God's Spell

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In my family we sang folksongs. We drove up the lake in the summer and my father sat in the back seat of the Meteor and stuck the neck of his guitar out the window because there wasn't enough room for him and the guitar inside, and he sang German songs, and my sisters and I and my mother who was driving sang with him. It was weird in those days in the interior of British Columbia for a man to be sitting in the back seat of a car while the woman drove, and it was even weirder for that man to be singing German folk songs. The workers on the Robson ferry came over to say hello to my father, who was doctor to some of them, and they laughed and smiled through the open window at our singing and I didn't know whether they were laughing and smiling at us or about us. They were mostly Italian and Doukhobor so they probably understood something about singing, but they couldn't understand our words, which was probably a good thing.

We sang "Muß I Denn", which is a song about leaving the town and wandering into the country and leaving your girlfriend behind. It is a song which Elvis Presley later sang in a mixed English and German version when he was a soldier in Germany. Elvis pronounced the German words wrong and changed the song into one about staying home with your true love, not wandering away from her, but my father never heard Elvis sing it, which was just as well. We sang "Wenn die Bunten Fahnen Wehen", which is a song about soldiers or boy scouts, I could never tell which, marching out of the town gates waving their flags and looking for strange foreign countries. I had never seen town gates or people marching out of them waving flags here in the Kootenays, which was already a strange foreign country as far as Germans were concerned, and so when I sang the song I just imagined myself carrying flags and marching, I never actually did it. I imagined the town gate was our ferry across the Columbia, where it emptied out of Arrow Lake, and for the banners I substituted the leaves of the black cottonwoods that grew out of the Columbia's river bank in that place: the leaves alternated between their white and black sides when wind hit and they fluttered. My father, who had marched out of town gates waving flags when he was young, later translated "Wenn die Bunten Fahnen Wehen" into English with Jack Bainbridge, the hospital administrator in our town, Castlegar, so that we Canadian boy scouts could sing it when we went up Arrow Lake and had a campfire; they changed the part about the town gates and foreign strange countries to *With our coloured banners flying we'll go marching to the sea,* and I always wondered what you did when you got to the sea in that song.

I sang in the school choir in grade five with some of the boys, and with Mrs. McCabe who had a pink English face and was the music teacher, not a normal teacher. She stood in front of us and waved her arm in the air, first up and down in front of her face, and then across her chest, and this was called 'beating time'. Mrs. McCabe held a little stick to beat this time with, and I watched her and learned the word 'baton'. She mouthed and never sang the words the choir sang, and I wondered what it felt like for an adult to be mouthing and imagining and beating time to, but not singing, the words that the children were singing. I sang "The Jovial Beggar" for Mrs. McCabe; it was a solo; I sang it in the West Kootenay solo and elocution concerts in Nelson, where you got blue, green and yellow first, second and third place certificates printed on special paper and given to you by adults called 'adjudicators', who listened to you in a different way than normal people when you sang; and I learned while Mrs. McCabe was teaching me this song that I had a soprano voice which is all right for boys to have until they are in grade six but not afterwards. "The Jovial Beggar" was about a man who lived in a hollow tree and had a wooden leg, and he was very happy to be a beggar, and I thought it was a stupid song because how would you be able to sleep in a hollow tree if you have to stand up on a wooden leg all the time? And how could you be happy if you were a beggar? You went high when you sang the word 'beggar', and I thought this was a false movement because a man, even if he was a beggar, wouldn't sing soprano in a song about his life. The choir with Mrs. McCabe sang a song called "English Country Gardens", which is about exactly what the title says it is about; it tells the story of how these English country gardens once came into town. I wasn't sure how English country gardens moved, if they marched and sang as they marched, for example, but I did imagine flowers moving along the streets, their petals waving in the wind and meeting the flags that were going the other way in the German song.

