Michael Downs

Trying to Find My Li'l All 'n All (Sitting on Top of the World)

A campground in Mississippi, a cold December dawn: I climbed from a sleeping bag, befuddled by the clarity of morning. Blinking into sun-glare off the steady surfaces of ponds. Stumbling across frozen, heaved ground that had been mud the night before. Coffee could have helped, but I didn't have any. My old dog nosed through dry leaves for the best place to piss. For two weeks she and I had traveled, a road-trip start to my fiftieth year. I'd envisioned back roads from Baltimore to Austin, campgrounds and books, barbecue, reunion with loved ones—my parents, especially, given Mom's flagging health and chronic pain. Kaimin would gain canine prestige by marking territory at the Clinton Library in Little Rock and Faulkner's Rowan Oak in Oxford.

That had been the plan, and much of it had come to pass. But this day involved a different agenda. Today I'd see a man about a song—and not just any song, but one that for more than two decades had held me with an inexplicable grip.

On its face, "Sitting on Top of the World" is just an old blues tune, first recorded in 1930 by the Mississippi Sheiks. But it's a shapeshifter, too, having been performed or recorded hundreds of times in everything from jazz to bluegrass to Texas swing, folk, and rock. Ray Charles, Jack White, the Carter Family, the Carolina Chocolate Drops, Bill Frisell, The Grateful Dead—even the "Bye, bye, Miss American Pie" guy: they've all done it. It's a song that works as well for Sweet Honey in the Rock's angelic a cappella harmonies as it does translated into a menacing, chrome-plated, leather-clad rock anthem for the outlaw-biker TV show, *Sons of Anarchy*.

Some days I listen to nothing else: "Sitting on Top of the World" straight through or on shuffle, and repeat. I've burned CDs full of "Worlds" as gifts.

My father loved his seventeen versions. Mom didn't. "It's the same thing over and over," she complained. "How can you listen to that?"

I had no answer, except "How could you *not*?"

What I heard was never the same thing over and over. There's something enigmatic and baffling about it, always a discovery in each new take, some fresh touch. Near the launch of my Just-Turned-Fifty Road Trip, I heard a local band perform "World" as the last number in their set—a goosebumps

Label from the original 78 record by the Mississippi Sheiks as shown on a historical marker in Bolton, MS. Photo by the author.

moment. Delighted by the song as if again for the first time, I understood that my trip could become something more than *Travels with Kaimin*. Call it a quest or pilgrimage, if that's not too grandiose. More humbly: the pursuit of an infatuation, an answer to my mother's question.

So, here I was, in a frozen-mud campground about twenty miles from the birthplace of Walter Vinson, who took primary credit for writing "World." "Now she's gone," Walter had warbled for the 1930 recording, "I don't worry," and that phrase echoed through decades: "Now she's gone, I don't worry," Walter sang, "I'm sitting on top of the world."

With light from a thin December sun, I dug around in my vehicle—one of those boxy things that's neither truck nor car—and retrieved my Dopp kit, unpacked a towel. Soon I'd drive to the home of Walter Vinson's nephew, himself now seventy-five years old, and with him listen to the song as performed by his uncle, and maybe learn from the bloodline something to explain how a tune so simple—just a basic 1-4-5 chord progression—would inspire eight decades and more of performances and revelations. Maybe I'd come to understand why it wouldn't let me go.

Shivering, I walked the rough earth to the campground's lavatory and shower house, which was built of plywood, had shaky pipes, and lacked heat. It was time to shave, because I wanted to show proper respect to the place that made the men who made the song, to the origins of mystery.

> Worked all the summer and all the fall,
> just trying to find my li'l all 'n all.
> Now she's gone, I don't worry.
> I'm sitting on top of the world.*

You might think "World" would be widely known, especially after its 2008 induction into the Grammy Hall of Fame, but that's not so. The song hasn't topped the charts since Herbert Hoover's administration, when Walter Vinson and the Mississippi Sheiks first recorded it. It won't spark name recognition at the level of "Amazing Grace" or "Stairway to Heaven"; friends who aren't musicians have rarely heard of it. Someone listening once asked me, "Didn't Cream do this?" (Answer: Yes.) Mostly, though, the song works on people the way a stranger's familiar face in a new city might. Ask, and it turns out you've never met; the person just has one of those faces. "Sitting on Top of the World" has one of those melodies.

