COURSEPACK

**POETRY & MUSIC**

Week 6

Too Much of Nothing from ‘The Basement Tapes’ (1967) by Bob Dylan

Now, too much of nothing

Can make a man feel ill at ease

One man’s temper might rise

While another man’s temper might freeze

In the day of confession

We cannot mock a soul

Oh, when there’s too much of nothing

No one has control

Say hello to Valerie

Say hello to Vivian

Send them all my salary

On the waters of oblivion

Too much of nothing

Can make a man abuse a king

He can walk the streets and boast like most

But he wouldn’t know a thing

Now, it’s all been done before

It’s all been written in the book

But when there’s too much of nothing

Nobody should look

Say hello to Valerie

Say hello to Vivian

Send them all my salary

On the waters of oblivion

Too much of nothing

Can turn a man into a liar

It can cause one man to sleep on nails

And another man to eat fire

Ev’rybody’s doin’ somethin’

I heard it in a dream

But when there’s too much of nothing

It just makes a fella mean

Say hello to Valerie

Say hello to Vivian

Send them all my salary

On the waters of oblivion

Wikipedia: One of the most haunting themes of ‘The Basement Tapes’ is an apprehension of the void. [Critic Robert] Shelton hears in this song an echo of the bald statement that Lear makes to his daughter Cordelia, "Nothing will come of nothing" (act I, scene 1). [Greil] Marcus asserts that this was one of the songs recorded at the end of "the basement summer" in August or September 1967. He writes that these songs "are taken slowly, with crying voices. Dylan’s voice is high and constantly bending, carried forward not by rhythm or by melody but by the discovery of the true terrain of the songs as they’re sung."

Whether by accident or design, the two women named in the chorus share the names of the two wives of the major 20th-century poet T. S. Eliot.

Daydreams for Allen Ginsberg by Jack Kerouac

I lie on my back at midnight

hearing the marvelous strange chime

of the clocks, and know it's mid-

night and in that instant the whole

world swims into sight for me

in the form of beautiful swarm-

ing m u t t a worlds-

everything is happening, shining

Buhudda-lands, *bhuti*

blazing in faith, I know I'm

forever right & all's I got to

do (as I hear the ordinary

extant voices of ladies talking

in some kitchen at midnight

oilcloth cups of cocoa

cardore to mump the

rinnegain in his

darlin drain-) i will write

it, all the talk of the world

everywhere in this morning, leav-

ing open parentheses sections

for my own accompanying inner

thoughts-with roars of me

all brain-all world

roaring-vibrating-I put

it down, swiftly, 1,000 words

(of pages) compressed into one second

of time-I'll be long

robed & long gold haired in

the famous Greek afternoon

of some Greek City

Fame Immortal & they'll

have to find me where they find

the t h n u p f t of my

shroud bags flying

flag yagging Lucien

Midnight back in their

mouths-Gore Vidal'll

be amazed, annoyed—

my words'll be writ in gold

& preserved in libraries like

Finnegans Wake & Visions of Neal

A few choruses from Kerouac’s Mexico City Blues (1959):

1st Chorus

Butte Magic of Ignorance

Butte Magic

Is the same as no-Butte

All one light

Old Rough Roads

One High Iron

Mainway

Denver is the same

'The guy I was with his uncle was

the govornor of Wyoming'

'Course he paid me back'

Ten Days

Two Weeks

Stock and Joint

'Was an old crook anyway'

The same voice on the same ship

The Supreme Vehicle

S.S. Excalibur

Maynard

Mainline

Mountain

M erudvhaga

Mersion of Missy

4th Chorus

Roosevelt was worth 6, 7 million dollars

He was Tight

Frog waits

Till poor fly

Flies by

And then they got him

The pool of clear rocks

Covered with vegetable scum

Covered the rocks

Clear the pool

Covered the warm surface

Covered the lotus

Dusted the watermelon flower

Aerial the Pad

Clean queer the clear

blue water

AND THEN THEY GOT HIM

The Oil of the Olive

Bittersweet taffies

Bittersweet cabbage

Cabbage soup made right

A hunk a grass

Sauerkraut let work

in a big barrel

Stunk but Good

10th Chorus

The great hanging weak teat of India

on the map

The Fingernail of Malaya

The Wall of China

The Korea Ti-Pousse Thumb

The Salamander Japan

the Okinawa Moon Spot

The Pacific

The Back of Hawaiian Mountains

coconuts

Kines, balconies, Ah Tarzan—

And D W Griffith

the great American Director

Strolling down disgruntled

Hollywood Lane

— to toot Nebraska,

Indian Village New York,

Atlantis, Rome,

Peleus and Melisander,

And

swans of Balls

Spots of foam on the ocean

113th Chorus

Got up and dressed up

 and went out & got laid

Then died and got buried

 in a coffin in the grave,

Man—

 Yet everything is perfect,

Because it is empty,

Because it is perfect

 with emptiness,

Because it's not even happening.

