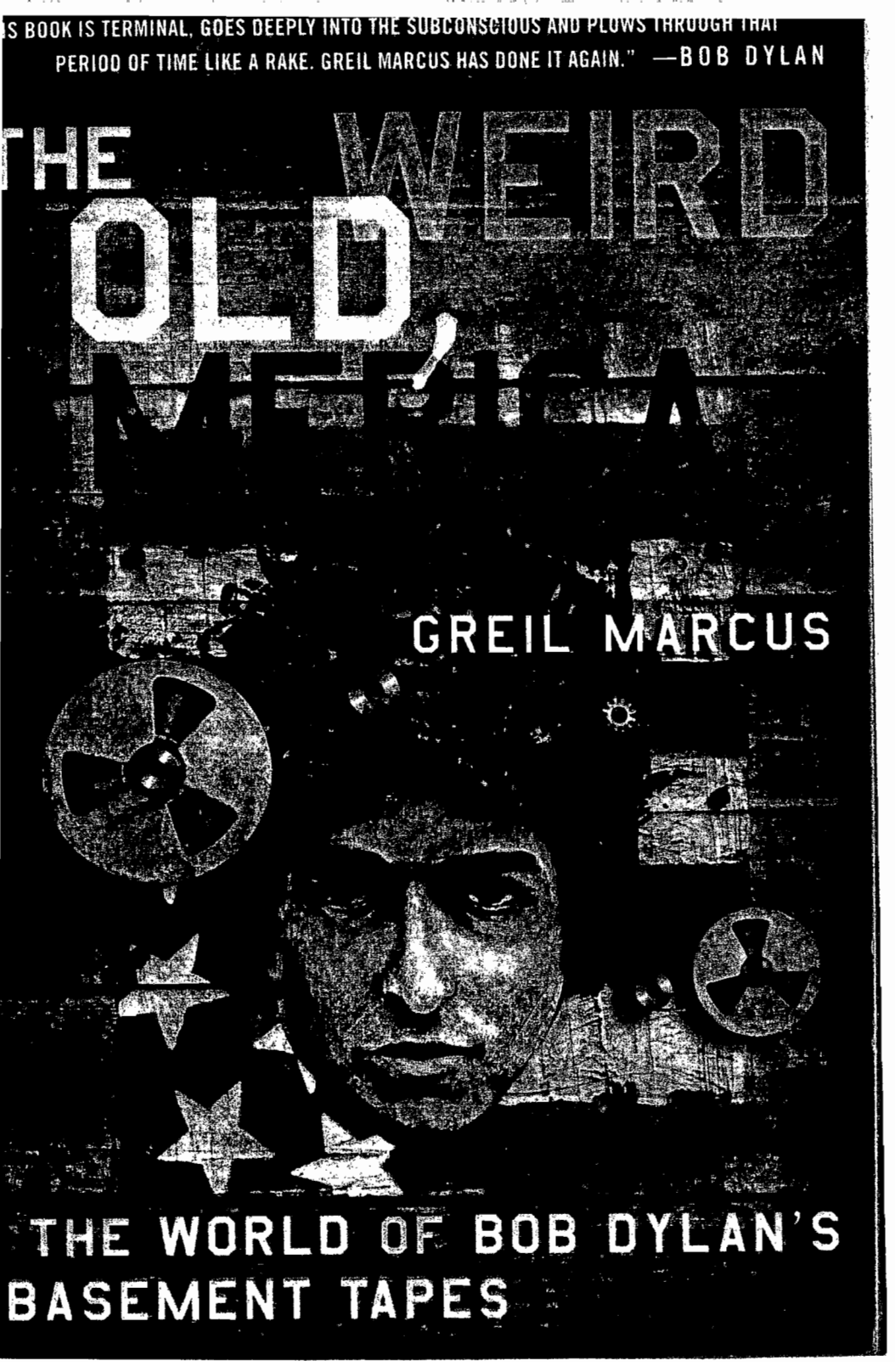

F I V E

KILL DEVIL HILLS

. . . street by street, block by block, step by step, door by door, all that's left of the old America is under siege. I catch sight of it from time to time: a fleeting glimpse at the top of the stairs, or outside rustling in the bushes. This is the old America of legend and distant memory, that invested no faith in the wisdom of history and no hope in the sham of the future, the old America that invented itself all over from the ground up every single day. . . . the America where no precaution is sufficient and nothing will protect you, no passport or traveling papers, no opportune crucifix or gas soaked torch, no sunglasses or decoder box or cyanide capsule, no ejector seat or live wire or secret identity or reconstructed tissues or unmarked grave or faked death. It's the America that was originally made for those who believed in nothing else, not because they believed there *was* nothing else but because for them, without America, nothing else was worth believing.

—Steve Erickson, *Amnesiascope*, 1996

"I could really believe in god when I heard Bob Dylan on the radio," Harry Smith once told Paul Nelson. Some years later, in 1976, an NYU student who had just seen *Heaven and Earth Magic* called Smith at the Chelsea Hotel, asking for an

immediate interview ("I have to do a paper"); he caught Smith in a particularly unbelieving frame of mind. "When I was younger," Smith said, rambling, lonely, "I thought that the feelings that went through me were—that I would outgrow them, that the anxiety or panic or whatever it is called would disappear, but you sort of suspect it at thirty-five, [and] when you get to be fifty you definitely know you're stuck with your neuroses, or whatever you want to classify them as—demons, completed ceremonies, any old damn thing."

