

Baptist Hymns

for Marcia, Marilyn, Nancy, Beth, Susan, and Eileen

They come to me at the oddest times,
tumbling out warm and electric
like the cotton socks and underwear.

A charge to keep I have, a God to glorify
when I let down the door of the dryer
or rolling in like a Friday night storm
as I stand looking across the lake.

All hail the power of Jesus' name
In my Friday night writers' group—
a Baptist, an Evangelical United Brethren,
two Methodists, an Episcopalian, a Catholic and a Jew,
all lapsed and relapsed—we are talking
about the houses we grew up in.
I mention the gospel music purring
inside the white plastic radio,
turned yellow and permanently tuned
to static, when someone across the room
breaks into *The Little Brown Church in the Vale*,
and before long we're all holding hands
and singing *Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam*
and *Bringing in the Sheaves*.

Except for our Catholic, who rises
to her feet, ceremonious and erect, and offers
Latin incantation that silences us all
in the middle of Verse Two, Repeat Refrain.
How mysterious those *a capella* words,
how seductive that ancient tongue.

This is what my mother, keeping watch
in the choir loft, was afraid I might hear.
Instead, I discovered the Pre-Raphaelite poets
and Matthew Arnold, though as I stand each year
before my class reciting *Dover Beach*, the sea

I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore
of those old songs may come crashing into the text:

It's Easter Sunday, I'm in grade three,
my new dress with its stiff with crinolines

makes me bob like a buoy and I glance down
to the page of my hymn book, though I never
need to look at the words, and squeezed
between my tenor father and off-key grandmother,
I join my eager monotone voice
with those rising around me, feeling the refuge
of song, *the power in the blood,*
and love lifting me,
(even me).

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