Something big is about to happen. At the heart of the song, the prince who after years of wandering the land as a vagabond is ready to tell what he has learned; at a fair he gathers twos and threes to hear his promise that he is about to reveal the secret of the kingdom, and soon there is a crowd.

In the studio in New York City, the fanfare opens, with small notes on the piano dancing like fairies over the low, steady pulse from an organ you hear but don't register. There is a false sense that you can still wait for whatever it is that is about to happen to happen. But when you emerge from the reverie of the song as it begins—in that rising sun of a fanfare there is an invitation to look over your shoulder at a receding, familiar landscape, as if the story that is about to begin is a story you have heard a thousand times ("It's such an old story," Bloomfield said)—the train has already left the station. "Once upon a time," and you are not the child falling asleep as someone reads from Grimm's Fairy Tales, the violence and gore removed, the illustrations glowing with blonde hair and blue eyes. You're in the story, about to be cooked, eaten, dismembered, left behind, and as in an early Disney animation the trees in the forest are reaching out their branches like hands and tearing at your clothes. That is what the singer is saying as the music blows all around you, but this isn't a nightmare, and if it were you wouldn't want to wake up. This is a great adventure. As if keeping a secret from yourself—the secret of how bad the story sounds and how good it feels—you cover your eyes with your hands and peek through your fingers at the screen.

Bombs are going off everywhere, and every bomb is a word. "*DIDN'T*"—"STEAL—"*USED*"—"INVISIBLE": they are part of the story, but in the way they are sung—declaimed, hammered, thrown down from the mountain to shatter among the crowd at the foot—each word is also the story

itself. You are drawn into single words as if they are caves within the song. Why one word is bigger than another—or more threatening, or more seductive—makes no obvious narrative sense. The words aren't merely bombs, they're land mines. They have been planted in the song for you to find, which is to say planted that they might find you. Each word lies flat on a stone in the field, spelled out. "YOU," "ALRIGHT," "ALIBIS," "KICKS," "THAT," "BE," "NEVER," but there is no way at all to know which one will blow up when you step on it

Like a waterway opening, the organ comes in to stake its claim on the song halfway through the first verse, just after Dylan finishes setting up the story and begins to bear down hard; just before "*You used to*/ Laugh about—" The song is under way, the ship is already pitching, and the high, keening sound Kooper is making, pressing down on a chord as it streams into the song, is something to hold onto. This side of the story is just beginning, a step behind the story you are already being told; this sound within the sound tells you the story can't end soon, and that it won't be rushed. The sound the organ traces is determined, immune, almost part of another song. "I couldn't hear the organ, because the speaker was on the other side of the room covered with blankets," Kooper says, speaking as someone caught up in the uncertainty, the blind leading the blind over a cliff. "I'm used to there being a music director. Having grown up in the studio, there was always someone in charge, whether it was the arranger, the artist, or the producer. There was no one in

charge at that session—in charge of the general chaos. I didn't completely know the song yet. I do have big ears—that was my biggest advantage. In the verses, I waited an eighth note before I hit the chord. The band would play the chord and I would play after that." But as the song goes on, the organ becomes the conductor of its own drama. For the song it is the shaping hand.

Bloomfield has entered the verse rolling a golden wheel. There is a great glow in the circular patterns he is tracing, but even as the glow warms the listener it is fading into a kind of undertow, now pulling against anything in the music that is still prophesying an open road. Now there is a deep, implacable hum coming from Bloomfield's guitar, a sound seemingly independent of the musician himself, a loose wire or a frayed connection playing its own version of the song.

No sound holds in the cataclysm the song is becoming; its general chaos is its portrait of everyday life. There is nothing remarkable in the words Dylan is singing so far, no oddly named characters, just someone who once tossed money at people who had none and is now wondering how far she's willing to go to get some of her own. But as the first verse tilts toward its last line Bloomfield is shooting out of the verse, playing louder than before, hurry and triumph in his fingers. You can feel the song turning, but there is no sense yet of what's around the turn.

What is around the turn is a clearing, where the musicians charging around the bend find themselves in Enfield, Connecticut, in 1741, with the singer already there to meet them for the chorus—the singer in the form of Jonathan Edwards pronouncing his sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" to parishioners who are tearing at their hair and begging him to stop, and the musicians are immediately alive to the drama. "I tried to stay out of Bloomfield's way," Kooper says, "because he was playing great stuff. '*Your next meeeeeal*'—on the five chord just before the chorus, where he does that 'diddle-oo da diddle-oo,' that was a great lick. I didn't want to step on that. And then he would play that coming out of the chorus, too. The other places, I had room to play, because Michael was not playing lead in those places: in the chorus." Kooper is still following his own road, but now it comes into full relief; each single line he offers is so clear, moving forward so deliberately, that you can see the track his notes are cutting. The singer is raging and thundering in the air above, paying no mind to anything anyone else has to say but his body absorbing it all, and everything his body absorbs goes into his voice, which grows bigger with every word. Bloomfield's golden wheel, now bigger than before and even brighter, and more dangerous, a wheel that as its light blinds you will roll right over you, carries the singer out of the clearing and into the next verse. In a minute and a half, a verse and a chorus, more has already happened than in any other song the year has produced.

