The Heart of Things

by Kirk Wilson

I have a shirt that sings. There is nothing else extraordinary about it, it's a simple cotton tee. If you care to know what it looks like, there is a crimson silhouette of a leaping dog, a Golden Retriever kind of dog, screen printed on a field of periwinkle blue. The shirt only knows one song, and sings it in the voice of Annie Lennox:

You didn't stand by me
No not at all
You didn't stand by me
Noooo way

The tune is catchy, and I confess that no matter how I try to resist it, it often sets my neck bouncing to the rhythm. This can be maddening, because the shirt only knows the chorus. And because I happen to play Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms for a living. I'm not, I assure you, a

musical snob, but if I'm going to listen to a shirt sing I'd prefer a tune more in line with my own tastes.

The first time the shirt sang I was driving. I jumped and almost lost control. At first I thought the radio had come on without my touching the power button. The windshield wipers do this on occasion but not the radio, so I was a bit unnerved until I realized it was the shirt that was singing.

That made perfect sense. There was no mystery over where the shirt had learned the song. A woman I betrayed played it on a boom box over and over as I cleared out my possessions from her apartment. Why do I say "a woman" as if she had no name? She has a name. It is Collette. Collette is a perfectly fine woman, lovely in every way, generous and kind, with gold-flecked brown eyes, classically sculpted cheekbones, and a pixie haircut. She is a well regarded painter best known for her portraits of women with their hair on fire. This very real person with a name, Collette, whom I betrayed, played the song over and over on a boom box as I cleared out my possessions. The boom box s at on the hardwood floor of the dining room, and Collette sat on a straight-backed wooden chair drinking brandy from a snifter and leaning over to restart the song each time it came to an end.

I was leaving on a tour, and the woman I was taking with me was not Collette.

"I don't know why I should be surprised. That's your pattern, isn't it, Louis?" She said as she bent to push the button on the boom box. "One woman per world tour?"

She was on target, of course, and as my companion on the previous tour she knew it. The inanity of my behavior as a womanizer, packaged and presented with a pop song and the odor of good brandy, made me numb. I am an anachronism as dated as the music I play. That's what she wanted me to hear.

The shirt, I should mention, has a connection with Collette. She bought it and gave it to me when we were traveling in Seattle, just because I had admired it in a store. After that she washed and folded it, over and over, and placed it in the proper order in the drawer she had organized for my

tee shirts, just as she maintained other drawers and closets for the rest of my possessions.

I know what you're thinking. If I don't like the shirt's choice of songs, why don't I throw it away, or pass it on to St. Vincent de Paul? Or perhaps I could bring in a houngan or some kind of exorcist to recast a silence in the cloth. I don't do any of that because I know it's not that simple. I understand the power at the heart of things.

I'm guessing you do too. Don't you have shoes that have been to too many funerals, and don't they stink of tuberoses?

I once picked up a stone I fancied on the shore in Scotland. It is coal black and the size and shape of an index finger. I felt a twinge as I put it in my pocket, a clear sense of anxiety coming from the stone, a signal that it wanted to stay where it was. I dismissed this as a foolish notion, but I was wrong. Now the stone moves of its own volition around my apartment, appearing on a windowsill or the computer keyboard or, most dramatically, on the hard milk surface of the sink. Sometimes I think I hear it keening in the night.

There is a terrible beauty about such things that has been with me all my life. Early in my career as a schoolboy, the teacher passed out bars of Ivory soap and little paring knives and told us to make the soap into anything we pleased. An innocent creative exercise. The wonder is we didn't whack off our fingers or cut each other's throats. The other children went to work and produced lumpy rabbit heads, cartoon cars, and humanoids that looked like juju dolls. These things are lovely in my memory. But I stared at the soap in my hand and realized what would happen to it if I cut it. The teacher sent me home with a note that said *Louis won't cut soap*.

In my first memory I'm under the upright piano in my parents' living room, too small to climb up on the stool, with my legs splayed out around some wooden blocks. They say I cried if they moved me from that spot, and that the first time someone held me on the stool I made music with the keys. It was my mother, bless her, who realized the only thing to do was give me lessons.

At six I was playing *Für Elise* when my hands and the piano first gave up their separation and produced a sound that reached right into my soul and took me prisoner. You can call me crazy, it's not like no one else has, or say that it's impossible, but I went cold all through. I struck the C major chord and held it, sat on that swiveling stool with the up-and-down screw beneath me and wept like a man who had been to war.