The basement tapes are not completed ceremonies. There are rituals forming, as bland tunes break out into a haze of jokes and doubt, but no rite takes a finished shape. Like the records Smith collected, the known and unknown basement tapes together make a town—a town that is also a country, an imagined America with a past and a future, neither of which seems quite as imaginary as any act taking place in the present of the songs. Erickson's old America is palpable here, because that country is defined solely by the way it can be made up, or can rise up, on any given day, whole and complete in a single phrase or metaphor, melody or harmony.

Smithville folk would recognize this place—the jail is full, and some people still remember when the Fourth of July was the biggest day of the year—but they might have trouble keeping up. For one thing, this town is more drunk. For another, while some people here say they see god as the children of Israel saw him, "by day in a pillar of a cloud," "by night in a pillar of fire," there are no churches, save for the church the man who recites "Sign on the Cross" inhabits in his own mind, a church with no address. The Bible is everywhere,

but less invoked than tested against the happenstance of ordinary affairs or invasions of the uncanny. Though more blasphemous than Smithville—blasphemous in the sense of a refusal to grant god, or any force larger than appetite or inconvenience, the slightest claim on one's attention—comes with the whiskey—this town might be even more religious, because here people can read fate out of the weather. Fate is less suspended, as it is in those Smithville singalongs "Sugar Baby" and "East Virginia," than looming, rushing forward—unless, as occasionally happens, someone here is rushing to meet fate. Sometimes it can seem as if the whole population is made up of Casey Joneses and John Henrys: daredevil stoics, like the hard-luck wrangler in "Hills of Mexico," the half-bored, half-threatening character in "Apple Suckling Tree," the squinting mystic of "This Wheel's on Fire," or the map-hopper in "Lo and Behold!" People here are restless, but while the citizens are always hitting the road, they seem to carry the air over the town with them, to the point where the place-names that dot their songs—Wichita, Williams Point, Tupelo, Mink Muscle Creek, Blueberry Hill—soon enough feel as recognizable as street signs and as interchangeable as signposts.

People talk funny here. Instead of the language of allegory and home truth that rules in Smithville, the currency is the shaggy dog story, from tragic parable to slapstick sermon, sometimes the one hiding inside the other. Every time you turn your head, ordinary speech cracks into word play that makes fitting "Coo Coo Bird" verses together feel about as tricky as stacking baby blocks. The native tongue is close enough to English to give you the illusion you're following a story

whether it makes sense or not, but often it's only the way a story is told—the way a suggestion of letting you in on a secret catches your curiosity, or the way a sly drawl makes you feel you've lived here all your life—that makes sense. Think the story through after the storyteller has passed by, fit one word to another, and it may make no sense at all.

For all of those behind bars here, and despite the sense of foreshadowing that murder can bring, it's unclear whether anyone has killed anybody, even the joker who says he killed someone just to watch him die. While Smithville murderers always chant "My name I'll never deny" as they confess on the scaffold, here prisoners don't necessarily know what they've done or even who they are, only that they've been condemned, by others or by themselves. There is no guilt in Smithville; here it's second mind. There are no executions. If crimes instantly become legends in Smithville, and with such drama that the drowning of a pregnant woman can emerge as more significant, more central to the town's sense of what it is than the assassination of a president, in the town made by the basement tapes no crime comes sufficiently into focus for it to become more than a rumor—or for justice to be done. In the tongue spoken in "This Wheel's on Fire," "Sign on the Cross," "Apple Suckling Tree," "I'm a Fool for You," "Tears of Rage," and "I'm Not There"—the words rushing or coming one by one as masks seem almost to dissolve before they seem almost bolted down—you can sense the town on the verge of a collective confession to a crime far greater than any simple murder. The whiskey comes with it.

Smithville has its suicides and its homicides; this town can appear full of village idiots, like those bearded geezers set up

on the corner, harmonizing on what sounds like a 1957 Dell-Vikings B-side they can't remember. "I am a teenage prayer," the leader offers, a dirty old man lost in contemplation of his own good looks, crooning with the perfect composure of the absolutely plastered, standing straight until he falls right over. In lieu of the drummer, who's having too much fun to worry about a beat, the organist keeps time as the guitarist plays sock-hop triplets and doo-wahs fill the air. "Take a look at me, baby, I am *your* teenage prayer," the leader insists, as if stating a philosophical proposition, or maybe running for office. "No, take a look over here at *me*, baby," demands a second voice—a deeper, more addled voice, the voice of a syphilitic trolling for fourteen-year-olds, the voice of a man who says what he means, means what he says, and doesn't care about either—"*I* am your teenage prayer." As a body of pure lust he makes a better case, but the leader is not dissuaded. As the boys around them raise their voices like glasses, the two men happily wrestle over the song until they're singing to each other, the leader finally lost in a joyous reverie. "Any day or night just come to me when you're in fright," he grins, as if she, or he, already has.

