Part Four

BACK IN TROUBLE

You see, ah, trouble down the tracks?
— Thomas Pynchon, Bleeding Edge

the year in which this particular round / of troubles began
— C.D. Wright, One With Others

The song is a séance in which the living and the dead change places until everyone is dead.
— Greil Marcus, “Disappearance and Forgetting”
Return to Trouble, That Lonesome Town

*But “a poetry collection is like a record collection.” (R. Maurer)*

— Donato Mancini

There’s a moment in *Six Feet Under*, after Ruth’s new husband George has refurbished a bomb shelter he discovers on the mortuary property. Ruth finds him there, sitting on the bed, looking up (for once) at her. She asks him what he’s doing in there and he says *I live here now.*¹ I’d look for the scene to check my memory and add detail, but I don’t have to. Can’t. I live here now.

In Trouble. Here in song.

Since I began writing *Trouble Songs* in earnest a few years ago now (nearly seven, at this moment, the day after the day after David Bowie joined the singers who exist in this world as song), this is where I live. I finished Part 3 and told myself and others that *Trouble Songs* was done.² But I never left the lonesome town of Trouble — the town where we are alone together, perhaps happily so, where we share “trouble” if not our troubles.

I no longer look for trouble, but it still finds me. And when it sings to me, when a word stands out in a song I’ve heard a hundred times, I hear it with a queer nostalgia — with what I might call kitsch, as I once tried to define it: nostalgia for something you didn’t experience. Perhaps that’s a definition of the sublime, or at least the devil’s advocacy for the sublime. But I wonder in those moments a light is cast on a lyric I might have known so well: Have I written through a subconscious awareness of this lyric? How long have I heard Trouble Songs, or how long had I heard them before I knew what to call them? If “trouble” wasn’t a word I notice in song, a word that opens a lower door, that

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¹ He practically sings it, so let’s leave off the quotes and italicize as we have done with sung text.

² always or often with the asterisk that I might write another part some day
rattles bones, that drops a shadow over the anatomical heart or places a black felt cutout heart over it, if I didn’t hear dark wings flapping in those two syllables, I would never have ended up in Trouble.

I am where I do not want to leave. Which is maybe a way of thinking about the world, like it or not.

So how do you come back to Trouble when you never left? And how do you go on?

I don’t mean that last sentence as a plea to the devil or the muse. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t know where I might be headed.

What happened is Part 3 ended and the road of Part 4 was unclear(ed) or indiscernible. I hadn’t even found the wood. But in the meanwhile, as I imagined maybe it was done, for now or forever: I kept hearing “trouble,” not so much as something I’d taken with me as something that took me with it.

So there’s maybe I should have written about that, and there’s why didn’t I hear that “trouble” before, and there’s the purgatory of the end without an end to trouble. The forest without the trees.

And there’s I live here now.

So here’s what I propose: Go down with me into the songs that find us. For what appears to me as well appears to you, as Whitman, that conflicted character, once sort of said. He too is the ghost — and the demon — of America. Robert Johnson also walked with the devil, then sang songs of himself that draw us

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3 nor to the devil muse
4 down, down, down, a katabasic chorus of the soon-enough dead
5 Ask poet CAConrad, who’s made a compelling case for Whitman the racist poster boy for (or voice and witness to) America’s troubled foundation. See “From Whitman to Walmart” online at Harriet, poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2015/06/from-whitman-to-walmart.
in, whether or not we can repeat after him: *I’m gonna beat my woman / Until I get satisfied.*

There’s nothing to catch up with, just as there’s no place to run when the body is where the self, however it is constructed, resides. We live here now.

And sure, *here* is a record room, an echoing hall that is also a bomb shelter, in and out of the world, contingent. We escape to ourselves, never from ourselves.

So as “trouble” finds me, I’ll write these Trouble Songs. As I will and as I won’t — which is to say I won’t make a corn-whiskey-filled prison of *Trouble Songs.* But this might open a few more doors — in the floor, the ceiling, or one of the walls. C’mon in.

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6 Gil Scott-Heron’s evasion — *I’m gonna see my woman* — on his “Me and the Devil Blues” adaptation for his last album, *I’m New Here,* tries to provide an exit, or access to the genius adjacent the horror of another time (and another exchange of oppression). If we’re lucky, we’ll horrify the future in turn, with our own meanness, or own blind eyes, our own willingness to go there.

7 Difficult usage, here: If Trouble Song refers to an individual song that fits this classification, and *Trouble Songs* refers to these collected writings about Trouble Songs, and individual chapters may also be seen as Trouble Songs, how do we treat this term when it refers to a selection of Trouble Songs but not the whole collection? And how’s there a whole when the whole is growing?

8 Datestamp: as I wrote this sentence, I noticed Bowie’s breathsound on the opening musical section of ★’s second track, “’Tis a Pity She Was a Whore.” I’d noticed it before, when he was still breathing, but now I hear it differently, as the recorded breath, the promise that its counterpart will quiet. Now also the titular gallows humor is apparent, and Bowie is himself the erstwhile whore: *’Tis my fate I suppose.* And/or “the phantasm that the mechanical reproduction of the silenced voice emits,” as Fred Moten conjures it (*In the Break* 118)