The song's simple blues chord progression parallels its basic lyrical set-up. A rhyming couplet offers bad news, a reason to turn to drink, to leave home, to be alone:

> Went to the station, down in the yard
> Go'n get me a freight train, work's done got hard

But in every case, the lament is followed by that refrain:

> Now she's gone, I don't worry
> I'm sitting on top of the world.

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*Author's note: This version of the lyrics is from the 2007 Carolina Chocolate Drops album *Heritage*.

Even if you've never heard the song, you might recognize that eight-syllable hook, which is pretty close to a phrase from Robert Johnson's "Come on in My Kitchen," recorded some half a dozen years later than the Sheiks' "World." Blues historians have argued that Johnson took the phrasing for "It's-GON'-to-be-RAIN-ing-OUT-doors" from "I'm-SITT-ing-on-TOP-of-THE-world," and the similarity is clear in The Robert Cray Band's live version (from *Cookin' in Mobile*, 2010).

In both songs the phrase descends, notes dropping to a final exhausted, unstressed syllable. That prosody is suited for Johnson's rainy day, but in the Sheiks' song the refrain's language is happy—an ironic counterpoint to the verses and to blues songs in general, which we expect to complain and cavil and lament. She's gone, Walter Vinson sings, but I'm happy. I've got to leave town to find work, growls Howlin' Wolf—I'm happy. I'm so happy, sings Taj Mahal on 1993's *Dancing the Blues*, that I'm having a party! "Let me fly!" he shouts.

What do we believe, the sad music or the happy words? The irony or the earnestness? Do we believe Walter or Wolf or Taj? Is the song's speaker dissembling or truly happy? How are we to know? What is happiness anyway?

That simple song? It's complicated.

A few weeks before I began my road trip, I sat at a roadhouse bar in rural Maryland. Matt Douglass, to my right, set his glass of Stella on the bar.

"It's not really the truth," he said. "He wants her back."

Also there was Matt's music partner, Sam Nitzberg, wearing a ponytail. We were sharing a Greek pizza and talking about "World." Matt and Sam front a band called The Old Part of Town, and their history in music covers so many years they had called their latest effort *Grayest Hits*. It was their show that expanded my road trip's scope.

"The guy's lying to himself," Sam agreed. "He sings, 'I'm sitting on top of the world, baby.' Meanwhile, it's a blues song. It's got all these backward things going on."

True, about those backward things. "It was in the spring one summer day," Vinson sings on the original recording. And if that phrase doesn't rejig your brain for a moment, try: "She's gone to stay." The wordplay sets things off balance—neither here nor there, not this nor that, a sad song about happiness, a happy song about sadness. No wonder that when Vinson first played his new tune for Lonnie Chatmon, fiddler and guiding spirit of the Mississippi Sheiks, Lonnie reportedly said, "What kind of a song is that?"

Over the years, the Sheiks' original six verses have been altered, added to, deleted. So Willie Nelson sings how it was in the summer and *not* in the fall

that "we spent all our money on alcohol." And Bob Wills, who made several marriage vows, admits he "[n]ever had one woman at a time; we've always had seven, eight, or nine." Taj Mahal adds a line about his baby jumping out of the shower with a towel around her . . . feet.

In fact, of the versions in my library, I count more than two dozen verses that are distinct from those on the original 1930 recording. Even the Sheiks may have changed verses; rewriting lyrics is a blues and folk music tradition.

For the finale that night when I heard Matt and Sam, they sent the mandolin and bass off stage, taking on "World" just the two of them. They sang four verses, only one of which reaches back to the Sheiks' original. Matt was picking on a resonator, the E string tuned to a low D, and singing lead. Sam handled a twelve-string and a harmonica, and sang harmonies. They played "World" as a duo, they told me, and at a slower tempo, because they like the song best when it's intimate and wistful. There were times that evening when Sam's harmonies almost sounded like whispers.

The first "World" Matt ever remembers hearing is Cream's—*not* whispery—with Eric Clapton reveling in distortion and Jack Bruce singing as if the words "I'm sitting on top of the world" taste bitter and need to be spit from his lips. For Matt and Sam's current interpretation, the main influence is a cover by the folky-blues guitarist Chris Smither, from his *It Ain't Easy* album, released in 1984.