A woman passing by calls out for Gid Tanner and His Skillet Lickers' "You Gotta Quit Kickin' My Dog Around"—"They cut it in 1926, the year I was born," she crows, as others in the street cheer her on—a tune the band essays as if it were Tanner's "You Gotta Stop Drinking Shine," which is reasonable, given how much the musicians have already drunk. Now the singer summons a great stillness, as if, for the first time in the last few minutes, true mysteries present themselves:

Every time
I go to town
The boys keep kickin' my dog around
I don't know why
I'm goin' to town
I don't know why they kickin' my dog around

"DOG, DOG, DOG," the rest reply craftily. "WHY, WHY, WHY." Still upright, the group jumps ahead thirty years for Bill Haley and His Comets' "See You Later, Alligator," which a stray shout from one of the musicians turns into "See You Later, Allen Ginsberg" ("After 'while, croc-a-gator," he adds helpfully), just like that.

These are priceless moments—that is, they're free, they cost you nothing. The crowd that has gathered for these ditties breaks up and moves on down the street. But the weather changes all the time here—if you don't like it, just wait—and sometimes you can't tell when it does. Just like that, everything is the same and everything is different. The blank questions in "You Gotta Quit Kickin' My Dog Around" can yield blurred images of mobs chasing men and women suddenly exposed for what they really are—dogs exposed as people, people exposed as dogs, the pious exposed as the reprobate, whites exposed as blacks, dog dog dog, why why why—and the woman who asked for the song may begin to suspect that as she called the tune, sooner or later she will have to pay the piper. In their happy, querulous abandon, "I Am a Teenage Prayer" and "You Gotta Quit Kickin' My Dog Around" are not so far from the fragmentary, chiliastic rehearsal of "I'm a Fool for You," its voice of rapture and enigma not so far from the judgment hidden in its lover's sighs and slow cadence: the single

cemetery this town keeps, that place where every heart shall rise and every man shall burn.

Here the streets are even less well marked than the streets in Smithville. The citizens are even more adept at disguises. They change their faces as easily as they change their clothes, a hooked nose flattening, rubbery lips going thin and pursed. Ben Franklin could pass for Groucho Marx, George Washington for Aaron Burr, Abraham Lincoln for either Ishmael or Ahab, Emily Dickinson for Sojourner Truth, Jonathan Edwards for Jimmy Lee Swaggart. That drunk singer on the corner is now preaching. As in a film running in reverse, the crowd is pulled back up the street and regathers itself at the speaker's feet. "Mem'ry serve well," he mutters, though it also sounds like "Mem'phis town"; the words come from a distance, weighted with tiredness and defeat, a breath for every bare syllable. As the men and women before the preacher crane their heads to place his words, to mouth them with him, he traces a rolling, deliberate rhythm, with his voice, with his hands, stepping into his famous sermon on the Book of Revelation, a soliloquy the crowd knows as "This Wheel's on Fire." It's a story the preacher has told for years, but his listeners are rapt and still, because neither he nor they have ever gotten to the bottom of it. As the man nears his peroration, urging the people in the crowd to bring forth their memories, or daring them to, reminding them of promises he has remembered and they have forgotten, his back hunches, his clenched fists open, and in a gesture no one can read his fingers wave raggedly in the air.

This town and Smithville are congruent, in the way they match the unknown to the obvious, in the high stakes the citizens of both towns place on a bet that may not be legal

anywhere else—the bet that anything can be transformed. The towns are like outposts on the same frontier, perhaps even in sight of each other over some unmarked borderline. Each place might be a tall tale to the other, people in Smithville laughing over the confusions of life on the other side, people on the other side baffled by the certainties of life in Smithville. Even a riddle like "The Coo Coo Bird" can feel like certainty in the town the basement tapes make.

Feeling the ground beneath your feet, as you likely would listening to "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere," "Million Dollar Bash," "See that My Grave Is Kept Clean," or for that matter "I Am a Teenage Prayer," you might call that town Union, after the town in Connecticut, or the one in Nebraska, Oregon, Maine, Mississippi, South Carolina, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee. Feeling the ground pulled out from under you, as you can listening to "Hills of Mexico," "The Bells of Rhymney," or "Lo and Behold!" you might call the town Kill Devil Hills, after perhaps the most ambitiously named spot in the U.S.A., the North Carolina hamlet where the Wright Brothers first found their wings. If the balance tips to Kill Devil Hills, it might be because you can imagine that no place with a name like that could fail to deliver the visions demanded in "Lo and Behold!"—or deny anything.

SEVEN

CITY ON A HILL

Kill Devil Hills is a place where symbols clash with metaphors; it's also a place where people simply go about their business. On Sunday the streets are busy. Mrs. Henry's boardinghouse has tipped the "NO" down on the "VACANCY" sign. The potato masher has a line out her door. The only year-round Halloween shop in the nation has its new mask shipment in the display window: the big sellers are Buster Keaton, Jonathan Edwards, Calvin Coolidge, Barbara Stanwyck (choose between the cardshark from *The Lady Eve* or the nurse in *Double Indemnity*), Jimmie Rodgers (in blackface), a reversible Natty Bumppo/Chingachgook, the Invisible Man (Ralph Ellison model), Dana Wynter and Sam Peckinpah (from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*), plus Charles Bronson, Henry Fonda, and Claudia Cardinale (from *Once Upon a Time in the West*—Leone's been previewing the five-hour rough cut here for weeks). A three-card monte dealer drawls lines like a comic at a stag night to pull her marks: "Get your rocks off / Get your rocks off / Get your rocks offa *me*," ever more slowly.