The feeling in the music in the second verse is more triumphant. Bloomfield's lines are longer, more like a hawk in

the sky than deer leaping a ravine. The rest follow a steady march, and the story seems headed to a conclusion; near the end of the verse is perhaps the most astonishing moment of all, when, out of instinct, out of desire, out of a smile somewhere in his memory, Bloomfield finds the sound of a great *whoosh*, and for an instant a rising wind blows right through the rest of the music as if the song is a shotgun shack. Is that what allows the singer to whirl in the air, striking out in all directions? There's a desperation, something close to fear, in the way Dylan throws out *"used to it"*—the words seem to pull the person in the song off her feet, leaving her in the gutter, stunned, filth running over her, the singer's reach to pull her out falling short, but there's no time to go back: the chorus has arrived again. With its first line, those four simple words, how does it feel, an innocuous question, really, you feel that this time the singer is demanding more from the words, more from the person to whom they are addressed. In the verses he has chased her, harried her, but the arrival of the chorus vaults him in front of her; as she flees him he appears before her, pointing, shouting—and the person to whom all this is addressed is no longer merely the girl named by the song. That person is now at once that girl and whoever is listening. The song has put the listener on the spot.

You are listening to the song on the radio, in 1965 or forty years later. "Like a Rolling Stone" is not on the radio forty years after its release as often as it was in the second half of 1965—but you might be able to count on hearing it more frequently in 2005 than you did in 1966, when it was last year's hit. On the radio, where the tambourine is inaudible, the piano seems like an echo of the guitar, and the organ could be playing to the drums, you can hear Dylan's up-and-down rhythm guitar and Joe Macho's bass as a single instrument. Dylan and Macho have heard each other, and they have locked into a single pattern, the bass supporting the guitar, the guitar extending the bass. This is the spine of the song, you realize, or its heartbeat, banging against the spine. It's the simplest thing in the world: "very punky," as Kooper hears it. "Ragged and filthy." But the song must be almost over—the second verse has passed, and the chorus has nearly run out its string. The song has already demanded more from you than anything else you've ever heard. You want more, but that's what a fade at the end of a record is for, isn't it: the sound disappearing into silence, to leave you wanting more?

Even now, when it is no shock that there is more, as there was when the record first appeared on the radio in 1965, no surprise that the disc jockey is actually going to turn the record over to see what happens, to play the whole thing, as in the first week or so of the song's release many disc jockeys did not, it is still a shock. The arrival of the third verse, the announcement that the story is not over, is like Roosevelt announcing for a third term.

"Like a Rolling Stone" wasn't the first six-minute Top 40 hit, or the first to be cut in half and pressed onto two sides of

a 45. In 1959 both Ray Charles's "What'd I Say," which was longer than six minutes, and the Isley Brothers' "Shout," which was shorter, but more dramatically flipped from side A to side B ("Now, *waaaaiiit* a minute," cried the leader as the first side reached the out groove), were hits, and "What'd I Say" was enormous, inescapable. But these were dance records, not story-telling records. They swept the listener up and carried the listener along, but they did not implicate the listener, they did not suggest that the song had anything to do with the moral failings of the people listening, or that its story was their story, whether they liked it or not. All "Like a Rolling Stone" shared with "What'd I Say" and "Shout" was their length and their delirium.

In *Don't Look Back*, in England in the spring of 1965, the film teases the viewer with the notion that you can see "Like a Rolling Stone" first take shape in the film itself. Dylan and Baez and Dylan's sidekick Bob Neuwirth are in a hotel room; Dylan is singing Hank Williams's "Lost Highway," from 1949. It was a rare Williams song that he didn't write. "Once he was in California hitchhiking to Alba, Texas, to visit his sick mother," Myrtie Payne, the widow of Leon Payne, the song's composer, told the country music historian Dorothy Horstman. "He was unable to get a ride and finally got help from the Salvation Army. It was while he was waiting for help that he wrote this song." With Baez singing harmony, it's the first time in the film that Dylan seems engaged by a song. "I was just a lad, nearly twenty-two," he sings, as if the words

are his, with a Hank Williams whine that somehow doesn't seem fake. "Neither good nor had, just a kid like you." "No, no," says Neuwirth. "There's another verse, 'I'm a rolling *stone*.'" Dylan picks it up, and it's odd that he left it out, because it is the first verse: "I'm a rolling stone, all alone and lost/ For a life of sin, I have paid the cost . . ." But the words "rolling stone" are swallowed up in the tune—"stone" almost fades away as it is sung, wearing down to a pebble as it rolls—and all the words speak for is someone with no will, no desire. Yes, it's a song of freedom: freedom from family, authority, government, work, religion, hut most of all from yourself. It's a wastrel's song; not "rolling stone" hut "lost highway" is the ruling image, promising that the singer's grave will likely be a ditch on the side of the road.

