Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

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“You Can’t Put Your Arms Around a Memory”

1978. Or now. When is now? The song says here is what is gone, means the opposite of what it says, or says the opposite of what is says. Or it does the opposite of what it asserts. Always did, and certainly does now. Perhaps the song did not achieve its end until Johnny Thunders did the inevitable, and went the way of the singer, if not (always) the song.

*All the smart boys know why.* In the first chorus, we aren’t sure whether he means it until he says *Don’t try.* He doesn’t need to say it again, or we don’t need him to, but we’re grateful for it when he does.

“Can’t Keep My Eyes on You” is the fair-haired sister to this thought.

If you shouldn’t try, you shouldn’t cry. No, these are two imperatives, unrelated. The singer willfully misinterprets these tears, which are not in frustration, not a failed attempt to substantiate memory, to reach for what is not there. They are perhaps tears that acknowledge what the singer knows, that the singer can only know: the singer cannot hear the song. But he can see the tear on the face of the listener, the opening magnified by a drop, the fracture, the loss. The singer can always see the loss. He sings it back, to lose it again.

“Can’t Keep My Eyes on You” is an answer song, an assertion, a manic *Don’t try,* or a *Can’t try,* or a *Why try?* There’s nothing to cry about here, or *Don’t cry* carries an exclamation. This is the flipside to all the smart boys know. It’s *You know I’m true* vs. *You know it’s true.*

Trouble is unspoken, or unspeakable, or unconveyable. You can’t put your arms around it, except that in speaking it, if you can manage to speak it, it’s the most obvious fact in the world. Trouble is self-generating, but it’s also self-negating. To speak trouble is to lose it. Trouble is “Can’t Put Your Arms Around a Memory” and “Can’t Keep My Eyes on You.” It is not-there in its presence. The spoken thing away. The genius¹⁰ in a bottle.