Down the alleys, one can glimpse people leaning against walls, sitting on the sidewalk, standing in doorways, a woman talking to herself about lies told long ago on a riverbank, a man mumbling to himself about hidden lace and lost chances. A thin woman with a determined stride passes by, wrapped in faded blues and whites, with a scarf over her mouth and a sun bonnet drawn so tightly one can't make out more of her face than an angry pointed nose, a pallor, and wisps of gray hair. "If the ladies were squirrels, with them bright bushy tails," croons a red-eyed, red-haired layabout with an air of impotent detachment, with the opiated ease of a man with a lifetime of worthless self-reflection ahead of him, "why, I'd fill up my shotgun, with rock salt and nails."

On main street, a crazy man with a rusted sword and dressed in what once must have been a priceless coat of rich green cloth—one can still see the strange clasps, embroidered in the shape of frogs, holding the coat closed over his huge belly—says he is Matthias, Prophet of the God of the Jews, that he is the King of France, that he is Belshazzar, that he is Daniel, that he can read the writing on the wall. He draws a few onlookers; they soon drift off to join a small crowd under the jailhouse window. A dozen men and women stand rapt as the elegant lament of "I Shall Be Released" comes from inside. Words rest in the air, then dissolve as a stoic, seemingly all-knowing guitar solo transcends the ability of any words to say what they mean. "He sounds like Aretha Franklin," a woman says of the invisible lead singer, wondering at how his voice can carry forgiveness when his words refuse it. "I still think they did it," a man says, "but for playing like that we ought to let them out." "They're not Leadbelly," says a second man. "They're not the

Prisonaires either," says the first man, "but they're the best this place has got." The crowd follows the local custom of slipping books through the bars in lieu of coins in the cup the prisoners aren't allowed to dangle: dog-eared paperbacks of *Peyton Place* and James Baldwin's *Another Country*, the Classic Comics edition of *Absalom, Absalom!* and Michael Wigglesworth's "God's Controversy with New-England" in its original 1662 broadside. It comes back shouted almost as soon as the paper has gone in:

> But hear O Heavens! Let Earth amazed stand;
> Ye mountaines melt, and Hills come flowing down:
> Let horror seize upon both Sea and Land;
> Let Natures self be cast into a town.
> I children nourisht, nurtur'd and upheld:
> But they against a tender father have rebell'd.

At the west end of main street, you can hear a string band begin to play and harmonize. The fiddle and the banjo bring the music into perfect balance: a sunny lilt born of practice and sympathy, the sound of people at home with each other, the ambience of a small room here in the open air. "Clouds so swift, rain won't lift," the band sings, until the crowd picks up the old chorus, crowing "Ooo-wee, ride me high" with a sway that in an instant has the whole town pitching back and forth like a single ship.

At the east end of the street, Rabbit Brown and Frank Hutchison, over from Smithville and looking for change, begin a duet on "The Titanic." Few pay them any mind, even though Rabbit Brown is an oddity—though blues can seem like a second mind in Kill Devil Hills, you don't see many black people

here. "Tomorrow's the day, my bride's gonna come," the town sings with the string band, drowning out the two bluesmen, but the song ends when it runs out of verses and when it does the doomed passengers at the stern of the *Titanic* are just getting into "Nearer My God to Thee"; nobody knows how many verses "The Titanic" has. "Neeeeerrrraaaarrr my gwww*aaaaad* to thee," Brown croaks, strangling the tune with a satanic glee, crocodiles crawling from his eyes, cold revenge on all those going down—in 1912, black Americans knew as well as any others that for its maiden voyage, the *Titanic* was promoted not only as unsinkable but, from stateroom to steerage, from its captain to its lowest scrubber, whites-only. "Captain Smith, how's your machinery?" Frank Hutchison says directly, just like a reporter. "All right," he has the captain answer. "How's your compass?" "Settin' dead set on New York."

The song changes the mood of the town. As it fades, finally, the string band, rolling a pump organ on a flatbed, carry a dirge through the street as if its weight has bent them double. Despite the muted horns they're now playing, they move less like the second line at a New Orleans funeral than a line of flagellants. People watch but keep their distance; under the dank, forbidding tune, perhaps from just outside of town, you can hear a cuckoo. "And it never, hollers cuckoo, till . . ." someone says instinctively, and the rest of the crowd automatically finishes the line.

"Mom," says a girl, "what's 'The fourth day of July'?"

There is less at stake in Kill Devil Hills than in Smithville. The town is far more playful. There is loss and there is guilt,

but little if anything is final—as opposed to Smithville, where whatever doesn't seem completed seems preordained.