In "Like a Rolling Stone" you can't hear "Lost Highway" any more readily than you can hear Muddy Waters's 1950 "Rollin' Stone." Cut in Chicago, with Waters playing a hig-city electric guitar, the piece was pure Mississippi in its tone, its menace, affirming a tension coiled so tightly in the music that when in a brief guitar solo Waters turns over a single, vibrating note, it seems to bite itself. "Gonna he a rollin' stone/ Sho' nuff be the rollin' stone," the pregnant woman in the first verse chants to herself of the child she's carrying, snapping off the last word again and again with the feeling of a knife quivering in a wall—unless it's the child inside her banging on the door, whispering he'll kill her if she doesn't let him out. Here the rollin' stone gets up and walks like a

man, and that's what you hear in Waters's guitar solo, more even than in the way he slides his voice over the words. You hear someone free from values and limits, never mind mothers, fathers, jobs, church, or the county courthouse. He never raises his voice. You get the idea that if he did—

In folk terms it's fables like "Lost Highway" and "Rollin' Stone" that Dylan's image comes from, but if the image of the rolling stone is what seals his song's own fable, that image is not what drives the song. As a song, a performance, a threat, or a gesture, "Like a Rolling Stone" is closer to Dylan's own "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," from 1963, Elvis Presley's 1961 "Can't Help Falling in Love," the Animals' 1964 "House of the Rising Sun," Sonny Boy Williamson's "Don't Start Me Talkin'" and Elvis's "Mystery Train," both from 1955, the Stanley Brothers' 1947 "Little Maggie," or Noah Lewis's 1930 "New Minglewood Blues." ("I was born in the desert, raised up in the lion's den," Lewis sang coolly, as if he were presenting himself as the new sheriff in town. "My number one occupation, is stealing womens from their men.")* "Like a Rolling

* Sometimes it's in Dylan's own performances of these songs that you can hear "Like a Rolling Stone," though not always: his desultory 1970 recording of "Can't Help Falling in Love," omitted from the already thrown-together *Self Portrait* and included on the bottom-of-the-barrel release *Dylan* in 1973 (Dylan had temporarily jumped to another label and Columbia was attempting to embarrass him by releasing the worst stuff they could find), said nothing about anything. His 1992 "Little Maggie" was stark, syncopated, and deathly, but it owed nothing to the Stanley Brothers; if Dylan drew on their performance for "Like a Rolling Stone," it was for its structure, its melody, and most of all its

Stone" is closer to Will Bennett's irresistibly distracted 1929 "Railroad Bill," which is fifteen combinations of two-line verses and a one-line refrain in under three minutes, including sets about weaponry ("Buy me a gun, just as long as my arm/ Kill everybody, ever done me wrong"), throwing everything away and heading west, drinking, domesticity, and the outlaw Railroad Bill himself, who never worked and never will. In its headlong drive into the street, its insistence on saying everything because tomorrow it will be too late—to speak as a prophet, someone who, burdened with knowledge he didn't want but, having received it, is forced to pass on—"Like a Rolling Stone" probably owes more to Allen Ginsberg's 1955 "Howl" than to any song.

If any or all of these things is a source of "Like a Rolling Stone," or an inspiration, like "Lost Highway" or "Rollin' Stone" they say little about why the song is what it is. If there is a

(*continued*) lift, a sense of triumph. The Animals' "House of the Rising Sun," at four and a half minutes in its full-length version, was taken from the broken reading Dylan gave the song on *Bob Dylan* two years before, with the kind of reach beyond a song's past or even its future that would power "Like a Rolling Stone," a five-man British blues band from Newcastle transformed an American folk ballad about a New Orleans whorehouse into an international hit that more than forty years later still circles the globe. But when Dylan sang "Don't Start Me Talkin'" on *The Late Show with David Letterman* in 1984 he was plainly possessed by the song, by the chance it gave him to run over everyone in town. "I'll tell EVERYTHING I know," he shouted with superhuman glee when he threw "New Minglewood Blues" off his stages in the 1990s, his band crashing down on "born" and "den" as he ripped the words away from them, every line built on the last until you couldn't see the top of their staircase.

model for "Like a Rolling Stone," it may be in the long, dramatic story-songs made by Mississippi blues players Son House and Garfield Akers—music that, as collected in 1962 on *Really! The Country Blues*, an obscure, hard-to-find album on the fanatical country blues label Origin Jazz Library, Dylan knew well.