Everything

Is Ignorant of its own emptiness—

Anger

Doesn't like to be reminded of fits—

You start with the Teaching

 Inscrutable of the Diamond

And end with it, your goal

 is your startingplace,

No race was run, no walk

 of prophetic toenails

Across Arabies of hot

 meaning—you just

 numbly don't get there

127th Chorus

Nobody knows the other side

 of my house,

My corner where I was born,

 dusty guitars

Of my tired little street where

 with little feet

I beetled and I wheedled

 with my sisters

And waited for afternoon sunfall

 call a kids

And ma's to bring me back

 to supper mainline

Hum washing line tortillas

 and beans,

That Honey Pure land,

 of Mominu,

Where I lived a myriad

 kotis of millions

Of incalculable

 be-aeons ago

When white while joyous

 was also

Center of lake of light

149th Chorus

I keep falling in love

with my mother,

I dont want to hurt her

--Of all people to hurt.

Every time I see her

she's grown older

But her uniform always

amazes me

For its Dutch simplicity

And the Doll she is,

The doll-like way

she stands

Bowlegged in my dreams,

Waiting to serve me.

And I am only an Apache

Smoking Hashi

In old Cabashy

By the Lamp

211th Chorus

The wheel of the quivering meat

                        conception

Turns in the void expelling human beings,

Pigs, turtles, frogs, insects, nits,

Mice, lice, lizards, rats, roan

Racinghorses, poxy bucolic pigtics,

Horrible unnameable lice of vultures,

Murderous attacking dog-armies

Of Africa, Rhinos roaming in the

                        jungle,

Vast boars and huge gigantic bull

Elephants, rams, eagles, condors,

Pones and Porcupines and Pills—

All the endless conception of living

                        beings

Gnashing everywhere in Consciousness

Throughout the ten directions of space

Occupying all the quarters in & out,

From supermicroscopic no-bug

To huge Galaxy Lightyear Bowell

Illuminating the sky of one Mind—

    *Poor!* I wish I was free

    of that slaving meat wheel

    and safe in heaven dead.

Kaddish, Part I

by Allen Ginsberg (he reads it here: **http://vimeo.com/24741966**)

For Naomi Ginsberg, 1894-1956

Strange now to think of you, gone without corsets & eyes, while I walk on

 the sunny pavement of Greenwich Village.

downtown Manhattan, clear winter noon, and I've been up all night, talking,

 talking, reading the Kaddish aloud, listening to Ray Charles blues

 shout blind on the phonograph

the rhythm the rhythm--and your memory in my head three years after--

 And read Adonais' last triumphant stanzas aloud--wept, realizing

 how we suffer--

And how Death is that remedy all singers dream of, sing, remember,

 prophesy as in the Hebrew Anthem, or the Buddhist Book of An-

 swers--and my own imagination of a withered leaf--at dawn--

Dreaming back thru life, Your time--and mine accelerating toward Apoca-

 lypse,

the final moment--the flower burning in the Day--and what comes after,

looking back on the mind itself that saw an American city

a flash away, and the great dream of Me or China, or you and a phantom

 Russia, or a crumpled bed that never existed--

like a poem in the dark--escaped back to Oblivion--

No more to say, and nothing to weep for but the Beings in the Dream,

 trapped in its disappearance,

sighing, screaming with it, buying and selling pieces of phantom, worship-

 ping each other,

worshipping the God included in it all--longing or inevitability?--while it

 lasts, a Vision--anything more?

It leaps about me, as I go out and walk the street, look back over my shoulder,

 Seventh Avenue, the battlements of window office buildings shoul-

 dering each other high, under a cloud, tall as the sky an instant--and

 the sky above--an old blue place.

or down the Avenue to the south, to--as I walk toward the Lower East Side

 --where you walked 50 years ago, little girl--from Russia, eating the

 first poisonous tomatoes of America frightened on the dock

then struggling in the crowds of Orchard Street toward what?--toward

 Newark--

toward candy store, first home-made sodas of the century, hand-churned ice

 cream in backroom on musty brownfloor boards--

Toward education marriage nervous breakdown, operation, teaching school,

 and learning to be mad, in a dream--what is this life?