That is how the music feels—and all that begins to change with a series of songs set down in August and September of the basement summer. They're taken slowly, with crying voices. Dylan's voice is high and constantly bending, carried forward not by rhythm or even melody but by the discovery of the true terrain of the songs as they're sung. Richard Manuel's and Rick Danko's voices are higher still, more exposed, though for everyone in the basement, with these songs—"Goin' to Acapulco," "Too Much of Nothing," "This Wheel's on Fire," "I Shall Be Released"—the only mask between nakedness and the invisible public of the secret songs is one of knowledge, craft, and skill.

In two of the basement songs that are part of this series—that emerge from the shifting ground laid by all the other songs—the stakes may be higher than they ever are in Smithville. In "Tears of Rage" and "I'm Not There," you can sense the presence of something that can't be found in Smithville, unless it's the keen wishfulness and utter abandonment of Ken Maynard's "Lone Star Trail," and that is tragedy. This is the sung and played embodiment of crimes that float in terms of argument and evidence but are immovable as verdicts, in their weight: sins committed, perhaps even without intent, that will throw the world out of joint, crimes that will reverberate across space and time in ways that no one can stop. What language do you speak when you speak of things like this?

You speak the language, as Bob Dylan would say in the fall of the year, recording *John Wesley Harding* in Nashville with Nashville musicians, of not speaking falsely. How do you do

that? You go as far into your song as you can. When Bob Dylan asked himself how far you could go with a song—with words and melody that on paper or in your head said next to nothing and in the air made a world suspended within it—Dock Boggs always had an answer: this far, and maybe no farther.

"where i live now," Dylan wrote in the mid–1960s, for a book that would be published in 1971 as *Tarantula*, in a voice one does not have to push very hard to hear as Dylan's idea of something Boggs might have written, or wanted to, "the only thing that keeps the area going is tradition—as you can figure out—it doesnt count very much—everything around me rots . . . i dont know how long it has been this way, but if it keeps up, soon i will be an old man—& i am only 15—the only job around here is mining—but jesus, who wants to be a miner . . . i refuse to be part of such a shallow death."

Bob Dylan knew better than most that the death in Boggs's music was no shallower than the hole the singer puts Pretty Polly in. "I dug on your grave two thirds of last night," Boggs's Willie tells her, brazenly, drunkenly, proudly, as he leads her to the sacred spot, hallowed by the countless pilgrimages lovers before them have made to this shaded grove. Speaking his life to Mike Seeger, Boggs called up a context, a setting, but the tension in his story is all in his will not to be reduced to his setting, not to be taken for anybody else.

The death Boggs made wasn't shallow but faked, and it was faked because it was art, not life. As a folk-lyric song, "Country Blues" was a mild, ritualized version of the everyday life Boggs described over the years, a celebration of certain choices, a dramatized refusal to take them back. As a ballad older than any family legend, "Pretty Polly" was a mythic version of the

desires Boggs felt welling up within himself, the wish for vengeance that all his life diffused into nothing here focused on a single anagogic object. In the culture of which Boggs was a part, that was what songs like these were for, if you could rise to them, or past them. Boggs could, and probably no one ever sang these songs as he did, or took them as far. As a primitive modernist, he accepted their invitation to transform commonplaces into unique emotive events, where the performer draws out what he or she has—what he is, or what she is afraid she could become—and measures it against the artifact of the occasion: the song and all the past lives that it contains. What results is not a reflection of real life for the singer any more than it is for the listener, but a vision, a *lo!* and *behold!* of possible life—lives the singer and the listener may have ahead of them, to realize or lose, lives that may already be behind them, deprived of oblivion only because of what the singer does with the song.

This is the territory of "Country Blues" and "Pretty Polly," and it's the territory of "Tears of Rage" and "I'm Not There." The difference is that the words and sounds in Dylan's new songs only seem commonplace, borrowed, transformed, resting in an aura of somehow having always been present, not made up one summer when the country was burning and five people in a Catskills basement were looking for a good way to pass the time.

"That's the sound he's got now," Bruce Springsteen said of Dylan in 1995, when he heard Dock Boggs for the first time. Springsteen was speaking of Dylan's early 1990s embrace of old music, of *Good as I Been to You* and *World Gone Wrong*. Was Springsteen hearing sound or aura? For sound—for pitch and

intonation, for the unstable flatness, for the yowl—there is more of Boggs in "Like a Rolling Stone" as Dylan recorded it in 1965 than there is in "Little Maggie" as he recorded it in 1992 or "Delia" as he recorded it in 1993. In the aura, though, was the peculiar intensity of absence, and here the intensity of a vanished culture making itself felt, like a Rayograph turning up on a roll of Kodachrome you bought last week, the old America rustling in the drawers of any mall's Fotomat. "That world!" as Denis Johnson shouts in his novel *Jesus' Son*. "These days it's all been erased and they've rolled it up like a scroll and put it away somewhere. Yes, I can touch it with my fingers. But where is it?"

In 1993, two years before Bruce Springsteen heard Bob Dylan in Dock Boggs, Dylan played shows that included the new/old material of *Good as I Been to You* and *World Gone Wrong*: the Appalachian standard "Jack-a-Roe," the blues "Ragged and Dirty," the Memphis street song "Blood in My Eye." Here critic Dave Marsh heard Bruce Springsteen in Bob Dylan, and after one show he asked Dylan about that: about the question of Springsteen's then-stalled career, caught between an established audience that could produce huge sales for a greatest-hits package and an unknown audience that might have as little to say to Springsteen as they thought he had to say to them.

