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RECKONINGS

The Elvis Room

Mama is digging through a cabinet, looking for a spare picture frame, when she pulls out a cassette tape in its see-through case. She hands it to me.

“I thought this was lost forever,” I say, turning it over.

“You can have it,” she says and smiles, then goes on rummaging.

The cassette tape is beige, affixed with a generic label that looks like it’s been soaked in tea. Two lines at the top. Next to *Title*, it says “My Way.” Next to *Artist*, someone misspelled my last name before correcting it with Sharpie. The tape coiled inside is mostly bright yellow, which means the recording is short. There’s a lot of space left on the tape.

On a road trip in 1978, my parents stopped in Memphis on a hundred-degree dead-summer day to pay their respects at Graceland. They were twenty-two and twenty-three, already married a couple years. Elvis Presley’s humble mansion wasn’t yet open to the public, but there were souvenir shops set up across the street. The strip mall is still there today, billed as the Official Graceland Outlet, much of its parking lot reserved for employees of the new Presley exhibition center/entertainment complex. But in ’78, my parents pulled over on suburban Elvis Presley Boulevard and browsed the shoddy postcards and teddy bears, then walked into a storefront called Graceland Recording Studio. My dad stepped into the booth, which was just a small closet lined with cast-off carpet and insulation. Inside, his head of long wavy-brown hair bumping against the ceiling, he put on headphones, aimed his voice at a microphone, and made his own Elvis record.

In our house, Elvis Presley always got a bigger room than I did. To be fair, my parents had him first. We were the only house on the block with a boombox propped on an empty kitchen chair, *Little-sister-don’t-you* jumping against the clink of rinsed dishes. A hushed Saturday made suddenly dramatic by the hit-your-knees *searchin’ for you!* of “Kentucky Rain.” A tongue-in-cheek *Uhhh thank yuh, thank yuh very much* whenever someone passed the salt. But in our house, Elvis wasn’t just in the air.

No, Elvis had an actual room. The King of Rock and Roll is the many-headed icon of a shrine that still fills a large room in the lower level of Mama’s house.

The walls are a kaleidoscope of Presley’s face: calendars, clocks, spoons, Elvis in leather, Elvis in rhinestones, Elvis-on-Wood, long-lashed Velvet Elvises on canvases of every size and crudeness. A glass display case is stocked with porcelain statuettes, karate-chop action figures, *Elvis Is Alive!* VHS tapes, and a cardboard model of Graceland. For decades, these objects have never moved. Nothing even gets dusted.

At the center of the Elvis Room is The Bust. It doesn't really look like Elvis; the vibe is much more Mary-Magdalene-in-drag. His face is textured like chalk and painted in pastels, and there's a sheen to the black matte of his hair. His parted pink lips curl softly upward. He measures two feet tall and two feet across at his widest point, where the shoulders of his white plaster jumpsuit jut off in opposite directions. His eyes—a little askew—are as blue as his silk scarf and tilted towards heaven. Blocking his view like a styrene halo is a powder-blue lampshade with a trim of burnished gold.

The lamp sits at eye-level atop a sound system that was state-of-the-art in the '90s, rising from shelves cluttered with CDs. Gold and platinum records checkerboard the walls: they're sales awards plaques, certified by the Recording Industry Association of America, bestowed on my dad back when he managed a Musicland, one in a long-defunct chain of record stores. His store was the largest in the St. Louis metro area, and so he reported its sales to the Billboard charts. In the '80s, label reps would still fly in to record stores to make sure their artists were displayed prominently, persuading managers with tickets and backstage passes. Tucked in front of a LaserDisc player is a framed photo of the time my dad met Lionel Richie backstage somewhere, sometime before I was born. According to the family account, my dad made a joke, to which Lionel Richie exclaimed, "Dave . . . you knock! me! *out*!" I don't know what the joke was, but the photo, Richie's expression, is our proof that a moment passed between them.

An only child learns early: a lot happened before we showed up. We get ab- sorbed into a society of two. The intimate culture of my parents took root in summer 1975, when they were given ten-dollar tickets to see Elvis perform in the small arena in their Indiana hometown. They were nineteen, too young for Elvis. He had scored his first hits the year they were born. By '75, Elvis was bloated kitsch, both beloved and reviled. Forty-year-old Elvis did karate moves and vamped with a cape across the stage, and housewives caught the baby-blue scarves he threw into the front row like sweaty sacraments. At the climax of a gospel medley, he looked like he might keel over or implode. America's biggest music star had long been hurtling into his black hole of self-destruction, and everybody knew it. But my dad was curious about *what Elvis meant*. According to Mama, seeing him live in concert "cemented the fascination." He loved his voice. Their friends laughed and asked, *Why would you go see Elvis?* When I ask, Mama says, "We just thought he was beautiful."