Smither offers the purest, most intimate version I've heard—a voice and a guitar, and outright melancholy. Every verse refers to ruined love. In the last, the singer asks:

> If you didn't want my peaches, why'd you shake my tree?
> You get out of my orchard, let my peaches be.

The first time I ever heard Chris Smither was on an evening in 1991 at the apartment of a woman I was dating. "Oh, my baby left me," he sang from her CD player, "she said she's gone to stay," and the song was so damn beautiful and sad. Later, maybe a few days or a week, at home and with Howlin' Wolf on my turntable, I heard his gravelly voice sing, "she gone and left me, she gone to stay," and my brain finally did what brains do: surprised, and a little astonished that I hadn't recognized the Smither's as a song I knew, I borrowed *It Ain't Easy* and listened to his and Wolf's "World" one after the other.

Many covers I knew—like Van Halen's effort at Roy Orbison's "Pretty Woman," or Jimi's "All Along the Watchtower"—showed me that a song could be repeated and even made new, but that the song's final effect—its emotional impact—proved a constant. A song had its own mass and direction, and who-

ever performed it worked within that momentum, never escaping the song's gravity. Smither and Howlin' Wolf, though, offered distinct experiences, as separate in character as Clark Kent and Superman, as a greenback note and a Susan B. Anthony coin.

The same song. Yet not.

A couple dozen covers and almost a quarter-century later, on day three of my road trip, I found myself in a Nashville coffee "parlor" with Tim Easton, a songwriter who made "World" the final cut on his 2006 album, *Ammunition*, a folky-Americana-roots-rock collection put out by New West records, which is also home to Steve Earle and John Hiatt.

"Beards and biscuits," Tim told me. That's the pride of this coffee house: flaky biscuits and waiters' beards groomed like wondrous topiary. The place was crowded, and most everyone stared into a laptop or computer tablet. My coffee came specially roasted from hundreds of miles away in Brooklyn, New York, was carried to our table in a carafe, and presented on a rough-hewn board. Five dollars a cup. I prayed one would be enough.

Tim was rumpled, unshaven, boyish at forty-something. The swollen bridge of his nose showed the telltale pink lines of recent skin cancer surgery—stitches removed just that morning. He was functioning with little sleep, having spent the 3 AM hour watching videos of Taj Mahal and Sam Chatmon, Lonnie's younger brother and also a Mississippi Sheik, performing "World." I'd found a simpatico soul.

"It's the uplifting nature of the song," he said, explaining its popularity among musicians. "No matter what's going on, I'm sitting on top of the world." He paused. "That's how I feel coming out of surgery."

"World" ended up on *Ammunition* more by accident than design. At a recording studio, with other musicians waiting, Tim played the song as a sound check. Combining slide with finger-picking in the ragtimey style named for guitarist Merle Travis, he offered up what he felt at that moment, changing a verse so that his baby called him from Ohio rather than El Paso.

Said come back baby, oooo, I need you so.

"My wife," he said. They lived in Ohio, then. When he sang that phrase, he thought of himself on the road and her back home. As he talked, the emotion he felt those years ago seems right there on the surface of his skin. I imagined intensity passing from his fingertips to guitar strings.

Anyway, he liked the sound check so much he put it on the album.

He first taught himself "World" as an homage to Doc Watson's classic 1964 version, a gentle and cordial take Watson recorded with his son Merle (named for the aforementioned Travis). But once Tim learned it, he changed it.

"I started doing it my own way," he told me. "I ended up putting my life into it." And because life changes, so too the song. When onstage, he'd slow it down or speed it up, add a verse, repeat a refrain, switch key, change mood and tone.

"I'll never do it the same way twice," he said. For an example, listen to the *Ammunition* version, then find Tim on YouTube, playing the song in a club in Brussels. The Belgian "World" is grittier, rougher, more dangerous, more Delta, more devil. It's a song for darkness, unfiltered cigarettes, beer.

"I'm not proud of the fact that I can't do the song the same way," he said. "It drives bandmates crazy. It's just the way it is."

When we finished, I thanked him, and he moved to chat with a few locals. Outside, gray clouds hung low and funky. A drizzle defied gravity, water just floating in air. Next door at a Goodwill shop, unshaven men hunkered into frayed and stained coats, escaping the drizzle by pacing under an awning, and I put that vision together with artisanal coffee and iPads, remembering what Sam Nitzberg said back in Maryland: "World's" got all these backwards things going on. Where I stood was like that, too.