People like Springsteen had missed something, Dylan said, with Springsteen only eight years younger and still born too late: "They weren't there to see the end of the traditional people. But I was." What was he saying? He might have been saying that as in 1963 he watched Boggs, Mississippi John Hurt, Skip James, Clarence Ashley, Buell Kazee, Sara and Maybelle Carter—"the traditional people," standing on the Newport stage, for Dylan's

cryptically perfect phrase, both as themselves and as a particularly American strain of fairy folk—he had learned something about persistence and renewal. Or he might have been saying something simpler, and harder: I saw a vanishing. He was present to witness an extinction, to see the last members of a species disappear. Thus it was left to him to say what went out of the world when the traditional people left the stage.

Where the past is in the basement tapes—what the past is—has more to do with this sort of question than with the question of any direct transmission of style or manner from one performer to another. In the basement tapes, an uncompleted world was haphazardly constructed out of the past, out of Smith's *Anthology* and its like, out of the responses people like Bob Dylan, Mike Seeger, and so many more brought to that music, its stories, and to the world—another country—implicit within it. The uncompleted world of the basement tapes was a fantasy beginning in artifacts refashioned by real people, dimly apprehended figures who out of the kettle of the folk revival appeared in the flesh to send an unexpected message. The vanished world they incarnated—as history, a set of facts and an indistinct romance; as a set of artifacts, as a work of art, complete and finished—was going to die, and you were going to be the last witness. Through your own performance, whenever it might take place, in 1963, 1965, or 1966, in 1967, 1992, or 1993, through its success or failure, you were to sign your name to the death certificate. You were to certify that a certain race of people had vanished from the earth, which was also a way of testifying that they once had been at large upon it—and as a result of your witnessing,

what traces these people might have left behind were to be lodged in you.

It's a possibility that instantly raises its own question. What will go out of the world with *you*? This is the sense of loss and finality that is a bridge to the sense of tragedy in "Tears of Rage" and "I'm Not There." The past that drives these songs is this past.

The playfulness, the lowered stakes of Kill Devil Hills when measured against Smithville, is the only right backdrop for tragedy here: an arena where tragedy can be discovered and yet not claim the whole of life. It will throw the rest of life into relief: only tragedy can justify a place with a name like this, can give its pleasures memory, its drunks true sleep.

Smithville is definitively settled, and in Smithville there is no tragedy because there is no guilt. Fatalism overshadows everything else. Kill Devil Hills is not only unfinished, it is transitory. At times it can feel less like a town than a depot, a stopping-off point, like so many earlier American towns—not the utopian seventeenth-century Puritan communities, with so many masked against their inability to live up to their word to follow god's, or the scattered, multiplying perfectionist settlements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but the frontier towns, with the guilt and doubt of utopians and perfectionists no less present in their air than the free rapaciousness of traders, con artists, and killers, all walking streets where a mask was just part of the wardrobe. Here fatalism is nothing to the daredevil. Everything seems open, any turn can be made at any time—at least until a certain dead end is reached, and then no mask, no secret identity, no change of name or face will protect you, and for a moment all masks come off.

• • •

There is nothing like "I'm Not There"—called "I'm Not There, I'm Gone" when Garth Hudson wrote down basement titles, later retitled "I'm Not There (1956)"—in the rest of the basement recordings, or anywhere else in Bob Dylan's career. It was only recorded once; unlike others of the new basement songs, which Dylan rerecorded or continued to feature on stage thirty years later, it was never sung again.

The song is a trance, a waking dream, a whirlpool, a "closing vortex," as on the last page of *Moby-Dick*: "When I reached it, it had subsided to a creamy pool. Round and round, then, and ever contracting towards the button-like black bubble at the axis of that slowly wheeling circle." Very quickly, a listener is drawn all the way into the sickly embrace of the music, its wash of half-heard, half-formed words and the increasing bitterness and despair behind them. Just as quickly, the sense that music of this peculiar nature has no reason to end, a sense that this music can have no real exit, comes into focus and fades away; for this music a sense of time is almost vulgar. It's a Memphis blues, kin to Noah Lewis's 1930 "New Minglewood Blues" or the Memphis Jug Band's 1929 "K.C. Moan," which means the precision of the rhythm is hidden in a stagger, a slide. It's a dark hollow prayer, like Buell Kazee's 1929 "East Virginia," which means it is a love song the premise of which is "I courted a fair young lady / What was her name, I did not know."

She fell into conversation with the first fat man she saw.

"What do you do?" he said, fitting two potato chips into his mouth.

I go to parties and only talk to the fat guys, she thought.

Owen was home writing. She thought of it as an act of fidelity to talk only to the unattractive guys.

She started to tell him about her jobs. She was talking on automatic pilot, hardly listening to what she was saying—instead, she was listening to Dylan. Going through the host's record collection, she'd found a bootleg album that included "I'm Not There," a legendary, never-released, never-completed song from the Basement Tapes sessions—a song that she'd heard just once, the summer after high school, and that she'd been searching for ever since. It came on as she was talking; it was even more haunting than she remembered.

