state ward to another
Like I was an orphan shoe from the lost and found
Always missing the other

And they gave me a harp last Christmas
And all the nurses took a dance
But lately I've been growing listless
I've been dreaming again of the past

I'm wandering down to the banks
Of the great Big Muddy where the shotgun houses stand
I am seven years old and I feel my dad
Reach out for my hand

While I drew breath no one missed me
So they won't on the day that I cease
Put a sprig of crepe jasmine with me
To remind me of New Orleans

I was standing on the sidewalk in 1945
In Jacksonville, Illinois