The first reason for this road trip is still the first reason: Mom and Dad, slumping health and age. My last visit had been in January to mark their fiftieth wedding anniversary, almost a year ago. The gap felt too long, but before Texas I made a detour to celebrate a friend in Arkansas, a grandmother figure to me and my wife Sheri.

Let me introduce you to Ellen: Imagine the tiniest woman you know. Add impossible optimism, verve, and generosity. So that she's not all rainbows and unicorns, give her two fingers of bourbon and an Irish wink. When the Razorbacks kick off, get out of the way. Make her a widow who still misses him three decades later. Put her through spinal surgery and rehab—in her late nineties. Know that when she says, "Bless your heart," she means it. Now, say hello to her one-hundredth year: Happy birthday, Ellen S.

At an Arkansas airport, Sheri stepped off a plane to join Kaimin and me for this leg of the road trip. A few hours later, we joined Ellen's family and friends for the first of the centennial celebrations: the devouring of smoked pig. Ellen took Sheri's hand, and I knew Sheri would happily hold on all night.

When we had lived in Fayetteville, Ellen—then in her eighties—had hiked with us through woods, mulled the mint for our first Derby juleps, taken us to her church, joined us for concerts and football games, and enwrapped us with warmth and a moment-by-moment delight in the world—which she did for many people. Since then, we've wanted to be like her, and know we aren't always, and try anyway.

The next day we celebrated Ellen again with more than two hundred folks at the Fayetteville Country Club: a slide show and toasts, satay and shrimp. That's when we learned how earlier in the week the Golf Channel had sent a crew to film Ellen out on the links because, though a soon-to-be centenarian, she still played a weekly round. In sprinkling rain and temps in the low forties, Ellen putted her way around a green for the cameras.

Now, Ellen took a microphone from her son, who had asked her to say a few words. She thanked us: "All of you here," she said, "prove the saying that 'The winds of grace are all around us. We need only lift our sails.'"

Then she recalled her beloved husband, Jimmy, and what had been his favorite psalm. "This is the day the Lord has made," Ellen said. "Rejoice in it, and be glad."

That Old Testament lyric stayed with me for days, even as Sheri boarded a plane back to Baltimore, even as I played again and again the other song that gave me such satisfaction even as we rode, the old dog and I, onward toward Texas and heartache.

My parents, say my brother and sister, always wear their best faces when I visit. I'm the oldest, the prodigal who left home and never moved back. For me, Mom and Dad smile and straighten up. If not atop the world, at least they're resting on pillowed recliners.

But I know. We all know.

We know how Mom fights daily with life and believes herself the loser. Her body betrayed her more than a decade ago, and she's lashed back at her faithless flesh and bone, mostly with prescribed meds, television, and a couch. Sometimes the drugs make things better, sometimes worse. On bad days, she sleeps or goes again to a hospital. On good days, she anticipates the bad days. We know that Dad manages the household and Mom's meds and drives her to appointments—sometimes several a week, even a couple-few a day. We know he makes lists and sleeps erratically, usually in an easy chair with the television tuned to golf. For respite, he visits fast-food restaurants where for hours he reads a newspaper. Most of their meals come from such places, because

neither of them cooks. It's not a joyless life; sometimes they cheer at my niece's basketball games or admire the ballpoint pens my nephew crafts from wood. But it's not what they'd hoped for after all those years at a gas station and a transcriptionist's desk. It's not an RV and western two-lanes and antiques malls. "Stupid doctors," says Mom, because they can't give back the body she had twenty years ago. She casts a hard eye at the wheelchair on which she relies, says, "I hate this thing." Dad sets his jaw, makes another list.

We know all that. What we don't know is how to help. We hear *cellulitis, spinal stenosis, lymphodema.* We hear *dropped wrist, depression, amputation, forgetfulness.* My brother and sister and their families do heroic work, but it's never enough. I visit too rarely, telephone from another time zone.

"Everything's good," Dad tells me.

"Doing okay," Mom says.

Then, sometimes, she cries.

We know this grief will end, but only with that final one.