Toward the Key in the window--and the great Key lays its head of light

 on top of Manhattan, and over the floor, and lays down on the

 sidewalk--in a single vast beam, moving, as I walk down First toward

 the Yiddish Theater--and the place of poverty

you knew, and I know, but without caring now--Strange to have moved

 thru Paterson, and the West, and Europe and here again,

with the cries of Spaniards now in the doorstops doors and dark boys on

 the street, fire escapes old as you

--Tho you're not old now, that's left here with me--

Myself, anyhow, maybe as old as the universe--and I guess that dies with

 us--enough to cancel all that comes--What came is gone forever

 every time--

That's good! That leaves it open for no regret--no fear radiators, lacklove,

 torture even toothache in the end--

Though while it comes it is a lion that eats the soul--and the lamb, the soul,

 in us, alas, offering itself in sacrifice to change's fierce hunger--hair

 and teeth--and the roar of bonepain, skull bare, break rib, rot-skin,

 braintricked Implacability.

Ai! ai! we do worse! We are in a fix! And you're out, Death let you out,

 Death had the Mercy, you're done with your century, done with

 God, done with the path thru it--Done with yourself at last--Pure

 --Back to the Babe dark before your Father, before us all--before the

 world--

There, rest. No more suffering for you. I know where you've gone, it's good.

No more flowers in the summer fields of New York, no joy now, no more

 fear of Louis,

and no more of his sweetness and glasses, his high school decades, debts,

 loves, frightened telephone calls, conception beds, relatives, hands--

No more of sister Elanor,--she gone before you--we kept it secret you

 killed her--or she killed herself to bear with you--an arthritic heart

 --But Death's killed you both--No matter--

Nor your memory of your mother, 1915 tears in silent movies weeks and

 weeks--forgetting, agrieve watching Marie Dressler address human-

 ity, Chaplin dance in youth,

or Boris Godunov, Chaliapin's at the Met, halling his voice of a weeping Czar

 --by standing room with Elanor & Max--watching also the Capital

 ists take seats in Orchestra, white furs, diamonds,

with the YPSL's hitch-hiking thru Pennsylvania, in black baggy gym skirts

 pants, photograph of 4 girls holding each other round the waist, and

 laughing eye, too coy, virginal solitude of 1920

all girls grown old, or dead now, and that long hair in the grave--lucky to

 have husbands later--

You made it--I came too--Eugene my brother before (still grieving now and

 will gream on to his last stiff hand, as he goes thru his cancer--or kill

 --later perhaps--soon he will think--)

And it's the last moment I remember, which I see them all, thru myself, now

 --tho not you

I didn't foresee what you felt--what more hideous gape of bad mouth came

 first--to you--and were you prepared?

To go where? In that Dark--that--in that God? a radiance? A Lord in the

 Void? Like an eye in the black cloud in a dream? Adonoi at last, with

 you?

Beyond my remembrance! Incapable to guess! Not merely the yellow skull

 in the grave, or a box of worm dust, and a stained ribbon--Deaths-

 head with Halo? can you believe it?

Is it only the sun that shines once for the mind, only the flash of existence,

 than none ever was?

Nothing beyond what we have--what you had--that so pitiful--yet Tri-

 umph,

to have been here, and changed, like a tree, broken, or flower--fed to the

 ground--but made, with its petals, colored, thinking Great Universe,

 shaken, cut in the head, leaf stript, hid in an egg crate hospital, cloth

 wrapped, sore--freaked in the moon brain, Naughtless.

No flower like that flower, which knew itself in the garden, and fought the

 knife--lost

Cut down by an idiot Snowman's icy--even in the Spring--strange ghost

 thought some--Death--Sharp icicle in his hand--crowned with old

 roses--a dog for his eyes--cock of a sweatshop--heart of electric

 irons.

All the accumulations of life, that wear us out--clocks, bodies, consciousness,

 shoes, breasts--begotten sons--your Communism--'Paranoia' into

 hospitals.

You once kicked Elanor in the leg, she died of heart failure later. You of

 stroke. Asleep? within a year, the two of you, sisters in death. Is

 Elanor happy?