On House's 1930 "My Black Mama," more than six minutes and twenty seconds on both sides of a Paramount 78, and Akers's 1929 "Cottonfield Blues," exactly six minutes on the two sides of his Vocalion ten-inch, the songs begin almost identically. "Oh, hey, black mama, what's the matter with you?" says House. "I said, looky here, mama, well just what are you trying to do?" says Akers. Both songs end almost mystically. In "My Black Mama," the woman who was trouble in Part 1 is dead in Part 2. The singer is summoned: "I looked down in her face," he says; you can feel her face already rotting. When he sings, in his last verse, his deep voice seemingly deepening with every syllable, "I fold my arms and I walked away," you can feel him walk off the earth. In "Cottonfield Blues" the woman who was trouble in Part 1 is gone in Part 2; as Akers sings commonplace lines in his high, thin voice, he makes you feel that they have never been sung before. He stretches his words across their vowels so naturally, so inevitably, somehow, that you picture the singer on a mountaintop, singing across a valley, making his own echo, but when the song hits home

> I'm gonna write you a letter, I'm gonna mail it in the air
> I'm gonna write you a letter, I'm gonna mail it in the air

> Says I know you will catch it, babe, in this world somewhere
> Says I know you'll catch it, mama, in the world somewhere

you see that Akers is the letter and that he is in the air, traveling somewhere out of reach of the U.S. Mail.

"My Black Mama" is slow, all of its drama bottled up as it moves forward the pressure is never released. Akers jumps "Cottonfield Blues" on his guitar, his technique so primitive that for all he has to tell you about Mississippi in 1929 he could be playing in Manchester in 1977 on the Buzzcocks' "Boredom," their punk theses-nailed-to-the-nightclub-door. Akers pushes his story so fast you can feel he's afraid of it, and House makes no effort to hide the fact that he is afraid of his. Each is such an old story—and each is utterly singular. Each man says the same thing: to tell a story, you must take as much time as you need. The length of "My Black Mama" and "Cottonfield Blues" is the axis of their art, when you reach the end of either, you have been taken all the way through a crisis in a certain person's life. Because the artist, speaking in the first person, has shaped that crisis so that his response to it becomes an argument about a whole way of being in the world, you have not only been through a crisis. Taken to its essence, the artist has described his life as such, guided you through the strange and foreign country of his birth, education, deeds, and failures, right up to the point of death.

With "Like a Rolling Stone" too, its six minutes—six minutes to break the limits of what could go on the radio, of

what kind of story the radio could tell; at first the label on the 45 read 5:59, as if that would be less intimidating—is the beginning and the end of what the record is about and what it is for. When the record is over, when it disappears into the clamor of its own fade to silence, or the next commercial, you feel as if you have been on a journey as if you have traversed the whole of a country that is neither strange nor foreign, because it is self-evidently your own—even if, in the first three minutes, the journey only went as far as your own city limits. The pace is about to pick up.

When "Like a Rolling Stone" smashes into its third verse everything is changed. The mystery tramp who appeared out of nowhere at the end of the second verse has left his cousins all over this one. Everyone has a strange name, everyone is a riddle, there's nobody you recognize, but everybody seems to know who you are. "Ah, you—" Dylan shouts, riding over the hump of the second chorus and into the third verse; the increase in vehemence caused by something so tiny as the adding of a syllable of frustration to the already accusing "you" is proof of how much pressure has built up. The sound Bloomfield makes is like Daisy's voice—"the sound of money"—and like Gatsby Bloomfield is reaching for it, but as soon as it is in the air he steps back from it, counting off the beat as if he is just James Gatz, counting his pennies. He is banging the gong of the rhythm as if he is hypnotized by it, each glorious note bending back toward the one before it. As the band seems to play more slowly, as if recognizing the

story in the song for the first time—a congress of delegates drawn from all over the land, all speaking at once and all giving a version of the same speech—the singer moves faster, as if he knows what's coming and has to stop it. He reaches the last line of the verse, holds the last word as long as he can hold his breath, and then as the song tips into the third chorus everything shatters.