My awareness cost me in the world. I grew lanky and exposed, upward but not outward, like a malnourished weed. My head stuck up above the other children, so that I was always looking at their hair. I refused to play football and baseball with the other boys. My parents fretted, particularly my father. Normalizing influences were sought. A pal of my father's suggested the Boy Scouts.

There was not a good fit, as they say, between the Scouts and me. The Scoutmaster was also a boxing coach, so the Scouts had boxing tournaments. When the time came for my first match, I entered the ring with my long arms drooping at my sides. I was afraid for my fingers. My opponent, a head shorter, charged like an apprentice bull and began pummeling my narrow abdomen.

"Put up your hands!" the Scoutmaster shouted.

I didn't want to put up my hands, because I knew the little bull would hit my fingers. Then I realized the advantage I had because of my reach, laid a boxing glove flat on the head in front of me and straight-armed the boy so that all he could do was punch the air.

"Don't just hold him off. Hit him! Hit him!"

But I didn't. I kept up my tactic until I heard the bell ring. The Scoutmaster's face was red and swollen. He looked like he'd been boxing. He was not unhappy when I quit the Scouts.

I did learn something of interest from the Scouts, though. I learned Morse Code. The very first example of the code in the Boy Scout manual was SOS. My father told me (I later learned he was wrong) this stood for Save Our Souls. Not Save Our Bodies or Save Our Bacon but Save Our Souls. It seemed to me the most urgent message in the world.

I tapped the message on my desk at school with a pencil until the teacher made me stop, beat it on the lid of a garbage can with a wooden dowel, sent it in middle C from the piano keyboard. One night I stood at a rear window of my home with my Boy Scout signal flashlight beaming SOS into the night. *Short short short long long long short short short* over and again until my thumb gave out. I believed no one had seen the signal, knew with a final and desolate certainty that no one would ever respond, even if I could signal SOS without stopping for the remainder of my days.

But a neighbor named Mrs. McClung did see the light beaming directly in her kitchen window, which faced the rear of our home across a patch of struggling Bermuda grass. She called the police.

I remember three quick knocks that sent an authoritative echo through the house. I stood at my father's elbow looking through the screen door at a fat policeman with a face like the man in the moon.

"Mrs. McClung says someone in your house is shining a flashlight through her window."

"Someone in my house. Louis, have you been shining lights?"

"No sir."

My father taught English at the Junior High. He was a small, bald-headed, precise man who specialized in intimidation. He gave the policeman the look he used on failed spellers, and spoke in a withering tone.

"No one in my house is shining lights at Mrs. McClung."

The policeman looked disappointed. He threw a glance at me, apologized to my father and made the porch creak as he turned to go. I hid the flashlight under my mattress.

Shortly afterwards I fell in love for the first time. The focus of my affections was a girl my age, Mary Catherine, who lived directly across the street. Mary Catherine's proximity was the glory and the agony of my days. After school I stood at the window, the piano abandoned at my back, and stared at her front door, the moment when the door would swing open and she would appear advancing in my imagination like the Hindenburg. As she skipped rope on her front sidewalk my heart skipped too—stupidly,

traitorously, sloshing in a bog of pain. I wished with an honest passion that Mary Catherine's family would move away, not across town but across the world, so that I would never have to watch her skip again.

One day my mother set out to make an evangelizing call upon the house across the street, on behalf of the church where I spent Sundays in scratchy, stifling clothes. Because the piano was in the living room, and because I spent hours there each day at practice, the room had become my special domain. Violating my space while I stood watch at the window, my mother announced that I should come along with her as an apprentice evangelist.

"They're Catholics!" I whined.

"All the more reason, dear," my mother said.

I said I had to practice. She wouldn't buy it. I stamped and tantrumed as I hadn't done since my father jerked me away from the piano when I was three. In the end she dragged me by the arm across the street. My downcast tear-dripping eyes watched the boards of a periwinkle porch go by. My mother knocked with her free hand. The door came open, revealing Mary Catherine. I realized with horror that she looked exactly like a chipmunk with freckles, an upturned nose, and eyes the color of her front porch. My heart jumped rope.