Max grieves alive in an office on Lower Broadway, lone large mustache over

 midnight Accountings, not sure. His life passes--as he sees--and

 what does he doubt now? Still dream of making money, or that might

 have made money, hired nurse, had children, found even your Im-

 mortality, Naomi?

I'll see him soon. Now I've got to cut through to talk to you as I didn't

 when you had a mouth.

Forever. And we're bound for that, Forever like Emily Dickinson's horses

 --headed to the End.

They know the way--These Steeds--run faster than we think--it's our own

 life they cross--and take with them.

 Magnificent, mourned no more, marred of heart, mind behind, mar-

ried dreamed, mortal changed--Ass and face done with murder.

 In the world, given, flower maddened, made no Utopia, shut under

pine, almed in Earth, blamed in Lone, Jehovah, accept.

 Nameless, One Faced, Forever beyond me, beginningless, endless,

Father in death. Tho I am not there for this Prophecy, I am unmarried, I'm

hymnless, I'm Heavenless, headless in blisshood I would still adore

 Thee, Heaven, after Death, only One blessed in Nothingness, not

light or darkness, Dayless Eternity--

 Take this, this Psalm, from me, burst from my hand in a day, some

of my Time, now given to Nothing--to praise Thee--But Death

 This is the end, the redemption from Wilderness, way for the Won-

derer, House sought for All, black handkerchief washed clean by weeping

--page beyond Psalm--Last change of mine and Naomi--to God's perfect

Darkness--Death, stay thy phantoms!

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Note, by Levi Asher **http://www.litkicks.com/Kaddish#.URtkskJp1xc**

*Naomi Ginsberg died on June 9, 1956. Ginsberg was living in Berkeley and enjoying the exciting first phase of his literary celebrity, having introduced Howl to the world a year earlier. He'd just fallen in love with Peter Orlovsky and must have felt a million miles away from the hopeless, lonely rooms of the mental hospitals where his mother had lived out her last years.*

*He missed the funeral, and later learned that the Kaddish, or Jewish prayer for the dead, had not been read because too few men had been present (according to traditional Jewish law, at least ten men, a minyan, must be present for certain services to be performed). Two years later, in November 1958, Ginsberg was visiting his friend Zev Putterman. After an evening of Ray Charles records and drugs Ginsberg told his friend about his mother's death, and about how the Kaddish had not been read. Putterman had a copy of the prayer in his apartment, and the two of them performed the ceremony themselves, two years too late. Ginsberg went back to his apartment, sat at his desk and began writing.*

Desolation Row by Bob Dylan (1965)

They’re selling postcards of the hanging

They’re painting the passports brown

The beauty parlor is filled with sailors

The circus is in town

Here comes the blind commissioner

They’ve got him in a trance

One hand is tied to the tight-rope walker

The other is in his pants

And the riot squad they’re restless

They need somewhere to go

As lady and I look out tonight

From desolation row

Cinderella, she seems so easy

It takes one to know one, she smiles

And puts her hands into her back pockets

Bette Davis style

And in comes Romeo, he’s moaning

"You belong to me I believe"

And someone turns and says to him

"My friend you'd better leave"

And the only sound that’s left

After the ambulances go

Is Cinderella sweeping up

On desolation row

Now the moon is almost hidden

The stars they're just pretending to hide

The fortunetelling lady

Has even taken all her things inside

All except for Cain and Abel

And the hunchback of Notre Dame

Everyone is makin' love

Or else expecting rain

And the good Samaritan, he’s dressing

He’s getting ready for the show

He’s going to the carnival tonight

On desolation row

Ophelia, she’s ’neath the window

For her I feel so afraid

On her twenty-second birthday

She already is an old maid

Now to her, death is quite romantic

She wears an iron vest

Her profession is her religion

Her sin is her lifelessness

And though her eyes are fixed upon

Noah’s great rainbow

She spends her time peeking

Into desolation row

Einstein, disguised as Robin Hood

With his memories in a trunk

Passed this way an hour ago

With his friend, some jealous monk

Now he looked so immaculately frightful

As he bummed his cigarette

Then he went off sniffing drainpipes

And reciting the alphabet

You would not think to look at him

But he was famous long ago

For playing the electric violin

On desolation row

Dr. Filth, he keeps his world

Locked inside of his leather cup

But all his sexless patients

They’re trying to blow it up

Now his nurse, some local loser

She’s in charge of the cyanide hole

She also keeps the cards that read

"Have mercy on his soul"