It was always so hard to bring cultures together in those days. I sang folk songs later with my sister, when we learned how to sing a high soprano and have long straight hair from an American woman named Joan Baez, if you were a girl, and how to look

fondly upon that long hair, and sing baritone harmony to that high soprano and play your guitar like a man named Ian who was maybe Canadian, if you were a boy. We sang "Three Jolly Coachmen", which is a song about Irishmen, as far as I could tell, who acted a bit like English country gardens on the road to somewhere and then stopping for water, and we sang Burl Ives songs about grandmothers and foxes and window panes hanging around the neck of a man named Johnny whom the grandmother beat with a ladle for loving her granddaughter, Nell. Johnny couldn't get into the house at Nell; he'd wandered in from the countryside to find her and was sticking his head through the window, which had no glass, to kiss her, and that's why he ended up with the window pane around his neck after getting beaten by the ladle, not the baton, wielded by the grandmother. Nell was called 'Wee Lassie', which meant a girl, not a dog.

Folk songs in those days were sung in coffee houses, where you sat on a high stool, and the soprano you accompanied sang harmony and stood, and the audience sat around small tables and smoked and drank coffee and sang along with the chorus and grew their hair and, if they were men, their beards. The coffee houses were often named after boats, so this was about movement, too. The sing-a-longs were called 'hootenanies', which is an interesting word with a strong sound at the beginning of it to encourage you, and I thought for a while I could be a singer, even though I had a name that sounded weird in North America. It was a secret that I thought this. I could be a singer like my father, I thought. This was a secret too. I was surprised when people listened to me when I sat up on stools in coffee houses and stared into wisps of smoke and darkness behind which Canadians and sometimes English people sat, and once I sang a song by Harry Belafonte by myself, not with my sister, and the audience applauded, even though I was a German person singing a Calypso song by a black man from an island in the Caribbean. I beat part of the rhythm on the body of the guitar between strums, so the body throbbed, and I throbbed too, and this was a different rhythm than my father ever sang. I struggled hard to get it: that, and de accent from de Islands.

I stopped singing after that for many years and for many reasons. I decided to become a writer instead. Writing was smarter than singing, I thought, because what you did lasted, whereas when you sang it was all over after you had finished singing: there was just you and maybe applause but otherwise there was silence. There was no part of you around anymore. You remembered more when you wrote, I thought, and the words weren't as stupid as songs easily were when they tried to tell stories. And you could keep secret who you were when you were writing them. My father and my sister kept singing and I worried that they would get laughed at: there is always this danger that people will laugh at you when you sing. My sister didn't sing German songs, she pretended to become an English person, so I thought, a jolly coachman or a country garden, not a set of flags and a town gate or a person who wanted to leave his girlfriend, or in her case boyfriend, behind, and she learned many songs about the Kootenays and the Arrow Lakes country where we lived, and sang German folk songs and even translated them for Canadian boy scouts, but no-one had ever heard of Canadian folk songs before. My sister looked into valleys and the crevasses of mountains and into lakes, and there she found them.

I started singing again when I met a man who knew the songs, or at least the music, from my and my father's country, as well as music from Africa and the African part of the United States, and I had never met a man before who had so many kinds of sometimes opposite music in his one head. A jungle of sounds and melodies and rhythms walked around in there, and he had a funny walk outside of him, too. He said I could sing songs from the African part of the United States with him, and that if I behaved myself and didn't start marching in the middle of songs I could sing in his choir. I didn't—ever—march when I sang songs, partly because I remembered Gary Leveridge's fist and the looks and grins of the ferry workers in Castlegar, and also the weird feeling of driving out of Castlegar pretending that you were waving flags and passing through a town gate and leaving your girlfriend when what you were actually doing was taking a ferry across a river with your father and looking at cottonwood leaves and your father's guitar neck stuck out of the Meteor's window: then you drove up to a Canadian lake in the Kootenays where the road was so rocky and steep and switchbacked you could hardly drive, let alone march, and your mother had to concentrate so hard on the driving that she gripped the steering wheel with both hands, near the top, until her knuckles grew white, and she stared straight ahead and sometimes forgot to sing soprano from all the concentration.

So I was sad when my new friend said that part about the marching. But I knew what he meant. Now I sing a style of music called Gospel which sounds a little bit like *gasp*, so it has an encouraging sound at the front of it too. You open your mouth and breathe: you gasp. And then you pour out a part of your soul. You *gossip.* Africans have a secret way of singing that doesn't worry about being laughed at, and I am trying to invent this for myself. After you gasp, you spell: that is the idea of this style of singing, and it makes me very enthusiastic.