HOW CAN I BE SURE?

The day they met, Elvis walked toward Tom Jones, singing With These Hands: backstage at Paramount, Tom’s own song sung back to him, the first verse of his very best story. All this week, I’ve been hearing a song, lyrics untethered from their melody. It’s Tom’s voice I hear—just a few stray phrases, sung in his rough baritone, drawn through that chest and the cavern of his great head, not to mention pipes, the whole instrument of which the torso and its undulation must be understood to be a part. In Wales, in the workingmen’s clubs where he got his start, he sang the ballads the men loved. The later self-making—shirt frilled open to there, heavy medallion, the frank-to-cartoonish sex—another revision of a self that just wanted to sing forever: on television, in Vegas, to Elvis, and to me, right now, wordless and full-bore, lifting the bridge of this nameless song I cannot place, song that insists, with no apparent reason but to swear to me that he must have sung it. Its melody surges—I wonder if it’s a standard. I sing my slip of song to anyone who will listen, search his catalog, come to admire the raw, flexible voice, the face and body both in youth and in the aged animal. When at last
I find the real singers—another band entirely —the melody is just as I’ve been hearing it: how can I be sure? Vodka martini one two three, cigar between his teeth:

his is the voice of a man who never no never held back when he sang, who sings the song to all its corners until it lifts my very rafters: I trust

him with the song, in his hands I’m made sure of it, the song he makes urgent even if mistaken: Tom’s version is best of all, although he never did record it.
TOO BLUE TO FLY

for as long as it lasted she sang the church sounded big
empty made of matching echoes her close alto
opium avatar whispered right into my ear

but from far off I let myself in the door released
into a low hum bass walking sun blazing
and a blue moon another singer would have made

so many more notes of a whippoorwill how many
more notes I have made of it how many times I
have sung this song hammered the dulcimer

fingered the singing bowls worried the piano
an excess of cymbal an over-instrumented never-ending coda I heard her again last week

her out-of-time unhurry I don’t wish back stolen time
nor the drug of a recording played over and again I
heard her voice waking at breakfast washing at night

it called me yet fifteen years gone
as if field lilies flourished not thinking
of tomorrow and so do I

for Margo Timmins
SAKURA

I’m not sure just how ancient it is, the bassist said of the melody he was about to improvise, but I think it’s about a cherry blossom—

and I remembered it, the song I had learned in sixth grade, my last few months in Japan: our culture lessons, where I learned to count to ten, say arigato and kudasai. I think of that melody played on a koto but also sung, a child voicing each syllable with no vibrato, a flute that enunciates. I have almost nothing left of Japan now—just a few photos, a handful of words, and this song the bassist and pianist begin to play in a little dialogue that does not match exactly, yet somehow does, the bones of the song most evident at the beginning and end, before and after the middle, when the melody swirls, sometimes dissolves out of hearing, into a clamor of polyrhythm and high flown repartee.

The runs and reaches, the percussion, are all well under the pianist’s hands. I watch her, remember a nocturne I learned, the mastery of it hard won, precarious, and when my boyfriend came to me after the recital, guitar in hand, to show me
how he had made Chopin swing. I admit that I recoiled. It seemed insulting, to so alter what was written, so undo

the grace of its rhythms. He held the guitar’s neck in his hand, its body resting against his body.

He had built me a dulcimer once, so I could play Joni Mitchell note for note. After he left, I played the nocturne again and again, trying to unhear what he had done.

The song’s lyrics ask is it mist or is it cloud, blossom a common emblem of drift, the mutable. A piano’s strings only untune after long use or disuse, but the

thirteen strings of the koto stretch over thirteen moveable bridges, allowing the player to adjust the pitches.

The bass must be tuned after each session, or after especially vigorous play. Onstage the bassist holds the belly of his instrument close, facing its head and scroll as if in a close conversation. The song’s melody surfaces again.

Behind the complex sound I hear a lonely plucking of strings. Sakura is said to be a good song for an instrument
with limited range. It’s old but not ancient—in seventeenth century Edo, it was repertoire for beginning koto students. Would it have been better for my nocturne’s rubato to have turned decorous? The two come to an elegant finish.

We spill into the street sparkling with sound, the lamps alive with light, sky wild with stars.
HEAVY METAL

The sound bled from his headphones thrash metal: he knelt in a pew, late afternoon sun pouring particolored and his pallor gleaming: sound blooming around him, but muffled: I glanced back at him from a few pews forward; like Jesus in the paintings of Gethsemane, his arms open, hands open, looking up: he was not well, and the music, if you could call it that, a quiet scream deadened in that high-ceilinged stone room, a sea, churning

❖

that stops when I halt in the ditch

❖

glass-lined cut between the road north and the road south, the motor still going

❖

a buzz at the back of the song, no organ or choir: the boy looked as if he had not slept, he was sweating, the music its own cell and him alone in it:

❖

once after mass I found a felled bird on the plaza north of the church, halved as if with a sharp, swift knife: looked up, no one but me there to see

❖

the sky lifts away, I am drawn up to it, I have not slept, but there’s music for driving when already broken:
if it could be called *song*: we looked back and looked away from his percussion, his making no noise but the uproar at his ear

in which I say something otherbodily, unthought, again and again as if it alone might bind me to myself hurtling away from impact: the truck I hit two times made of what seems to me steel, my fender crushed like a paper cup: I sing I don’t know what words in the capsule of my headlong car, boundless, until I stop in the gully, the car humming, my heart

the priest talks on, as if this noise were the same as the still air, the falling atoms of afternoon light

careening: sun high at its one o’clock traverse, the car breathes, I hum, check my instruments to see if I am well: strangers stand beside their cars wait at the other side to pull me from the wreck.
WHEN THY MIND SHALL BE A MANSION FOR ALL LOVELY FORMS

a house nearly burnt from electrical failure
jackrabbit homestead, fifty dollar claim
cave high in the Sun and Moon mountains
cellars subterranea chambres d’hôtes

one of the nine castles of the Knuckle
built into the mountain dug into the ground
bedsit boarding room flophouse jail
thick glass windows up the lighthouse stairs

the dim motel room at the last light of day
the Nauvoo River, its insect aria
a room a barracks a hospital a foxhole
a house the length of a lodgepole pine

cell made of brick of wood of stone
on the cold island in the cold island house
hermitage cloister berth on a train
a blanket under the stars’ turning dome
BLACK DRESS

fell soft from shoulder to ankle as if only a gloss on the body beneath, the neck a wreath of blossom when girls my age did not wear black because its severity, its knowingness were not appropriate, and so

I coveted it in my friend’s closet, and how she wore it so lightly, as if it had slipped over her head and settled onto her shoulder, fallen to her ankle, her bare feet moving toward a wider world:

and when the bag I brought from America to Ireland falls open, unzipped, every soft black garment spills, each speaking the same tongue, each shirt understanding the velvet midnight discourse the shawl speaks:

clad in them my voice deepens, stiffens, a voice as if soaked first in mordant, then a dyewood, then a solution of copper salts. The color, fast, permanent, falls with finality from shoulder to my shod feet,

vests the somber body in a late medieval style: I look to a horizon I once wanted whole now framed as a door, a renunciation inked, bounded in dark wood.