While in Texas, I hoped to visit with Austin-based Elizabeth McQueen, who'd performed a ground-breaking "World"—a vocal duet with Willie Nelson. Back then she was part of the band Asleep at the Wheel. (Her husband still is; everything's copacetic.) The 2009 album *Willie and the Wheel* began with an idea from Jerry Wexler, the legendary producer. For decades, he'd wanted Willie to record songs from the repertoire of Bob Wills, the famed King of western swing. Among those was a sardonic bad-boy "World," with Wills playing the role of heart-breaker.

> Late in the evening, honey-babe, way after school . . .
> remember, darling, we broke the rules.
> But now you're gone, I don't worry—
> I'm sitting on top of the world.

In a filmed version, Wills leans toward the camera as if whispering "remember darling" into a woman's ear, then raises his dark eyebrows, lifts his arms like wings, and grins ("now you're gone") to show how he relishes his freedom from her. Honey-babes, they're plentiful—and easy pickings.

But come 2009, there was Elizabeth McQueen with swagger of her own, to show how honey-babes handle the bad boys.

I gave away a day during my trip to meet her on the grounds of an Austin elementary school, surrounded by booths where craftspeople offered their wares to Christmas shoppers. This being Austin, the Cherrywood Art Fair

offered lots of Day of the Dead iconography. Also: live music. Elizabeth was to perform near the lunch hour, just voice and a guitar, red boots and black denim.

Her duet with Willie changed the song, she told me. "It got a lot more playful," she said. "Now it's two people trying to say they're better off, to up the ante about how they were enjoying not being with each other."

Elizabeth sings on the record,

> Keep talking about leaving,
> Let's see if you can,

and Willie replies,

> I can get a woman
> Quick as you get a man.

"It's a pretty multi-layered song," she told me. "The narrator is so unreliable, which is why I think it's great. It's a universal way to talk to oneself after a break-up."

If there's another "World" duet out there besides Willie and Elizabeth's, I've yet to find it. Elizabeth loved the challenge. "How do you make it sound like two people trading sexy insults," she said, "come-ons that are also insults?"

During recording, she sang with an attitude she imagined Mary J. Blige would bring to western swing. Then the band and Willie hit the road. "Totally rad" is what she wrote on a blog to describe sharing the stage with "the jazzmaster of country music" and his "behind-the-beat free association way of singing."

Live, the song's give-and-take grew riskier, the insults sexier. "There's a reason he's Willie Nelson," she told me. "Willie is totally present. He actually looked me in the eye the entire time. And it's Willie, so it's never the same way twice. I'm looking at Willie Nelson, and he's looking at me, I'm looking at him."

That eye contact opened her up, made her vulnerable and connected all at once, even as she pretended to be a woman jaded and sassy and savvy about heartbreak. She was more than singing. With Willie, the song encompassed her, and she lived in it: "Well, I never have one girl at a time," sang Willie, and Elizabeth gave back: "Oh, don't I know it."

Maybe she'll perform "World" again one day, she told me. But she left Asleep at the Wheel to pursue other types of music. Lately, she'd been into remixes of jazzy stuff, adding hip-hop or noise rock, or reggae. Anything to make a song danceable. How would "World" sound with a drum machine? she wondered. She laughed at the notion. But a moment later, it seemed possible.

With that song, she said, "you could do anything."

The next day, I left Texas. My visit had lasted six days. During that time, I'd helped mark Dad's seventy-third birthday by grilling New York strips and roasting Brussels sprouts, a favorite he hadn't eaten in years. We knocked off a bottle of Chianti, too. We shared booths—Mom, Dad, and I—at McDonald's, Burger King, Denny's, Carl's Jr., and Steak and Shake. Often we enjoyed ourselves, but their patience with life, with ill health, with each other, sometimes grew short. My sister had warned me of Mom's decline since my last visit, and it was true the eleven months had roughed her up. She'd had toes amputated and now spent more and more time in her wheelchair. Her weakened back curled her forward when she sat, her head craned left as if her neck couldn't straighten. Now and then we caught her nervously picking at scrapes on the backs of her hands. Her habit of complaint—about waitresses, pain, TV shows, Dad, more pain—salted the air.

The morning I left, she bent forward from her wheelchair, wiping the base of the kitchen garbage pail with a disinfecting sheet. Wiping, wiping as I waited.