My dad died when he was forty-seven and I was about to turn seventeen. We were very close. He bought me my first records, recommended music from Hendrix to Alanis Morrissette to N.W.A. He left Chaucer and Tom Robbins on my bed- side table. We shared subscriptions to *Rolling Stone* and *Spin*, played basketball for hours in the driveway, and saw stupid movies together—*Half Baked*, *Austin Powers*, *Pootie Tang*, *Dude Where's My Car?*—turning to each other in the dark theater with tears streaming down our cheeks. He was monumental to me: six- four, 240 pounds, salt-and-pepper hair, handsome in a way that made people comment, smart and sharp but gentle to his core. So gentle that even as a kid I saw how easily he could be hurt, that he needed protection. For longer than any of us could remember, he struggled with alcoholism and depression. By the time I was a teenager, I was angry—even as I understood how he felt, recognized his darkness in myself. I was angry because I could still clearly see the flashes of who he had been and who he

could be behind his addictions. One morning, he woke up to his skin yellow and swollen. Less beautiful, suddenly. He asked to go to the hospital. I don't like to remember the artifacts of those last weeks: a stack of dialysis reports, the stuffed bunny Mama tucked into his shirt pocket in the casket, the mostly empty bottles I found hidden in corners and closets until I graduated high school. Those things, we didn't keep.

The Elvis Room is a collection, sure, but *shrine* is the better word. Meaning, it's not curated but haphazard—strange memorabilia discovered in the wild—and very personal. There's the custom-made neon light, which beams *Elvis* in cursive glass lettering, a violet glow you can see a quarter mile down the road. There's the photo of my young parents at a Halloween party: my dad svelte in a white jumpsuit, his features obscured by a rubber Elvis mask. Mama's dolled up as Raggedy Ann, her red hair caricatured with a yarn wig, real-life freckles highlighted with marker, clutching my dad at the waist and chest and grinning, even though the mask looks like it's melting his face.

When playing tour guide for first-time visitors to the Elvis Room, I point out one bust in particular. Made of thick white porcelain stuck to an ugly brown base and embossed *ELVIS, 1935–1977*, it looks rough-hewn but was mass-produced. I turn the bust around to where a brass plate reads *McCormick Distilling, Weston, Mo*. I unscrew the corked knob to show where you pour out the liquor.

Fans of Elvis forged him into a weird saint, his purity put into relief by the weakness or excess that killed him. In *Dead Elvis: A Chronicle of a Cultural Obsession*, Greil Marcus describes this moment from a phone-in radio show: "I have a friend who has a shrine to Elvis in his bathroom," the caller says, flummoxed. "When you flush the toilet, these lights light up. He's got Quaalude bottles in front of it."

The phenomenon of Elvis shrines in private homes has been around nearly as long as Elvis himself. But the practice of hoarding Presley ephemera as a form of devotion took on a decidedly more religious bent after his death in 1977. He died at age forty-two of cardiac arrest likely caused by his abuse of pharmaceutical drugs. In *Afterlife as Afterimage: Understanding Posthumous Fame*, historian Erika Doss writes, "Associating material culture abundance with Elvis piety is not only a sign of being a true fan, but of being true to Elvis: fans repeatedly say that by collecting and displaying Elvis memorabilia they are 'taking care' of Elvis, keeping his memory alive and rescuing him from historical oblivion." Many fans took the memory-keeping to the extreme: denying that Elvis died at all.

I haven't heard my dad's voice since I was sixteen. As far as I know, this tape is the only recording of him that exists. I've heard that the first thing you forget about someone is not their smell or touch or face—there's a difference between types of sensory memories. Our brains are much better at converting visual memory, called *iconic*, into longer-term storage. We can scan an image and close our eyes and see it still. On demand, I conjure my dad's face, the particular light of an eye glinting between dark lashes and ruddy cheek, an expression that was never exactly captured in a photograph. I'd know his cologne immediately across a crowded mall. My grandmother says sometimes she still feels the pads of his fingers squeezing her shoulders when she needs it.

We can't do that with auditory, or echoic, memory. *Echo-ic*, echo. By definition, the sound is fading, already and always going away. Of course, we would recognize a familiar voice if it somehow returned, snuck up behind us. But after absence— and it's shorter than you'd think—it's almost impossible to call up another's voice with our own.