She touched the fat guy's wrist. "This," she said, "may be the greatest song ever written."

The woman speaking is the heroine of a 1991 novel by Brian Morton called *The Dylanist*, and it's a wonderful thing she says—because so many people have responded the same way, at the same time realizing that "I'm Not There" is barely written at all. Words are floated together in a dyslexia that is music itself—a dyslexia that seems meant to prove the claims of music over words, to see just how little words can do. "I *believe* that she'd look upon deciding to come," the singer says, if that is what he says through the fog of his own anguish; you hear the anguish, it doesn't matter if the sentence doesn't make ordinary sense. Here a sentence is an opportunity to find a word, here *believe*, that rescues the speaker from silence, the only real alternative you can credit as "I'm Not There" unwinds its ball of string. For every phrase that seems clear—"And I cry for her veil," "I dream about the door"—there are far more that make you doubt the apparent shape of anything you've heard: "By temptation less it runs / But she don't holler

me / But I'm not there, I'm gone." In this music, where as you listen words are precisely as irretrievable as the plot of a fading dream, the moment of certainty offered by the title phrase when it occurs seems priceless; superseded in the next movement by a line that has no more shape than water in your hands, that certainty seems worthless. In the forest of this song, not only can a line of words you can identify not pierce the veil hiding words you can't, the line that speaks can't match the allure of words that don't. As if it were life, the song takes the measure of language and goes elsewhere. Sometimes the music reaches such a pitch of intensity the slightest turn of a word or a note can seem to tell the song's whole story. *"Well,"* Dylan sings to start the last verse. You can't make out what follows—not words but, as so often here, just slurs, there to fill up a line until the next one opens—but there's no need. In the darkness Dylan puts into this *well* there is foreshadowing and acceptance; in this moment, the singer is already looking back on the disaster.

The music makes you listen this way. "It's almost as though he has discovered a language," the composer Michael Pisaro said, "or, better, has *heard* of a language: heard about some of its vocabulary, its grammar and its sounds, and before he can comprehend it, starts using this set of unformed tools to narrate the most important event of his life."

For all of its insistence on miasma—for an unchanging weather indistinguishable from Judgment Day—there is no drift in the performance. The progression in the melody is unnoticeable and unbreakable, the sympathy between Dylan, Rick Danko, Garth Hudson, and Richard Manuel absolute. There is no hesitation in the way Dylan pursues his story

through the thicket of his abandoned words—where vows are ripped apart and survive only as non sequiturs, where "She knows that the kingdom / Weighs so high above her" and "I daren't perceive her," lines barely separated in a verse, are not clues but warnings—and there is no doubt at all as to what the story is about.

In the last lines of the song, the most plainly sung, the most painful, so bereft that after the song's five minutes, five minutes that seem like no measurable time, you no longer quite believe that anything so strong *can* be said in words: *"I wish I was there to help her*—but I'm not there, I'm gone." There is a singer and a woman in the song; he can't reach her, and he can't reach her because he won't. They might be separated by years or by minutes, by the width of a street or a thousand miles; there are moments when the music is so ethereal, so in place in a world to come, that the people in the song become abstractions, lovers without bodies: "She's my own fare thee well."

The mood grows more awful as the song moves on. As Richard Manuel's piano waits behind Dylan's vocal, as Garth Hudson continues decorating the circle of the tune, as the muscle Rick Danko's bass puts behind every wail and moan of the singing demands that you not leave, you are listening to a crime, unspeakable as a physical fact of its description, more intolerable for the listener than, it seems, for the singer, more a tragedy for you than for him. *No one,* you say to the singer, can be left as alone as you have left this woman, can be as abandoned as finally as you have abandoned her—because it is plain that this is no mere love affair that has dissolved. As Dylan sings, as the shimmering northern lights in the sound Hudson, Manuel, and Danko are making rise to meet him, a phantom

town gathers around the woman in the song, and like the phantom text of the song it disappears as soon as it is apprehended.

The song grows ever more desperate, and yet with the winding of stray and floating lines back to the sealing title phrase, more stoic, too—because the singer is not simply the only person who can reach the woman in the song, he is the last person who can reach her. The town has already abandoned her; by common will or her own, she is already outside of society, ostracized, banished, a self-made mute, a hermit—the cause can't be known, but her fate can't be questioned. The singer sings with such mortification because he knows the only way he can reach this woman is to place himself outside of society—but as in Geechie Wiley's unearthly "Last Kind Words Blues," that would mean there would be no one left to sing for him, and the circle really would be closed.

Recording in 1930, Wiley, of Natchez, Mississippi, sang a song of abandonment that only "I'm Not There" can match. She begins on guitar with a heavy minor chord; then she picks a small, circling pattern around it, pulling away from the doom in the first theme, not to deny it, but as if to say *not yet; don't rush me.* There is no hurry: everyone else in the song is already dead. She might be the last person on earth: every time she sings the word "I" or "me" or "my" it stretches out, takes over whole lines of meter, drowns the words around it, as if the singer believes she may never get a chance to say another word.