Mary Catherine's mother invited us in. My mother settled in a wing-back chair and began the conversation chirpingly, as though she had never dragged anyone across any street at any time. Avoiding Mary Catherine's blue gaze, I focused on an object that stood alone on the family mantel. It was a small silver globe on three pod-like, curving legs. It was antique and tarnished but something in it glimmered at me and drew me across the room. I stared at the thing from a distance of six inches. With awe I realized the bit of filigree along its circumference could be a kind of handle. I gave the handle a lift with my finger and the top half of the orb flew back. Inside was a perfect cavity, smooth, lustrous, and empty. Whatever it was, I knew it was a female object. I climbed inside and pulled the lid shut behind me. I could hear a suggestion of polite conversation through the silver wall.

The lesson of that escape has served throughout my life. When pressed, I seal myself away into a space no unpleasantness can penetrate, and where the walls provide ideal acoustics for music and for silence. It is not surprising that this experience is associated with the pain of my first infatuation.

In any event, it was need for armored shelter as much as love of music that spurred me to the labor that would build my rarified life. And believe me it was labor. Much as I loved it, I worked hard for it. As a young teen I scored enough firsts in international competitions to assure a good living. At fifteen I played Tchaikovsky's piano concerto with the Chicago Symphony, standing in for Stefan Glockheim, who was suffering from an ulcerated stomach. The performance was a triumph. From that day all I would have to do, ever, was more of what I lived for.

When the time came I discovered the bodies of women only because I had first discovered the hold the music gave me over them. It didn't just gain entrée to bedrooms, it spread the door wide. And a good thing, too. Without the music, I would not have made much progress in the sexual direction. I was and am shy, offbeat, and gawking, all hands and feet and elbows. Maybe my narrow shoulders do support a head classic enough in its proportions to be considered handsome and maybe I can spin a line of conversation when required. I can hold my own in an affair of love, for a time. It is only when the air of the bedroom becomes too close that I begin to have my problems.

The end result, as Collette observed, is a career as a serial monogamist that neatly parallels the career at the piano, one woman per world tour.

And what women they have been. Janice, the flame-haired therapist who changed the locks to our love nest while I was at the store. Yolanda, the doe-eyed potter, who chunked prize-winning vases like Sandy Koufax. The delicate Sumiko, the oboist, who took wire cutters to the strings in my practice room. They all had their reasons.

Measured by women or concerts, the years flew by. Perhaps, I'll admit, I might have made better use of the time. But understand: there is no distance between my hands and the keyboard. Anachronism that I may be,

I am an instrument, and instruments are good for certain things and not for others.

By the time I turned fifty, my insulation from the world was near perfect. For business affairs, I had a manager. I was surrounded by accountants, lawyers, organizers, travel consultants, yogins, and housekeepers in the same way warlords are surrounded by elite troops. It goes without saying that the center point of this support group was my woman of the moment, the provider not only of cleaned and folded shirts but of harmony and meaning.

Though I maintained contact from a distance, I rarely thought of my family of origin or visited the one horse town where they still lived. One day my mother called to tell me in a quavering voice that my father had died. I was between relationships, living alone in the apartment at the time, with the singing tee shirt in a dresser drawer. As I packed for the funeral an impulse caused me to leave my suits in the closet, to dig through the dresser until I found the tee shirt and to pack it, muffling down its song. My return was front-page news in my hometown, and my appearance in informal dress was viewed as an expected eccentricity.

After the service, my father's spirit—or ghost, or soul, or whatever you like—approached me in the hallway outside the funeral home chapel. These things happen.

"It was good of you to come," he said. The tone was typical of him.

"You don't have to be sarcastic," I said.

My father's bald head shined. It reminded me that his students had called him Chrome Dome. And, for some reason, that when I was an infant he had called me Samson because my oversized hands made him dream he had spawned an athlete. His lifelong disappointment, apparently, had followed him into the afterlife.

"Sarcastic? I'm dead serious. You could be in Japan tinkling the ivories for your accustomed fee. What is it these days? Fifty grand? A hundred?"

The shirt began to sing. Completely out of character, my father's spirit began to pop its neck to the rhythm. I couldn't believe it.

"You don't like music!"

"*This* music I like."

I left my father be-bopping in the hall, made my way through the thinning crowd of mourners, and climbed up to the small organ in the chapel. I thought of Mozart's Rondo in A minor, then Schubert's Sonata in B-flat major. Then my hands began to play *My Funny Valentine*. The shirt went silent, listening.