**Dylan and the brick wall – Red River Shore**

*Tell Tale Signs, 2008 (written 1997)*

The title is akin to a Ledbelly song *Red River Blues*, although that is quite a different piece.

But Dylan more than likely had heard that song – and the title it is one of those that just stays in the mind.  There’s even a book called Red River Blues which describes the blues in south east USA.

This is a song that combines lots of traditional themes about wandering, walking away, regrets, loss etc.  In more detail…

* **Lost love** – one of the two fundamental concepts within popular music (the other one is love).
* **The myth of mutual attraction** – that just because I love you, you should love me.  “Why don’t you love me,” cries the man, “when I love you this much and I’d give you everything.”  Reciprocated love is not that easy to find.
* **Endless pining** – I’ve waited for ever, my entire life has been the waiting for this girl.  Sorry old friend, that’s just how it goes.
* **The notion that desiring possession of another is just plain wrong**.  Most of the folk and blues tradition treats the woman as an object that has no feeling.  But in this piece Dylan does reflect in passing that “possession” is not a good desire, although that gets twisted at the end.
* **The sadness much later of not taking advice** – the “if only” songs.  In this song she says, *go away and live the quiet life,* but he can’t and he doesn’t.  But if only he had, had much sweeter life might have been.
* **The hopelessness:** “I’ve had everything the world can offer but not the one thing I wanted more than anything.”
* **The lack of reality.**  The most important thing in my life is unknown to everyone else who was there.   The twist of memory – I remember, it is so real to me, how come they don’t.

“Red River Shore” is a emotional ballad about a quest for love. The narrator loves a woman who captivated him at first glance, the memories of which are dreamlike. In the third verse, Dylan sings, “Well, the dream dried up a long time ago,” adding later, “Well, we’re living in the shadows of a fading past.” The girl from the Red River shore— is she a fantasy or the expression of perfect love? Dylan lets listeners use their own imagination.

In listening to “Red River Shore,” the quality of the song makes us wonder why Dylan excluded it from Time Out of Mind. This Tex-Mex-colored ballad is a great success, and thankfully “Red River Shore” was finally released after stay languishing too long in the shadows.

Dylan famously couldn’t get the song to sound right after several attempts in the studio, and abandoned the idea.  Which can happen to the best of songs.  The aim is not just to write nice words and a good tune, but also to get a good production with the instrumentation available.  Dylan didn’t manage it this time, but even the greatest songwriter of the age can hit a brick wall.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Some of us turn off the lights and we live In the moonlight shooting by Some of us scare ourselves to death in the dark To be where the angels fly Pretty maids all in a row lined up Outside my cabin door I've never wanted any of them wanting me Except the girl from the Red River shore*  *Well, I sat by her side and for a while I tried To make that girl my wife She gave me her best advice and she said "Go home and lead a quiet life." Well, I've been to the east and I've been to the west And I've been out where the black winds roar Somehow, though, I never did get that far With the girl from the Red River shore*  *Well, I knew when I first laid eyes on her I could never be free One look at her and I knew right away She should always be with me Well, the dream dried up a long time ago Don't know where it is anymore True to life, true to me Was the girl from the Red River shore*  *Now I'm wearing the cloak of misery And I've tasted jilted love And the frozen smile upon my face Fits me like a glove But I can't escape from the memory Of the one that I'll always adore All those nights when I lay in the arms Of the girl from the Red River shore*  *Well, we're living in the shadows of a fading past Trapped in the fires of time I've tried not to ever hurt anybody And to stay out of a life of crime And when it's all been said and done I never did know the score One more day is another day away From the girl from the Red River shore* | *Well, I'm a stranger here in a strange land But I know this is where I belong I'll ramble and gamble for the one I love And the hills will give me a song Though nothing looks familiar to me I know I've stayed here before Once, a thousand nights ago With the girl from the Red River shore*  *Well, I went back to see about it once Went back to straighten it out Everybody that I talked to had seen us there Said they didn't know who I was talking about Well, the sun went down on me a long time ago I've had to fall back from the door I wish I could have spent every hour of my life With the girl from the Red River shore*  *Now, I've heard of a guy who lived a long time ago A man full of sorrow and strife Whenever someone around him died and was dead He knew how to bring 'em on back to life Well, I don't know what kind of language he used Or if they do that kind of thing anymore Sometimes I think nobody ever saw me here at all Except the girl from the Red River shore* |