The story opens with the last kind words the singer's man told her before he went off to die in the Great War—the First World War, as we call it, though the man in this song just calls

it "the German war," which means the song comes forth to us with prophecy in its history. Wiley's voice is as weighted as her first chord, dragging, then erupting and fading as quickly; again the refusal to be hurried curls her words, as if like Scheherazade she knows she may not outlive her tale. She lets the last word of each verse go like a whisper down a well. "If I die, if I die," her man says through her, somewhere back in the teens, when he left; now more than a decade has passed. She has already said these words to herself more times than she could count, if she bothered to.

'f I get killed
'f I get killed
Please don't bury my soul
Iiiiiiiiiiiiiiii
Cried just leave me out
Let the buzzards eat me whole

And so she responds in the only way one can respond to a wish like that. She becomes a wanderer in her own song, as alone as Ken Maynard on the Texas plain, as scared and as at peace with herself. She becomes a visionary, and what she sees is so strong as to make her shake as she sings, or you shake as you listen; you can't tell which.

The Mississippi River
You know, it's deep and wide
Iiiiiiiiiiiiiiii
Can stand right here
See my face from the other side

This is what the singer and the woman in "I'm Not There" can't do. The singer in "I Shall Be Released" can do it; that is why compared to "I'm Not There," "I Shall Be Released" is a sentimental parlor ditty. Geechie Wiley can see her face from across the Mississippi River because hers is the only face to see; all those she loves are dead, and there is no hint of community or society, of town and fellowship, anywhere in her song. The country it makes is a wasteland. In "I'm Not There" all the other characters from the basement tapes surround the house where the woman lives, and then they turn and walk away. No one will ever speak to her again. That is how deep the abandonment is, and the question it raises is the question of what crime it is that is secreted in Kill Devil Hills. A town that can leave anyone so far outside of itself as "I'm Not There" leaves the woman in its every verse may be in and of itself a crime. It may be that when abandonment or exclusion as profound as that described in "I'm Not There" is present—present as a kind of civil death, like a public stoning without stones—there can be no real town, just a collection of individuals bound together by nothing at all. Or it may be a matter of the burden the town has taken upon itself with its name, a burden that has from one place to another defined the country from the time of the Puritans on down: when you can't find the devil, you kill someone else instead. In the words of the police chief, this isn't "a Kill Devil Hills story, it's an American story."

"Listen," Bob Dylan says just before beginning the first of three taped versions of "Tears of Rage." It's a hark! a raising of

the curtain; it could hardly be more dramatic, or portentous. It's a promise, and the song that follows pays it in full.

It is now, thanks to the recording that appeared on *The Basement Tapes* album, or that opened the Band's *Music from Big Pink*, a famous beginning: "We carried you / In our arms / On Independence Day." Singing slowly, letting the phrases pull him forward against his own fatigue and sorrow, Dylan rocks the words "Independence Day" like a cradle, into

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stepping into a story of forgetting, rejection, betrayal, and, again, abandonment—he steps carefully, but without hesitation, because there is no other story to tell.

There is a vast and darkening sweep of history in the first images of the song: a party of elders carrying a child on a beach, to a naming ceremony. Her naming, certainly; perhaps also a naming ceremony for the nation, on this day, a reaffirming that it exists, that with each new member the nation is born again. But in the music—Robbie Robertson's milky notes counting off the rhythm, Rick Danko's bass heavy, only Garth Hudson's organ and Richard Manuel's harmony carrying Dylan over the high steps to the chorus—and in Dylan's singing—an ache from deep in the chest, a voice thick with care in the first recording of the song—the song is from the start a sermon and an elegy, a Kaddish. The procession on the beach is also, in the

memory the music carries, given all that happens in the song—the father scorned by his daughter, the common lessons from the nation's founding ignored, the pull of justice and right broken by the lure of riches—a funeral procession, not for the child but for the country whose birthday is recalled so bitterly.

In the confines of this song, with Manuel's piano offering up notes that are sad and sentimental and Robertson's guitar placing a line that can regret its own disdain around Dylan's pleading, Independence Day is no longer celebrated. It's a story that can no longer be told. The Declaration of Independence itself is like a rumor, as if Jefferson's declaration of an irrevocable breach between past and future, mother country and colonies, parent and child, has erased itself with words that were expunged from the Declaration's final draft. "We must endeavor to forget our former love for them," Jefferson had written of England, of all the relatives and friends and ancestors who were to be left behind. "The road to happiness and to glory is open to us, too."

That is the road followed by the daughter in "Tears of Rage," a road paved with gold, as the daughter's heart is filled with it—"as if it was a purse," the singer says so painfully, shocked by the coldness of his own words, the old word-picture of a heart of gold now ashes in his mouth. As the singer knows, the road to happiness and glory is traveled only by the trusting and the faithless; in the only story on this road, the faithless prey upon the trusting. The father tried to tell the daughter this, she didn't listen, she prospered; she has crossed over, and she is now among the faithless herself. In the shame and guilt that all but possess Dylan's singing in the first recording of the song, in the singer's despair over his failure to

pass on the ethics of place and loyalty, you can see Lincoln's face as it appears in bronze busts all through *The Manchurian Candidate*, more mute and saddened in each successive scene, forced to bear witness to plots to destroy the republic Lincoln preserved.