The intensity of the first words out of Dylan's mouth make it seem as if a pause has preceded them as if he has gathered up every bit of energy in his being and concentrated it on a single spot, and as if you can hear him draw that breath. "How does it feel" doesn't come out of his mouth; each word explodes in it. And here you understand what Dylan meant when he said, in 1966, speaking of the pages of noise he'd scribbled, "I had never thought of it as a song, until one day I was at the piano, and on the paper it was singing, 'How does it feel?'" Dylan may sing the verses; the chorus sings him.

With this moment every element in the song doubles in size. It doubles in weight. There is twice as much song as there was before. An avenger the first time "How does it feel" takes him over here, the second time the line sounds Dylan is despairing, bereft and sorrowful, but by now, moments after he himself has blown the song to pieces, the song has gotten away from him. Kooper's simple, straight, elegant lines are breaking up, shooting out in all directions, as if Dylan's first "How does it feel" was the song's Big Bang and Kooper is

determined to catch every fragment of the song as it flies away. As the chorus begins to climb a mountain that wasn't in the chorus before, Kooper finds himself in the year before, in the middle of Alan Price's organ solo in the Animals' "House of the Rising Sun," a record that to this day has lost none of its grime and none of its grandeur. Price's solo was frenzied, its tones thick and dark; it was a deep dive into a whirlpool Price himself had made, and Kooper is playing from inside the vortex, each line rushing up and out, nailing the flag of the song to its mast.

Nothing could follow this. In the fourth verse, everyone's timing is gone. The "Ah" that swung the first line of the third verse is here a long "Ahhhhhh" that flattens its own first line. Bobby Gregg, whose drum patterns in the first verse had given the song shape before the musicians found the shape within the song, fumbles as if he has accidentally kicked over his kit. Everyone is fighting to get the song back—and it's the words that rescue it, that for the first time take the song away from its sound. The words are slogans, but they are arresting, and if "When you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose" sounds like something you might read on a Greenwich Village sampler, a bohemian version of "Home Sweet Home," "You're invisible now, you got no secrets to conceal" is not obvious, it is confusing.

Confused—and justified, exultant, free from history with a world to win—is exactly where the song means to leave you. There is a last chorus, like the last verse spinning off its

With Michael Bloomfield

axis, and then Dylan's dive for his harmonica, and then a crazy-quilt of high notes that light out for the territory the song itself has opened up.

Fifteen years later, when Dylan invited Bloomfield onto the stage at the Warfield Theatre to play the song again, Dylan was filled with Jesus, and Bloomfield was just a Jew, washed-up, a junkie whose words were as empty as his eyes, a pariah. Bob Johnston, the producer who would replace Tom Wilson after "Like a Rolling Stone," was there for the show. Bloomfield approached him. "Can you help me?" he said. "No one will talk to me." Bloomfield promised he was off drugs, that he wasn't drinking, that he had gotten his life back, but Johnston had already heard him play. After each phrase from Dylan, Bloomfield fingered his rolling notes, but he couldn't play the song. In the way that he could only play the record—in the way that he couldn't hear the music, couldn't respond to the other musicians, or to Dylan, or to the three-woman gospel chorus, in the way that, like so many Dylan guitarists who over the years, in city after city, have copied Bloomfield's notes as blankly as Bloomfield was doing this night, he could only copy himself—he was lost, and then he was incoherent, a ruin. But as he so rarely would after the first year he toured with "Like a Rolling Stone," this night Dylan is flying with the song, energized by the story. As it goes on he hits everything harder:

He's not *selling any al-i-bis*
As you stare into the vacuum of his eyes
And say, do you want to, ha ha, make a *deeeaaaaallll*

He opens the second chorus as if he is unfurling the flag that Tashtego, or Al Kooper, nailed to the sinking mast of the *Pequod* at the end of *Moby-Dick*, and as it did in 1965, fresh wind blows through the music. It almost seems as if Dylan is defending the song from Bloomfield—trying to rescue the song Bloomfield must have still carried somewhere inside himself from the broken man who could no longer really play it; defending the song or, from his own side, trying to give it back. "In them you can hear a young man, with an amazing amount of young man's energy, the kind of thing you would find in the early Pete Townshend or the early Elvis," Bloomfield said two days before his death, speaking to the radio producer Tom Yates, talking about the songs Robert Johnson cut more than forty years before. "You can hear this in Robert's records; it just leaps off at you from the turntable." Was he asking his interviewer to say to him, "Yes, but you played like that, too"? Could it be that in the unfinished fable of the record they made together in 1965, Michael Bloomfield played out the fable of self-destruction in "Lost Highway," and Bob Dylan the fable of mastery in "Rollin' Stone"? "Michael Bloomfield!" Dylan said as the song ended that night at the Warfield. "Y'all go see him if he's playing around town."

CHAPTER NINE

Democracy in America

This may be the truest setting for "Like a Rolling Stone"—a country imagined forty years ago, and as recognizable today as it was then.

