Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

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“Troubled Waters,” Cat Power

They surround “Kingsport Town” on one side. Unrecognizable on the other side is the Stones’ “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction,” which has no chorus to call it by. The roughness LeRoi Jones ascribes to untutored blues is there in Chan Marshall’s delivery, and she knows it, just like Karen Dalton knew it. They are interlopers and appropriators or genuine sufferers or just good singers, another kind of authenticity to pack with listening hard at the songs. Do you remember me / I remember you quite well, Marshall concludes in “Kingsport Town,” shouting across registers to complete David Bowie’s “Blue Jean” thought,99 before announcing herself as “the devil’s daughter” while she bridges the gap into “Troubled Waters.” She sounds farther off than the previous song, because she must be, as she tells us. She has descended below the surface of the song. She has sunk below the cover. She will drown, nearly as an aside, in that “troubled water.” We barely hear her whenever she confronts the troubled water in which she’ll subside. She tells us again, in case we missed it, because we missed it. That’s all she says, because the song is over. Only after she has drowned does she emerge “Naked if I Want To.” After her “Sweedeedee,” she will disappear in her own “In This Hole,” and that’s all for side one, but it’s not all the trouble on The Covers Record.100

99 That is, to answer his song.
100 “Troubled Waters” is song three on side one. On side two’s third song, “Red Apples,” she goes down to the river in the first line, re-enacting her descent to the devil’s (troubled) waters on the other side. As in a chorus, she repeats herself. She goes down to meet the widow, and she is the devil’s daughter.