

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 sparking
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



grass-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.