> I seen a little gal all dressed in blue,
> Said, Little woman, what's the matter with you?

"Judy," Dad said. "Your son is here to say goodbye."

"I know," she said. Then she stood. She stood and wrapped her arms around my waist, pressed her head against my chest. I held her and felt the shudder of her sobs, and I cried, too.

"I want to go with you," she said. "I want to get in the car and go and live in Baltimore."

Outside, she sat in her wheelchair on the sidewalk, this woman who had been my mother and still was, but also wasn't, and who knew for how long? Dad stood next to her and waved as I drove off. They stayed on that sidewalk, watching, until I turned a corner. I know this because I watched, too.

And later, on rural Texas highways, I played that song, because I didn't know what else the hell to do.

but now she's gone and now she's gone now she's gone now she's

That day I drove through all of east Texas into Louisiana, and through Louisiana to the Mississippi River, crossing at Vicksburg, and then I drove more, until through darkness I followed road signs to that family-owned campground where I parked in mud. The next morning I woke to that frozen ground and

stumbled coffee-less to that shower house so as to be presentable before the nephew of Walter Vinson, the Mississippi Sheik who took credit for "Sitting on Top of the World."

In the unheated plywood shower house, the mirror was cracked. The water, though hot, trickled. What passed for a bath mat was the sort of thing you use to wipe muddy boots before going indoors: plastic grass with a crushed white plastic flower in the corner. My mother's voice, so clear in my mind, muttered, *It's awful, it's awful.*

The nephew, seventy-five, rested in a big easy chair, his eyes closed as his uncle's reedy tenor filled the room. In one hand he held reading glasses, twirling them gently as he murmured verses, sang the refrain. Sunlight from the window behind him threw his face—broad, flat, and gentle as the singer's—into shadow and silhouette, so the nephew could have been mistaken for the uncle.

"The words of that song," Bobby Vinson said, after it had finished playing. "That could go a lot of ways."

I asked him what in the words or melody recalled his uncle's personality. "He had a lot of women," he said, then laughed. "I can remember women, good lord."

Women. Women and parties. Parties and card games and laughter and lies and stories. And "a big old country steel guitar." And more songs and more laughter.

"Black people tell everything as a joke and as entertainment," said the nephew, "even if it was a tragedy."

Lost job, lost love, lost home. There were so many reasons for grief in the 1920s and 1930s for a black man in Mississippi—even one who could entertain white people with his guitar and voice, who sang for what was then the country's most popular African-American string band, and who wrote an everlasting song that turned pain into a comfort, maybe a laugh. There was more than enough strife to send such a man to Chicago to escape the evil of home. "There's just something about Bolton, Mississippi," explained the nephew. "It ain't never been fair."

The nephew came to know his uncle well in those Chicago days, having moved there himself in the early 1960s to teach high school math. He left Mississippi, he said, for the same reason as his uncle: "Nobody wants to be a bum. You always want to take care of yourself."

Walter took care of himself with that big old country steel guitar. "He really made his living singing," said his nephew. "I can't think of nothing else he

ever done." The uncle played South Side venues and hosted rent parties, charging people a little money to come to his rooms for games of whist and to drink beer and listen to his songs and jokes and lies and stories. He kept company with a woman the family called "Granddad," given her bourbon preference.

"You had to be able to cook and listen to him sing," said the nephew. "If you could do that you could be his wife, or—you know what I'm saying."

The Sheiks were long gone, having made their last record in about 1935. But then came the Rolling Stones and Cream and so much interest in early blues, and in 1974 a label called Mamlish gathered some of those old Sheiks recordings, including "Sitting on Top of the World," and pressed *Stop and Listen Blues*. Lonnie Chatmon, the fiddler, was decades dead, but Walter Vinson talked with the men who wrote the liner notes. He told them he penned "World" on the road to Itta Bena, Mississippi, after he and Lonnie had played a white dance in Greenwood. Later, when Walter played the song for black passersby, they dropped nineteen dollars in his bucket. That's how he knew the song would be popular: nineteen dollars.

A year after the Mamlish record appeared, Walter was dead, aged either seventy-five or seventy-six. He'd been born on Groundhog Day, the nephew told me. In the family, they knew him as Walter Jacob to distinguish him from *his* father, Walter Manson Vinson. The uncle sometimes used Walter Jacobs (with the "s") as a pseudonym with the Sheiks.