When I try to imagine my dad's voice, I can only *describe* it: versatile, rangy, warm like a woodwind. A voice with an ironic, inviting edge. A voice that in- structed, pleaded, reeled. When things were bad, I learned to listen for gradients of lucidity in the give between words, in a garble at the back of the throat. From a note of his voice, I could tell how far gone he was, how drunk or high, how lost in his own memory, how far from being my dad. But now when I try to *hear* his voice again, I'm clouded by doubt—*was it pitched higher or lower? Is that laugh his* real *laugh, or was it forced? Am I making it up?*

Perhaps we lose the voice because the "voice" is not technically a body part, not an entity unto itself. The voice is created when two tiny vocal cords tighten as air pushes through, and the tongue, lips, and teeth give form to sound. Voice is a mutation towards a need, a trick of evolution, totally unique to the capacity of its vehicle.

And Elvis was quite a vehicle—container of a supreme voice. Critic Henry Pleasants called it "an extraordinary compass." Robert Plant said Elvis "created a euphoria within himself"—a transfiguration. The voice is rafter-rattling, a glorious and spasmodic wail. It is also, by turns, a hiccup, a come-on. Elvis was a baritone *and* a tenor with a range beyond two octaves. The voice was a risk-taker, a shapeshifter of emotive forms: soul shouting, operatic bombast, tender lullaby. The voice was a mimic and thief, filtered through the quirks of self. The voice could deepen or obliterate the meaning of a lyric. That voice—recorded, referenced, remixed—endures: an echoic memory the world is not allowed to forget.

In the first home video where I appear, I'm alone. I'm an infant in only a diaper, with light curls and a pink slash across my lip where stitches are healing. In the background, you can hear the rolling tempo and gale-force chorus of Presley's "Burning Love"—*just a-hunk-a-hunk-a—ahhhh!* You can hear my parents' voices, my name. I stand, wide-legged and shaky on the brick hearth, then start to rock back and forth.

I've been trying to recall my dad's voice for a long time. I've sat alone, eyes closed, listening for it. Gone searching for it in vinyl records and far-flung cities. I've imagined it into other bodies. I've tried molding my own voice into something approximating his. I know his catalogue of wounds, his flashes of greatness, his potential. Who else could do it, who was closer?

As soon as Mama hands the tape to me, I want to play it—but I hesitate. Even the highest-quality analog tape wasn't built to last. My dad's tape, recorded in 1978 at the height of the technology's short heyday, looks as decrepit as the beige strip mall where he made it. What if I stuff this artifact into a tape deck and the mechanism swallows it whole? In online forums, users recount attempts to play old cassettes only to hear the sound of the tape cinching and crinkling: "all of a sudden, it's *squeak squeak*, then *jam*! Loop-mash city!"

Sound information on tapes is encoded on magnetic particles, bound within a polyester-urethane adhesive. Exposed to heat and humidity, the tapes become sticky, and eventually begin to shed pieces of the binding, a condition called *sticky shed syndrome*. In "Orpheus Unglued," ethnomusicologist Dr. Michael Heller writes, "In the squealing instant of shed, tape ceases to function as memory . . . The archive breaks down at the very instant we wish to hear it." He equates this moment of loss with the moment that mythic Orpheus turned back to look at Eurydice—and in doing so, sealed their separation forever.

The analog-heads in the internet forums recommend the only known way to salvage tape, which even then only makes the tape playable for one week. The remedy? It's literally *baking*: Remove the tape's plastic casing, stick it in the oven, and cook at a low temperature. I imagined watching my relic melt and catch fire, burning away all it held.

Instead, I email the local photo center to inquire whether they digitize vintage audio, and play it cool, mentioning casually that the recording is "precious." An employee named Mike assures me they can handle this, but he explains that an old tape might get stuck together—a glitch called *crossover*, where data seeps between layers so it sounds like two tracks playing at once. There might be literal fungus growing on the tape. He writes, "Just letting you know that it is worth doing, because it's precious, but it may not sound like when it was originally recorded." He signs off, "We will do what we can. Mike."

My head swims. Should I risk destroying the tape in the attempt to hear his voice again? Or is it better to hold onto the tape and preserve its potential, as something pure but inaccessible? I mean, what happened to Eurydice after Orpheus *almost* led her back into the world of the living? When she died a second time, was there even less of her? I mean, look what they did to Elvis. Look what Elvis did to himself.