They all play on the penny whistle

You can hear them blow

If you lean your head out far enough

From desolation row

Across the street they’ve nailed the curtains

They’re getting ready for the feast

The phantom of the opera

In a perfect image of a priest

They’re spoon feeding Casanova

To get him to feel more assured

Then they’ll kill him with self-confidence

After poisoning him with words

And the phantom shouts to skinny girls

"Get outta here if you don’t know

Casanova he's just being punished for going

To desolation row"

Now at midnight all the agents

And the superhuman crew

Come out and round up everyone

That knows more than they do

Then they bring them to the factory

Where the heart attack machine

Is strapped across their shoulders

And then the kerosene

Is brought down from the castles

By insurance men who go

Check to see that no one is escaping

To desolation row

Praise be to Nero’s Neptune

The Titanic sails at dawn

And everybody’s shouting

"Which side are you on?"

And Ezra Pound and T.S. Elliott

Fighting in the captain’s tower

While Calypso's singers laugh at them

And fishermen hold flowers

Between the windows of the sea

Where lovely mermaids flow

And nobody has to think too much

About desolation row

Yes, I received your letter yesterday

About the time the door knob broke

When you asked me how I was doing

Was that some kind of joke?

All these people that you mention

Yes, I know them, they’re quite lame

I had to rearrange their faces

And give them all another name

Right now I cannot read too well

Don’t send me no more letters, no

Not unless you mail them

From desolation row

excerpts from *Bob Dylan in America*, by Sean Wilentz

“Desolation Row” presents a kind of carnival (the critic Christopher Ricks calls it a “masque”) of fragments, shards of a civilization that has gone to pieces, in a modernist tradition that runs from Eliot’s Waste Land to Ginsberg’s “Howl.” Curious listeners have had a field day claiming particular references in every line, beginning with the very first, “They’re selling postcards of the hanging.” Clearly, some would have it, this alludes to the Hanged Man tarot card that turns up in the opening section of The Waste Land; not at all, others retort, it’s about a notorious lynching that occurred in Dylan’s birthplace, Duluth, in 1920, when his father was just a boy, and when, indeed, postcards of the two hanged blacks were made and sold as souvenirs. Who knows? With its repeated images of drowning and the sea—in references to the Titanic, Shakespeare’s Ophelia, Nero’s Neptune, Noah’s ark and the great rainbow—the song almost certainly echoes The Waste Land’s repeated invocations of death by water. But no matter. Here on “Desolation Row” (conceivably a Beat-influenced updating of Steinbeck’s Cannery Row) it is enough to see the characters from the Bible, Shakespeare, folktales, the circus, and Victor Hugo, most of them doomed, as well as Albert Einstein disguised as a noble outlaw, sniffing drainpipes and reciting the alphabet—strange sights and sounds, but all too real, everything a symbol of itself, viewed by the singer and his Lady looking out on it all, detached, from inside Desolation Row.

In all of its strangeness, the song mocks orthodoxies and confining loyalties of every kind—loyalties to religion, sex, science, romance, politics, medicine, money—which the singer has rejected. The least mysterious verse (although it is mysterious enough) comes next to last. Crammed aboard the damned Titanic, the people are oblivious to what is happening; instead, they shout an old reliable left-wing folkie tune (made popular by the Weavers), “Which Side Are You On?” T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, respectively the author and the editor of The Waste Land, struggle for command of the ship; but it is all a laugh to the calypso singers; and down beneath the dreamlike sea where lovely mermaids flow, and where (simple) fishermen hold (simple) flowers, thoughts of Desolation Row are unnecessary. Neither strait-minded politics nor modernist high art will save the ship from crashing and going down.

…by the time Dylan recorded “Desolation Row,” he had found his way out of the limitations of the folk revival, having reawakened to Beat literary practice and sensibilities and absorbed them into his electrified music. He had thereby completed (according to Ginsberg himself) a merger of poetry and song that Ezra Pound had foreseen as modernism’s future. Thereafter, it would be Ginsberg who sought artistic enlightenment from Dylan, turning his long-line verse into musical lyrics, and at times even becoming—as he did during the Rolling Thunder Revue tour of 1975—the willing mascot he had initially feared he might become. At the beginning of the 1970s, Ginsberg persuaded Dylan to collaborate on some studio recordings, the best of which, “September on Jessore Road,” would not be released until 1994, a few years before Ginsberg’s death. Finally, Ginsberg would partially fulfill what one punk rock musician from the 1980s called his firm desire “to be a rock star,” by working with, among others, Joe Strummer of the Clash and Paul McCartney.