U.S. Highway 61 runs from the Gulf of Mexico to the Canadian border, just above Grand Portage, Minnesota. In Dylan's high school days in Hibbing it was a magic road; he and his friends would cut twenty miles east for a straight shot down U.S. 53 to Duluth, where he was born, and there they'd pick up 61 and head for St. Paul and Minneapolis, looking for scenes;* in 1959 and 1960, when Dylan attended

* In Minnesota the driving age was fifteen; Dylan made his first recordings at Terline Music, an instrument and sheet music store, in St. Paul on Christmas Eve, 1956. Included were fragments of Little Richard's "Ready Teddy," Sonny Knight's "Confidential" (a song Dylan took up again in 1967 with the Hawks,

the University of Minnesota, the highway took him to his haunts. In the Cities Dylan discovered folk music, the old country music and the old blues—and discovered that in song and story there was no more protean line drawn in the nation than the line drawn by Highway 61. History had been made on that highway in times past, and history would be made there in times to come.

Bessie Smith, the Queen of the Blues, died on Highway 61 in 1937, near Clarksdale, Mississippi, where Muddy Waters grew up and where, in the 1910s and '20s, Charley Patton, Son House, and others made the Delta blues; some have pretended to know that Robert Johnson's 1936 "Cross Road Blues" was set right there, where Highway 49 crosses Highway 61. Elvis Presley grew up on Highway 61, in the Lauderdale Courts public housing in Memphis; not far away, the road went past the Lorraine Motel, where Martin Luther

[*continued*] as part of the Basement Tapes recordings, and was still performing on stage twenty-five years after that), Carl Perkins's "Boppin' the Blues," Lloyd Price's "Lawdy Miss Clawdy," the Five Satins' "In the Still of the Nite," Shirley and Lee's "Let the Good Times Roll," and the Penguins' "Earth Angel." Dylan accompanied himself on piano; friends Howard Rutman and Larry Keegan also sang. Left a paraplegic after accidents in his teens and twenties, Keegan, in his wheelchair, joined Dylan onstage in Merrillville, Indiana, in 1981, for an encore of Chuck Berry's "No Money Down" (Dylan played saxophone), and in 1999 sang at Jesse Ventura's inauguration as governor of Minnesota. Keegan died in 2001 of a heart attack, at fifty-nine; he had always kept the aluminum disc that resulted from the 1956 session, and after his death relatives listed it on eBay, supposedly with a $150,000 floor, though no bid close to that was forthcoming. "Awful," says one sympathetic listener who heard the songs.

King was shot in 1968. "Highway 61, go right past my baby's door," goes the blues that has been passed from hand to hand since the highway took its name. "I walked Highway 61, 'til I gave out at my knees," sang John Wesdon in 1993. The highway doesn't give out; from Hibbing, it would have seemed to go to the ends of the earth, carrying the oldest strains of American music along with businessmen and escaped cons, vacationers and joy-riders blasting the radio—carrying runaway slaves north, before the long highway had a single name, and, not so much more than a century later, carrying Freedom Riders south. Highway 61 embodies an America as mythical and real as the America made up in Paris out of old blues and jazz records by the South American expatriates in Julio Cortázar's 1963 novel *Hopscotch*—a novel which, like a highway, you can enter wherever you choose, and go backward or forward any time you like.

Most people who bought Bob Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited* in 1965 had probably never heard of the road the album was named for; today the record is as much a part of the lore of the highway as anything else. The album cover, as with *Bringing It All Back Home* a photograph by Daniel Kramer, pictured two people ready for a journey: Dylan, sitting on a sidewalk in a gaudy pink, blue, and purple shirt open over a Triumph Motorcycles T-shirt and holding a pair of sunglasses in his right hand; and a second man, standing behind Dylan, visible only from the waist down, in jeans and a horizontally striped orange and white T-shirt, his right thumb hooked into his

pants pocket with a camera hanging from his clutched fingers, and the viewer's eye directed straight at his crotch. I remember a college friend bringing the album home as a present for his younger brother; his mother took one look at the thing and threw it out of the house.

The journey described on the album took in the country. When you hear "Like a Rolling Stone" as a single, the story it tells takes place wherever you happen to hear it; on *Highway 61 Revisited*, it was a flight from New York City. One step across the city line, with "Tombstone Blues," you were in Tombstone, Arizona, without Wyatt Earp—or Levittown, or Kansas City, any town or suburb in the nation, where people talked about money and school, losing their virginity and the war in Vietnam, dreamed about sex and the west, about Belle Starr and Ma Rainey, and the president damned them all. Cutting hard around the turn of the song as it ended, Bloomfield led the charge out of town; then the road took over, and while anything could happen on it, there was nothing happening outside of it. The road was a reverie, movement on this highway as peaceful, as slow-rocking as a cradle in "It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry," a timeless blues with a timeless, commonplace verse at its center, a woman at the end, Dylan singing the song of an unworried man and the band blowing behind him like a breeze—

> Don't the moon look good, mama
> Shinin' through the trees?