I can picture the room where my dad made the tape. I've been there with him and without him, wandered those souvenir shops, spun the mobiles of keychains. I'd been to Graceland before I'd been to kindergarten. We drove through Memphis nearly every year on the way to see family on the Gulf Coast. We rolled south from St. Louis on I-55, following the Mississippi River. Even if we didn't stop, my dad marked our passing through Memphis. As we neared the exit, he reached into the cup-holder and put on the sunglasses he kept there. The shades were cheap plastic, flaking silver. Aviator-style lenses, a chunky frame wrapping around the nose and ears. Etched into the arm: a lightning bolt and the letters *TCB*. He'd curl a lip and we laughed. He'd pop Paul Simon's *Graceland* out of the tape deck (what else could you listen to on '90s road trips?) and cue up an Elvis steamroller like "Suspicious Minds." *We're caught in a trap.* He'd turn up the volume real loud. *I can't walk out*. With the chorus strings soaring at our backs, we'd fly over the river, whether shining or sludgy, all three of us boogying in our seats and trying to sing like Elvis, trying to mark this passing—*because I love you too much, baby.* This was our ritual, an ironic fandom so deep it transfigures into devotion.

Once, my parents drove us west on Interstate 70 to Wright City, Missouri, home of the Elvis Is Alive Museum. The theory goes that Elvis faked his death to escape the chains of unprecedented fame and exploitative contracts. Death-deniers are split, however, on

whether Elvis began a new “normal” life, worked undercover for the CIA, or rejoined the aliens. The “museum” was founded in 1992 by Bill Beeny, a Baptist minister who had organized segregationist, anti-communist, and pro–Vietnam War actions in the 1960s. I don’t remember much of that building, just the claustrophobia of narrow halls crowded with too many images. The bad white light. But I remember one room in particular, perhaps because I have a photograph of it. This was the room with the casket. Inside, laid out on cheap lace, was a wax dummy of Elvis. He was wearing sunglasses like my dad’s. This was a replica of a replica, the sham body that Beeny and others believed to occupy Elvis’s actual coffin. I left the funeral room almost immediately, but my parents lingered. In the photo Mama snapped, Dad wears a Hawaiian shirt and poses beside the casket. He’s looking down into the mannequin’s face as though deep in thought, paying his respects. He’s playing and not—one palm pressed flat against his own heart.

Elvis’s fall was always part of his story. Even as a kid, I viewed him as totally tragic: complicated, manipulated, profoundly sad, capable of greatness, generous—and ultimately unable to overcome. Yet I reacted viscerally against the death cult of Elvis. I disliked its religiosity and the mocking it inspired. “The fasci- nation [with Elvis] was the reality showing through the illusion,” writes Dr. Linda Ray Pratt in “Elvis, or the Ironies of a Southern Identity,” in *The Elvis Reader*. “The illusion of invincibility and the tragedy of frailty; the illusion of complete control and the reality of inner chaos . . . Elvis had all the freedom the world can offer and could escape nothing.”

Yet the ballooning devotion to Elvis after his death mutated the popular image of him—from provocateur and outsider artist, bellwether of changing social mores, to a paranoid puppet, a pitiable figure of ego and excess. The rhinestone jumpsuit, death-on-the-toilet, even his outsized beauty: His image got passed around and replicated like a garish Mona Lisa. Elvis stood in for everything simultaneously wrong and great about America.

The Elvis faithful use their material fandom to “construct his immortality,” writes Doss. “The images and objects in these rooms are highly charged and passionately loved, antidotes to Elvis’s absence, fetishistic substitutes for Elvis himself.” At the Elvis Is Alive Museum, Mama bought VHS tapes of a program called *Elvis: Dead or Alive?* The cover promised *new FBI evidence!* She stored the tapes in the basement and called them “hospitality gifts,” offered as a joke prize to anyone who would spend the night on the twin-size trundle bed in the Elvis Room.

The world’s audiocassettes are dying of old age. The recordings on magnetic tape are actively degrading, and many will reach the end of their “playable lifetime” without being preserved or digitized. The Cultural Heritage Index estimates that US museums and archives hold 46 million magnetic tapes, including VHS and cassettes, but due to limited time and equipment, archivists don’t know the quality or playability of 40 percent of these. Elvis’s voice will never disappear, but what about those voices that were only put down once, like my dad’s, and on audio technology that was outdated just a few short years later?