Lo and Behold from ‘The Basement Tapes’ by Bob Dylan (1967)

I pulled out for San Anton’

I never felt so good

My woman said she’d meet me there

And of course, I knew she would

The coachman, he hit me for my hook

And he asked me my name

I give it to him right away

Then I hung my head in shame

Lo and behold! Lo and behold!

Lookin’ for my lo and behold

Get me outa here, my dear man!

I come into Pittsburgh

At six-thirty flat

I found myself a vacant seat

An’ I put down my hat

“What’s the matter, Molly, dear

What’s the matter with your mound?”

“What’s it to ya, Moby Dick?

This is chicken town!”

Lo and behold! Lo and behold!

Lookin’ for my lo and behold

Get me outa here, my dear man!

I bought my girl

A herd of moose

One she could call her own

Well, she came out the very next day

To see where they had flown

I’m goin’ down to Tennessee

Get me a truck ‘r somethin’

Gonna save my money and rip it up!

Lo and behold! Lo and behold!

Lookin’ for my lo and behold

Get me outa here, my dear man!

Now, I come in on a Ferris wheel

An’ boys, I sure was slick

I come in like a ton of bricks

Laid a few tricks on ’em

Goin’ back to Pittsburgh

Count up to thirty

Round that horn and ride that herd

Gonna thread up!

Lo and behold! Lo and behold!

Lookin’ for my lo and behold

Get me outa here, my dear man!

Ode to Billie Joe by Bobbie Gentry

It was the third of June, another sleepy, dusty Delta day

I was out choppin' cotton and my brother was balin' hay

And at dinner time we stopped and walked back to the house to eat

And Mama hollered out the back door "y'all remember to wipe your feet"

And then she said "I got some news this mornin' from Choctaw Ridge"

"Today Billie Joe MacAllister jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge"

And Papa said to Mama as he passed around the blackeyed peas

"Well, Billie Joe never had a lick of sense, pass the biscuits, please"

"There's five more acres in the lower forty I've got to plow"

And Mama said it was shame about Billie Joe, anyhow

Seems like nothin' ever comes to no good up on Choctaw Ridge

And now Billie Joe MacAllister's jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge

And Brother said he recollected when he and Tom and Billie Joe

Put a frog down my back at the Carroll County picture show

And wasn't I talkin' to him after church last Sunday night?

"I'll have another piece of apple pie, you know it don't seem right"

"I saw him at the sawmill yesterday on Choctaw Ridge"

"And now you tell me Billie Joe's jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge"

And Mama said to me "Child, what's happened to your appetite?"

"I've been cookin' all morning and you haven't touched a single bite"

"That nice young preacher, Brother Taylor, dropped by today"

"Said he'd be pleased to have dinner on Sunday, oh, by the way"

"He said he saw a girl that looked a lot like you up on Choctaw Ridge"

"And she and Billie Joe was throwing somethin' off the Tallahatchie Bridge"

A year has come 'n' gone since we heard the news 'bout Billie Joe

And Brother married Becky Thompson, they bought a store in Tupelo

There was a virus going 'round, Papa caught it and he died last Spring

And now Mama doesn't seem to wanna do much of anything

And me, I spend a lot of time pickin' flowers up on Choctaw Ridge

And drop them into the muddy water off the Tallahatchie Bridge

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Bobbie Gentry’s “Ode To Billie Joe” by Bill DeMain (article from the “Performing Songwriter” website: **http://performingsongwriter.com/bobbie-gentry-ode-billie-joe/**)

In August 1967, Lyndon Johnson announced that he was sending 45,000 more troops to Vietnam. Black power advocate Stokely Carmichael called for violent revolution in the streets. Beatles manager Brian Epstein died from an overdose of sleeping pills. But around water coolers, the hot topic was what Billie Joe McAllister and his girlfriend threw off the Tallahatchie Bridge.

The mystery created by Bobbie Gentry in her debut single “Ode To Billie Joe” cast a spell over the entire country. Set to a backing of spare acoustic guitar chords and atmospheric strings, Gentry’s sensual, Southern-fried voice relates the story of two Mississippi teenage lovers who share a dark secret that eventually leads to the boy’s suicide. And over 40 years later, despite cinematic details in the song’s lyric, we still don’t know exactly what happened up there on Choctaw Ridge.