—and the road was a crackup, the singer shouting out the window as he sped past the carnage in "From a Buick 6." The band is trying to get out of there as fast as he is, taking the turns too fast, as if there is such a thing as too fast when you can't get the blood out of your mind, when, as Dylan sang, in words that were suddenly about anything—films of what Allied forces found in Nazi extermination camps in 1945, as seen by American school children in the late 1940s and early '50s, as the historian Robert Cantwell has suggested, or news footage, just beginning to appear on American television, of dead Vietnamese and U.S. Army body bags, as anyone could have thought, or just the wreck on the highway—you "need a steam shovel, mama, to keep away the dead."

In "Ballad of a Thin Man," the travelers have circled back to New York. In a back room in a bar you're better off not knowing too much about, someone who thought he belonged anywhere is finding out what nowhere means. The piano rolling the tune into place is so ominous it's one step short of a cartoon starring Snidely Whiplash; then Snidely Whiplash is Peter Lorre in M. On the highway, there is a strange place every ten miles, somewhere where nobody knows you and nobody cares, and no one is cool; in New York City, the singer is a hipster, snapping his fingers, and as he does a whole cast of grotesques appears to point and taunt, to see if the mark can escape from the locked room. Then the album turns over, into "Queen Jane Approximately," and the singer rides the wheels of the music on his back,

swimming in his own sound, as he reaches for a woman who, like the girl in the song that started the tale, seemingly a long, long time ago, has nowhere to go. It was one of many mid-to-late sixties songs on the soundtrack of Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers*, his 2004 movie about three young people making their own world out of sex, movies, and parental allowances in a Paris apartment, as, outside their windows, the near-revolution of May 1968 took place in the streets. There was Jimi Hendrix, the Doors, the Grateful Dead. "It's not fair, to put them up against something from that album," a friend said. Then "Highway 61 Revisited," with Dylan squeezing a police-car siren in what is probably his most perfectly written song, sung as the ultimate tall tale. You find out that not only can anything happen on Highway 61—a father murdering his son, a mother sleeping with one of hers, the Gross National Product dumped as landfill or World War III staged as a stock car race, in other words Bessie Smith killed in a car crash, Gladys Presley walking a teenage Elvis to school, or Martin Luther King lying dead on a balcony—it already has. As the song plays, the band chasing a rockabilly rabbit, the singer snarling with glee, the road goes in every direction at once, and then it is one of the tornadoes that sweeps down from Fargo to Minneapolis, picking up cars and dropping them off the map. In "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues," the singer turns up in Juárez, Mexico, and all he wants is out. He's seen the country east and west, north and south, most importantly backward and forward. "I'm

going back to New York City," he says, understanding that the joke he tried to tell the country is on him. "I do believe I've had enough." But there is one more song.

"Desolation Row," Al Kooper wrote in 1998, was on Eighth Avenue in New York City, "an area infested with whore houses, sleazy bars, and porno-supermarkets totally beyond renovation or redemption." At the time it was the kind of place where you were told to walk down the middle of the street if you were stuck there at night, because you were better off with the drivers who didn't see you than with the people on the sidewalks who did. But even more than "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues," the eleven-minute song has a south-of-the-border feeling, and not just because the work by the Nashville session guitarist Charlie McCoy, brought in by Bob Johnston, reaches back to Marty Robbins's 1959 cowboy ballad "El Paso." In the U.S.A. Mexico is a place you run to.

You are walking down the middle of Eighth Avenue, trying not to look at the neon lights above the street and the unlit doorways on either side of it. As it is on Eighth Avenue, culture in "Desolation Row" is the scrapheap of Western civilization, decay at best and betrayal at worst, and by now, at the end of Highway 61, you can find culture anywhere, in a beauty parlor, in a police station, on a bed, in a doctor's office, at a carnival, on the *Titanic* as it sinks. Dylan follows his characters through the song as if he is the detective and they are the suspects; what he learns is that almost no one keeps what she has, and that almost everyone sells his

birthright for a mess of pottage. The song, Dylan once said, was his "America the Beautiful," and he sings the song dead-pan, which is part of why it is so funny; the scrapheap gives off a sickening but intoxicating smell of missed chances, folly, error, narcissism, sin. Everything seems worthless. In the theater, you're laughing, but when the show is over, as the Russian philosopher Vasily Rozanov once wrote, you turn around to get your coat out of the coatroom and go home: "No more coats and no more home." "Desolation Row" seems merely to give the scrapheap a name—except that in Dylan's guided tour of the place, with Cinderella making a home in Desolation Row, Casanova punished for visiting it, Ophelia not being allowed in, it becomes plain that the scrapheap is also a utopia. It's a nowhere described again, in more ordinary language, as a chronicle of more ordinary events, in "Visions of Johanna," a song from *Blonde on Blonde*, from the late spring of 1966, though under the title "Seems Like a Freeze-Out" Dylan was already performing it on stage in the fall of 1965, just after *Highway 61 Revisited* was released.