I keep the tape beside my computer as I research. Eventually I find articles on a technology called infrared spectroscopy. It’s a method of analysis that can be applied to everything

from determining blood alcohol content to the pigments of ancient illuminated manuscripts. A lab at the University of South Carolina published a paper in 2015 on the technology's application to old audiocassettes that the Library of Congress had deemed in danger of degrading. Here was a noninvasive method for determining whether my dad's tape was playable without sticking it into a playback machine or an oven and crossing my fingers. I imagine driving to the lab, watching through thick windowpanes and goggles as the lasers . . . do whatever it is that lasers do. I track down the lead investigator's contact information and conduct hypothetical conversations about what he believed he was preserving. Could his belief bolster my own?

I used to work for university scientists, so I know better than to cold call the head of a major lab. Instead, I internet-stalk every coauthor on the infrared spectroscopy paper. Samantha Skelton, who had been a research assistant early on in the project, answers my message. She has since moved from chemistry to working as a conservator of paintings, honing her skills as a craftsman in what was some- times called *heritage science.* When she agrees to an interview, I tell her I'm a bit of a "heritage scientist" myself. Luckily, she doesn't hang up.

Skelton explains that the study's goal was to develop a cost-effective way to quickly discern "healthy tape" from gummy, degrading tape. If the scientists figured out which materials were in the most danger, then archivists could approach them more efficiently and with less destruction. The lab applied Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR) and developed a statistical analysis to "suss out very small patterns" about the tapes' fitness within an enormous data set. Skelton's duties included figuring out the precise conditions for the best analysis, which meant determining *what kind of crystal through which to shoot a laser*. (Emphasis mine.) Many labs use diamond crystal, but Skelton recommended germanium, because it provides "a less noisy spectra."

I ask how she got into this work, what she was after. "It's this idea that we as a species have a tangible cultural history that has been gathered and stood the test of time," Skelton says. "But it's also been edited down through intentional destruction or iconoclasm or the elements of time or natural disasters. We have this physical record, and it says so much about us. It's all we have."

I've had a friend since sixth grade who refuses to enter the Elvis Room. She said Elvis was the height of *creepiness* and *corniness*, like a clown, and she was *afraid* of him. Naturally, at sleepovers, our friends and I put on the Elvis mask and chased her or snuck up behind her holding a ceramic Elvis bust, made it peek over her shoulder. We tricked her into entering the Elvis Room, then held the door shut while she yowled and pounded. No one believed her Presley-phobia. To be honest, it insulted me. I believed Elvis was, objectively, important, beautiful, complicated. I rejected the one-dimensional view but also rejected any version of Elvis other than my own, the one built within my family's culture, our foundational mythology.

I rejected the obscene cartoon versions of Elvis and the death cult of Elvis. I hated any kind of mourning that turned people into saints or angels, that flattened whole lives into one

cheesy glamour shot settled on a mantelpiece. I resisted when anyone tried to tell me that my dad was—points skyward—*up there, watching over me*. It didn't comfort me to think of him fixed overhead; I wished that he were still uncontainable. I wished that I didn't get to decide what he was, that it wasn't down to me to form one image from the relics we have left.

There's a difference between absence and loss. There is a way we can pretend that Elvis is just in the next room, that the man is somehow contained in his ephemera and vinyl. But this cassette tape could mean another death for my dad and me. I can remember some of his voice—melodious, but strongest when doing an impression, singing a made-up lullaby. What if I listen to the tape, and what I hear—*that* voice, unknown, unfamiliar—replaces whatever remnants of him I hold in my mind? Would my dad be that and only that from now on? Would he be reduced, and therefore lost again?

Orpheus turned around to look at Eurydice in order to solidify his connection, to be sure that she was still within reach. *Possessable*. We all know that Orpheus should not have looked back. But perhaps more than that, he should have listened harder for Eurydice's footsteps behind him. He should've trusted the sound.

"A dead person is vulnerable in ways a living person is not," Greil Marcus writes in *Dead Elvis*. "When the subject of a book is living, he or she can always make that book into a lie by acting in a new way. A dead person can be summed up and dismissed. And Elvis is especially vulnerable, because for much of America he has always been a freak."

Worse than a freak, a man becomes a symbol. An *icon*: memorable but static. I knew about this. When your dad is an alcoholic, or addicted, or depressed, or dead, or all of the above—that becomes the whole story. But what about a life beyond its destruction? The complication and capacity. What about the charisma, the kaleidoscope, the music? What about the time he met Lionel Richie and made him laugh? What about Graceland?

