Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

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The End of Trouble

If trouble is inevitable as death is inevitable, if death is the only release from trouble, and if we wish to be free from trouble, why not end it all?

But this would be to make life a problem with a solution. Trouble has no solution, as death is not a solution to life, but an end to it.

In Notes on Suicide, Simon Critchley considers the possibility, via downbeat philosopher E.M. Cioran, that suicide is an optimistic act committed by optimists who can no longer function in the world as optimists. In The Trouble With Being Born, via Critchley, Cioran advises those who come to him with suicidal intentions, “What’s your rush? You can kill yourself any time” (quoted in Critchley, 72–73).

And here’s the crux (and precipice) for troubled singer/listeners: This song is the end. And there’s the paradox of the Trouble Song. It’s the end that stops ending, and starts again. The last song is the song before, forever until the last song we hear, or sing.

You can kill yourself any time. The Trouble Song puts off all kinds of death, by inviting all kinds of trouble. Refrain: Life may run out on us, but we have time for one last song. The dead hear no more songs, though they sing. So the singer/listener becomes the twice disembodied singer—once by memory or recording, once by separation of body and spirit. Those of us who remain in the flesh sing and listen to deaf ghosts. Our troubles are not the same though we share the song, which has come all this way, through time and space, through myth and blame, to deliver us.

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72 Trouble, after all, is not another word for death, even as death is the ultimate trouble.