Here Desolation Row could very easily be an apartment on Eighth Avenue, somewhere well above the street, with the singer looking out the window. The song makes a dank room where a draft just blows balls of dust across the floor. In the corners some people are having sex; others are shooting up or nodding out. It's a bohemian paradise, a place of withdrawal, isolation, and gloom. It's fourth-hand Poe, third-hand Baudelaire, passed down by the countless people who've

bought into the fable of the artist who cannot be understood, the visionary whom society must exile for its own protection—must exile within itself, so that his or her humiliation is complete and final, but that's the danger. That's the one card left to the artist, and with that card the artist can change the game. As Dylan does on *Highway 61 Revisited*, from one end of the highway to the other, stopping at every spot that looks like it might have the best cheeseburger on the strip or for that matter the worst, the artist will return society's vitriol with mockery and scorn of his or her own. The difference is that while society speaks only in shibboleths and clichés, the artist invents a new language. When society's language has been forgotten, people will still be trying to learn the artist's language, to speak as strangely, with such indecipherable power. That's the idea.

The dank room where this magic is made is its own cliché, of course, but there's nowhere else the singer in "Desolation Row," or anyone else in the song who's allowed in and allowed to remain, would rather be. All of them, the Good Samaritan, Casanova, Einstein back when he used to play the electric violin, Cinderella—well, actually that's it, along with the singer those are the only people named who've left traces in the place, and Casanova's gone—stick their heads out the window, eyeballing those few they might judge worthy of joining them, laughing down at the crowds on the street, at all those who don't know enough to beg to be let in. They watch the horrors taking place in the building across the

street, where the Phantom of the Opera is about to serve a meal of human flesh, but it's nothing they haven't seen before; why do you think they're here and not there? The voice in "Desolation Row" and "Visions of Johanna" is partly Jack Kerouac's voice, in his narration for Robert Frank and Alfred Leslie's 1959 life-among-the-beatniks movie *Pull My Daisy*. "Look at all those cars out there," he says. "Nothing there but a million screaming ninety-year-old men being run over by gasoline trucks. So throw a match on it." From Kerouac you can go back more than half a century, and hundreds of years from there, and find yourself in the same room. In the Belgian painter James Ensor's 1885 *Scandalized Masks*, a man sits at a desk, a bottle before him, hat on his head and a pig-snout mask on his face. A woman stands in a doorway, holding a staff, a pointed hat on her head, black glasses over her eyes. Her nose is huge and bulbous, her chin sticks out like a growth; you can't tell if she's wearing a mask or if you're looking at her face. Yes, it's Brussels, they're just going to Mardi Gras—but at the same time, in this sadistically prosaic scene, you know something unspeakable is going to happen as soon as the two leave the chamber. You know the carnival they're going to is not in the public streets but on Desolation Row, that place where the old heretics, the witches, the ancestors of the bohemians of the modern world, perform their ceremonies.

That is where "Desolation Row" almost leaves you. And then, eight and a half minutes into the song, with nine verses

finished and one to go, Dylan and McCoy begin to hammer at each other with their guitars, and after more than a minute—with Dylan running a searing harmonica solo over the guitar playing, taking the song away from its form as a nonsensical folk ballad, as a "Froggy Went A-Courtin'" with its mice and ants and cats and snakes now dressed up by the MGM costume department—Dylan snaps the song into its last verse with three harsh, percussive bangs on his acoustic guitar, and the circle is complete. In this moment the song opens back into the sound of "Like a Rolling Stone," all threat, all promise, all demand. Once again it is time to get out of this suffocating room and onto Highway 61. Because all across *Highway 61 Revisited*, "Like a Rolling Stone" has hung in the air, like a cloud in the desert, beckoning. The song has taken you out into the country, so that you might see it for what it is, but also so that, caught up in the momentum of "Like a Rolling Stone," the thrill of its explosion, you might realize that the territory you have covered is also the country as it was. "Like a Rolling Stone" promises a new country; now all you have to do is find it. The engine is running; the tank is full.