I realize that whether I listened or not, I've been trying to recapture my dad. I'm still trying to protect him, to ward off the flattening of time, of addiction. It's understandable, but in doing so, I'm trying to possess him, to control the end of the story. That's not how it works between people, not even a dad and a daughter. I can't keep treating the tape like an illuminated manuscript. Maybe every grief deserves infrared spectroscopy, but I can't wait any longer, can't keep the voice protected behind glass. The only way that the voice has even a chance of *living* again—as a separate entity, an expression made by a separate person—is this: *Play the tape*.

I drive to the local photo center. The tiny bell rings above the door, and the middle-aged man behind the counter is not Mike who had emailed me. When I mention *baking* tapes, he widens his eyes and clutches his pearls. He says he can transfer the tape to a CD by Friday. It's Monday.

"Oh," I say, ". . . or as soon as possible?"

“Probably,” not-Mike says.

I put my hands on the counter and singsong, “I sure hope it doesn’t get ruined!” He stays thin-lipped, but his eyes are sympathetic. “We will do what we can,” he says.

I leave him with the tape, walk into the parking lot. I get in my car and drive away, but I only make it across the street. Wander the aisles of Food Lion. Pick things up and put them down. I can’t imagine standing in front of that man or other unsuspecting customers as the tape of “My Way” jams and rips apart in the cassette player. But if the tape is about to be destroyed, I also can’t stand to not be there. *We will do what we can.* I hightail it back to the photo center and ask to listen to the tape right then.

“Oh, sure,” not-Mike says. He brings out a portable tape player, but he has to dig around for headphones and new batteries. He presses buttons and the gears squeal. This is my low-tech nightmare. This is my expert, my holy heritage scientist? But then not-Mike hands me the player and walks away. Here I am, headphones plugged in, standing alone at a counter in the center of the store.

When I found the tape, I had been disappointed that my dad had chosen to sing “My Way.” It’s best known as a Frank Sinatra song, though I’ve always preferred Elvis’s version. Sinatra seems to sneer, denying any regret about his choices all the way to the end.

Elvis sobs.

I wonder how my dad would sing it: would he be over-the-top and vulnerable like Elvis? How much pain would I hear, and whose, and could I take it?

I press play. The cassette wheel turns, and there he is.

My dad rumbles, “Uh, *thank youu*, thank you very much.”

The first Elvis impersonator, after all, was Elvis himself. I can already tell: My dad is holding back laughter. He’s using the lounge-act voice I recognize: deeper and self-serious, yet playful. He’s doing late-era Elvis, Elvis in Vegas. The strings of the backing track swell. And he sings. Even though he’s playing, he really sings. He starts low, ponderous, then shoots for those delicate notes—and actually hits a few. He fakes a vibrato, and it hits me the same as the real thing. He stays in character, pausing between lyrics to make jokes as though he’s striding across some casino stage, blinking into the bright lights: “*I did it myyy waaay*—buck naked in the recording booth! Ha-ha!” He pretends to shake hands with Sammy Davis Jr., and he tells the Jordanaires to cut loose. He tells the crowd they’re wonderful. As he reaches the big finish, he cries, “Now everybody, let’s sing the last part together,” before breaking into that final verse, the one that really means something—

For what is a man? What has he got?
If not himself, then he has naught

Here's the truth: We, the faithful, know that Elvis is dead. But what does *dead* have to do with us? What does it have to do with love? We were there. We've got the tapes.

My dad is singing into the microphone nestled between my ears, and it's so beautiful and burning I can hardly listen. He sounds exactly like I remember: multifaceted, flashing, ironic but profoundly tender.

But, of course, he doesn't sound exactly like I remember. He couldn't. He made the tape years before I even existed. Before he was my dad, when he was a young man on a long trip with a red-haired girl. He was pretending to be Elvis. He's not one thing or another. His voice is closer than it's been in fifteen years, and yet he's less accessible again, the way the living are. I can't predict what this voice will do next.

It's true that in each remembering, each replay, something is lost again. I look around the quiet store, boxed-up technologies set on pedestals. Our icons die, our dads die. They didn't slip out the back of the building or disappear into a black Cadillac. They can't be recalled if you learn the right notes or if you pray to their images or if you want it enough. We can only play it through.

On the tape, his voice is nothing like Elvis: that belting, lunging with an op- eratic need, near tears. Because my dad is laughing. By the end, he cracks up completely. He laughs like he can't believe it—how great this is, how *silly* and how great. He steps back from the mic and goes right on chuckling to himself. That's how the song plays out. That's how the recording ends. The gears keep respooling the yellow tape. For a few more beats, I listen to it whir. ■