Walter Manson never married Walter Jacob's mother. But he gave the boy genes to play music. A mandolin picker, Walter Manson earned enough through music and carpentry to buy 180 acres southwest of town. Vinson Quarters, founded in 1915, remains the family's farm, where the nephew raises cattle, and where in his living room he twirled his glasses and sang along to his uncle's song. The Sheiks played that song at a walking pace, and it's easy to imagine Walter Jacob humming this melody as he footed the distance from town to Vinson Quarters and back again. He preferred town—"got tired of smellin' mule farts," he once said—with its theater and railroad tracks, trains regular to Shreveport or Meridian. In town sits a small house, just south of those tracks, that was his last address in Bolton. It's a ruin now, and after I thanked Mr. Bobby Vinson, I drove to that ruin on Champion Hill Road and parked at a school across the street. Nearby, boys played basketball during their school recess.

Elsewhere in Bolton, on a vacant lot on Texas Street, you can find a bright blue marker, part of the Mississippi Blues Trail, planted near the homestead of the Chatmon family. The marker tells their story and that of the Sheiks, and it

includes a photograph of Walter Jacob Vinson, guitar in hand, standing outside his Chicago home.

Historical marker outside the old Chatmon house in Bolton, MS. Photo by the author.

Here, though, at his last address in Bolton, nothing makes note of music history. Harassed by overgrown bushes and trees, the house sits back of a drainage ditch. Its metal roof curls up, but the rafters look strong. The two doors have gone missing, and the front porch boards decay into the dirt. Indoors are three rooms, where Kaimin and I took care that we didn't step on rotten boards or broken glass. There wasn't much of either, and the walls were mostly clean, no graffiti or penciled song lyrics. No evidence of Walter Vinson at all. But there was a fireplace where a man with a guitar and a chair might warm himself and feel the floorboards shudder as trains rumbled by.

That night, I drove another Mississippi interstate in the dark, this time to bunk with friends in Oxford. For once I drove in silence, and I let the day and weeks behind me crowd around.

Bobby Vinson had said, "Those musicians must have been miracle workers. White folks *liked* it."

Tim Easton had marveled that "World" was featured in a Hollywood movie set during the Civil War, sounding as if it belonged—though it was written sixty-five years after Appomattox. "The mark of a perfect song," he said, is that "It can be altered, revised, rejuvenated, all the time. For eternity."

Then another Nashville man returned to mind, one who had filled the pockets of his orange bib with folded copies of a newspaper sold by homeless people. I met him on a street corner in a drizzle, and he gave Kaimin treats and swiveled his hips at drivers in passing cars. His sun-baked face looked like terra-cotta, and he grinned at the dog. "I'm out here," he said, "making people laugh and be happy."

And then came again that very morning when I stood shivering naked in the cold—a trickle of water and a crappy bath mat putting me in mind of my mother, of pain and bitterness and soul-deep sorrow. In that same moment I imagined Ellen S., the hundred-year-old widow, faced with the same shower house—her voice cheerier, game for whatever the world might give.

How do we do it? That's what I wondered, staring at that trickle of water, the broken mirror. Because, world as it is, we hurt and fly both. I'm fifty years old and I've been searching for a song, just an old pop tune for fiddle and guitar. A vessel.

But into that vessel people have poured so much—the aches of emptied hearts, the yearnings of hollow stomachs, the lies and truths of happiness, everyone's all-in-all. I listen to that back-and-forth miracle: joy and melancholy mixed, the quaver of a note and a full-throated whoop, in every moment a new imbalance. Lord, it sounds like life. Or lives. What could describe it all, except Walter Vinson's song in its endless variety. Performed and received by old and young, women and men, dancing and crippled, heart-broken and heart-glad and every heart between.

That shower water smelled of rotten eggs—sulfur from the well below—but it steamed, and someone had stocked the bathroom with body-and-hair gels that smelled good. After I dried off and dressed, I took old Kaimin for a walk around the ponds. The wind blew leaves across the scraped earth of the campground, and my fingers went numb from the cold. Ducks and geese followed us expecting bread or other food scraps, and a Great Blue Heron flew a lazy arc over the water. High in a bare tree sat an egret, white as a rip in the sky. In three days, I'd be home.