Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

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“Summer Days,” Bob Dylan

She said, “You can’t repeat the past.” I said, “You can’t? What do you mean you can’t? Of course you can.”

Who said that? Dylan? Someone he was talking to? MacDonald Carey and Alan Ladd in The Great Gatsby? Someone in a novel?

We repeat ourselves all the time in conversation, sometimes in print. We repeat each other more often in print. When we sing, we sing each other’s lines. When we talk about trouble, we say it or we don’t say it, and when we listen, we want it to go away, or we want to know it’s there. So there’s solace in Trouble Song, whether it’s a summoning or a dispersal. To the extent that trouble is here in song, we feel safe. To the extent it hasn’t been allowed in, we fear its encroachment. Or we’re superstitious, we want to have a good time, and we rely on irony to deliver us from what’s at stake. We light our cigarettes on the fire, look up, and smell our soles.

Trouble is elusive, of course. Of course, along the way, trouble is down the line, on the way, follows us out the door. If we invite the possibility that “trouble” can replace trouble, the “Trouble” Song must already exist. At some limit of (de)stability, this song readmits trouble, as a shy dog taunted turns vicious, or Bloody Mary replaces your face after enough revolutions of the knife in the mirror. For now, let’s bar the door. “Trouble” Song is to be distinguished from Trouble Song. The former is a chant without a reference, a wolfen mascot with foam teeth that houses a vicious boy with an all-American smile. This is trouble-en-abyme, a baby swallowing a nested doll. Try as we might to evacuate the song, to neutralize “trouble,” it grows grotesque in echo. Which is not to say the “Trouble” Song does not (cannot) exist. We must pursue it further into the surface of the song.

5 the relief promised in sharing a burden
6 Speak my name and I appear, Joanna Newsom sings like or as Bloody Mary in “Easy” — or she entreats us to call her, if not by her own name.