“Ode” was recorded on July 10, 1967 at Studio C in the Capitol tower. Accompanying herself on guitar, Bobbie nailed a keeper take in 40 minutes. Arranger Jimmie Haskell told MOJO, “I asked Kelly, ‘What do you want me to do?’ He said, ‘Just put some strings on it so we won’t be embarrassed. No one will ever hear it anyway.’ The song sounded to me like a movie—those wonderful lyrics. I had a small group of strings—two cellos and four violins to fit her guitar-playing. I was branching out in my own head for the first time, creating something that I liked because we thought no one was ever gonna hear it.”

It sounded like nothing else on the radio, Gentry’s husky voice inviting listeners into a world that was as dark and exotic as a Flannery O’Connor story. Not long after the song’s debut, the water cooler talk started.

As Gentry told Fred Bronson, “The song is sort of a study in unconscious cruelty. But everybody seems more concerned with what was thrown off the bridge than they are with the thoughtlessness of the people expressed in the song. What was thrown off the bridge really isn’t that important.

“Everybody has a different guess about what was thrown off the bridge—flowers, a ring, even a baby. Anyone who hears the song can think what they want, but the real message of the song, if there must be a message, revolves around the nonchalant way the family talks about the suicide. They sit there eating their peas and apple pie and talking, without even realizing that Billie Joe’s girlfriend is sitting at the table, a member of the family.”

In its first week of release, “Ode” sold 750,000 copies, knocking “All You Need Is Love” out of the top spot on the Billboard chart. It stayed there for four weeks. The song won Gentry three Grammy Awards, including Best New Artist (she was the first Country artist to ever win in this category).

The enigma of her best-known song is nothing compared to that of Bobbie Gentry herself. In the early ’70s, she was riding high—headlining in Vegas, duetting with Glen Campbell on several hits, hosting her own TV series. Then around 1975, after contributing music to a movie based on “Ode,” she simply checked out. She has not been heard from in over 35 years. All requests for interviews, recordings and performances have been denied. She is said to be living in the Los Angeles area.

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Clothesline Saga from ‘The Basement Tapes’ by Bob Dylan (1967)

After a while we took in the clothes

Nobody said very much

Just some old wild shirts and a couple pairs of pants

Which nobody really wanted to touch

Mama come in and picked up a book

An’ Papa asked her what it was

Someone else asked, “What do you care?”

Papa said, “Well, just because”

Then they started to take back their clothes

Hang ’em on the line

It was January the thirtieth

And everybody was feelin’ fine

The next day everybody got up

Seein’ if the clothes were dry

The dogs were barking, a neighbor passed

Mama, of course, she said, “Hi!”

“Have you heard the news?” he said, with a grin

“The Vice-President’s gone mad!”

“Where?” “Downtown.” “When?” “Last night”

“Hmm, say, that’s too bad!”

“Well, there’s nothin’ we can do about it,” said the neighbor

“It’s just somethin’ we’re gonna have to forget”

“Yes, I guess so,” said Ma

Then she asked me if the clothes was still wet

I reached up, touched my shirt

And the neighbor said, “Are those clothes yours?”

I said, “Some of ’em, not all of ’em”

He said, “Ya always help out around here with the chores?”

I said, “Sometime, not all the time”

Then my neighbor, he blew his nose

Just as Papa yelled outside

“Mama wants you t’ come back in the house and bring them clothes”

Well, I just do what I’m told

So, I did it, of course

I went back in the house and Mama met me

And then I shut all the doors

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Lenny Bruce, by Bob Dylan

Lenny Bruce is dead but his spirit lives on and on

Never did get any Golden Globe award, never made it to Synanon

He was an outlaw, that’s for sure

More of an outlaw than you ever were

Lenny Bruce is gone but his spirit’s livin’ on and on

Maybe he had some problems, maybe some things that he couldn’t work out

But he sure was funny and he sure told the truth and he knew what he was talkin’ about

Never robbed any churches nor cut off any babies’ heads

He just took the folks in high places and he shined a light in their beds

He’s on some other shore, he didn’t wanna live anymore

Lenny Bruce is dead but he didn’t commit any crime

He just had the insight to rip off the lid before its time

I rode with him in a taxi once

Only for a mile and a half, seemed like it took a couple of months

Lenny Bruce moved on and like the ones that killed him, gone

They said that he was sick ’cause he didn’t play by the rules

He just showed the wise men of his day to be nothing more than fools

They stamped him and they labeled him like they do with pants and shirts

He fought a war on a battlefield where every victory hurts

Lenny Bruce was bad, he was the brother that you never had

Jack Kerouac’s Rules for Spontaneous Prose, from"Belief & Technique For Modern Prose: List of Essentials"

from a 1958 letter to Don Allen, in *Heaven & Other Poems*, Grey Fox Press, 1958

1. Scribbled secret notebooks, and wild typewritten pages, for yr own joy

 2. Submissive to everything, open, listening

 3. Try never get drunk outside yr own house

 4. Be in love with yr life

 5. Something that you feel will find its own form

 6. Be crazy dumbsaint of the mind

 7. Blow as deep as you want to blow

 8. Write what you want bottomless from bottom of the mind

 9. The unspeakable visions of the individual

 10. No time for poetry but exactly what is

 11. Visionary tics shivering in the chest

 12. In tranced fixation dreaming upon object before you

 13. Remove literary, grammatical and syntactical inhibition

 14. Like Proust be an old teahead of time

 15. Telling the true story of the world in interior monolog

 16. The jewel center of interest is the eye within the eye

 17. Write in recollection and amazement for yourself

 18. Work from pithy middle eye out, swimming in language sea

 19. Accept loss forever

 20. Believe in the holy contour of life

 21. Struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind

 22. Dont think of words when you stop but to see picture better

 23. Keep track of every day the date emblazoned in yr morning

 24. No fear or shame in the dignity of yr experience, language & knowledge

 25. Write for the world to read and see yr exact pictures of it

 26. Bookmovie is the movie in words, the visual American form

 27. In praise of Character in the Bleak inhuman Loneliness

 28. Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better

 29. You’re a Genius all the time

 30. Writer-Director of Earthly movies Sponsored & Angeled in Heaven

To Allen Ginsberg - Czesław Miłosz (written in 1995)

Allen, you good man, great poet of the murderous century, who persisted in folly attained wisdom.

I confess to you, my life was not as I would have liked it to be.

And now, when it has passed, is lying like a discarded tyre by the road.

It was no different from the life of millions against whom you rebelled in the name of poetry and of an omnipresent God.

It was submitted to customs in full awareness that they are absurd, to the necessity of getting up in the morning and going to work.

With unfulfilled desires, even with the unfulfilled desi to scream and beat one's head against the wall, repeating to myself the command "It is forbidden."

It is forbidden to indulge yourself, to allow yourself idleness, it is forbidden to think of your past, to look for the help of a psychiatrist or a clinic.

Forbidden from a sense of duty but also because of the fear of unleashing forces that would reveal one to be a clown.

And I lived in the America of Moloch, short-haired, clean-shaven, tying neckties and drinking bourbon before the TV set every evening.

Diabolical dwarves of temptations somersaulted in me, I was aware of their presence and I shrugged: It will pass together with Life.

Dread was lurking close, I had to pretend it was never there and that I was united with others in a blessed normalcy.

Such schooling in vision is also, after all, possible, without drugs, without the cut-off ear of Van Gogh, without the brotherhood of the best minds behind the bars of psychiatric wards.

I was an instrument, I listened, snatching voices out of a babbling chorus, translating them into sentences with commas and periods.

As if the poverty of my fate were necessary so that the flora of my memory could luxuriate, a home for the breath and for the presence of bygone people.

I envy your courage of absolute defiance, words inflamed, the fierce maledictions of a prophet.

The demure smiles of ironists are preserved in the museums, not as everlasting art, just as a memento of unbelief.

While your blasphemous howl still resounds in a neon desert where the human tribe wanders, sentenced to unreality.

Walt Whitman listens and says, "Yes, that's the way to talk, in order to conduct men and women to where everything is fulfillment. Where they would live in a transubstantiated moment."

And your journalistic clichés, your beard and beads and your dress of a rebel of another epoch are forgiven.

As we do not look for what is perfect, we look for what remains of incessant striving.

Keeping in mind how much is owed to luck, to a coincidence of words and things, to a morning with white clouds, which later seems inevitable.

I do not ask from you a monumental oeuvre that would rise like a medieval cathedral over a French flatland.

I myself had such a hope, yet half-knowing already that the unusual changes into the common.

That in the planetary mixture of languages and religions we are no more remembered than the inventors of the spinning wheel or the transistor.

Accept this tribute from me, who was so different, yet in the same unnamed service.

For lack of a better term letting it pass as the practice of composing verses.

*- Polish poet Czesław Miłosz, trans. by the author and Robert Hass. Miłosz is the 1980 Nobel laureate for literature.*