

Ain't Seen A Dime At All

This was written for my friends on Lesbos Island in Greece who simultaneously had to deal with the country's worst economic recession in modern history and the European refugee crisis.

I've been sweatin' in the summer sun
Working the fields as hard as anyone,
But I find that when my day is done,
I ain't seen a dime at all.

Went by the bank on a trip into town,
"I've got no cash", the clerk declared with a frown,
"Because the state foreclosed on our accounts,
We ain't seen a dime at all".

Ain't got no future, ain't got no hope,
Tryin' to get by, tryin' not to mope,
Just tryin' to live on and tryin' to cope
And tryin' to keep our heads together clinging on to this fraying rope.

Sister Sophie's working at the store,
Keeping busy 'til her hands are sore,
But there's nobody coming round no more,
She ain't seen a dime at all.

Uncle Phil, he's got a bad luck spell,
His diabetes keeps on giving him hell,
To buy his meds he put his house up for sale,
He ain't seen a dime at all.

Ain't got no future, ain't got no hope,
Tryin' to get by, tryin' not to mope,
Just tryin' to live on and tryin' to cope
And tryin' to keep our heads together clinging on to this fraying rope.

Doctor Nick, he's working overtime,
Hops in his car after seein' his last client,
Runs to the camp to treat the sick and the blind,
He ain't seen a dime at all.

One's got malaria, another's got TB,
Too much to handle for a village M.D.,
The world's expecting it all done for free,
They won't send a dime at all.

Ain't got no future, ain't got no hope,
Tryin' to get by, tryin' not to mope,
Just tryin' to live on and tryin' to cope
And tryin' to keep our heads together, keep our minds together,
keep our hearts together while we're still clinging on to this fraying rope.

© Amelie Protscher 2016

Jet Black Cadillac

A friendly reminder that, unlike on newly-bought cars, there are no warranties on interpersonal relationships.

When I first met you, I thought you're just my kind of girl
I thought our loving would take us all around the world,
It felt like cruising in a jet-black Cadillac
But just two months into dating you were veering off track.

The slightest hill would bring your cooler liquid to a boil,
The brakes a-jammin' and the engine leaking oil,
With red lights flashing in the dashboard we were stranded high and dry
To watch the other happy riders just passing us by.

Our loving started out as magic,
Then suddenly the spark had gone,
With passion slowly choking in the toxic exhaust
I should have made a quick decision, but I kept on hanging on

Despite there was no use to hold on to a lemon like you,
You ain't in it for the long haul, you break down 'fore night is through,
There's no point in keeping you around, I'm gonna trade you in
And hope that you'll run smoother on someone else's gasoline.

Tried to make sense of all the instructions that I read
Like what's an airbag? Well, that may just be your head,
You gave me all the proof I needed that I had to set you free
When your brakes failed and you ran right into Civil Registry.

Called a mechanic to tell him 'bout the problem that I had
And he said "Baby, I'm sorry, but it's really looking bad,
There ain't no spare part you can buy to get your clunker back in line
'Cause the vehicle you've got here sure looks broken by design".

Cupid must have been as blind as ever,
Or maybe he was drunk, I fear,
For instead of sticking to his usual arrows and bow
He took a monkey wrench and slammed it right into the gears.

There ain't no use to hold on to a lemon like you,
You ain't in it for the long haul, you break down 'fore night is through,
There's no point in keeping you around, I'm gonna trade you in
And hope that you'll run smoother on someone else's gasoline.

© Amelie Protscher 2016

When Language Was Innocent

This is loosely based on the life of poet Mascha Kaléko who had to flee Germany during the Nazi era. The lyric also mentions her husband, musicologist Chemyo Vinaver, and linguist/diarist Victor Klemperer, whose essay collection "Language of the Third Reich" makes the case that authoritarianism always leaves traces in language, stripping it of its innocence. In fact the early Kaléko, who referred to herself as "a poor city sparrow in the woods of German poetry", wrote German verse in a manner so light-hearted it would be hardly imaginable it could have been written post-World War II.

Dear Masha, I write on this crisp winter's day,
This is just a quick note to see if you're OK.
How's Chemyo and his book he's been writing for years,
And how's life treated you and the ones you hold dear?

And how do you deal with it all?
What makes us hold on at all?

And how do you feel staring at this blank page
With the tool of your craft irrevocably changed,
And this mountain of madness between now and the day
When language was innocent, half a life away.

There's a lot to catch up on since you left for New York:
We had hid three long years in a shed out in the dark,
And Victor kept his diary writ in coal and in chalk
How the city sparrow's song became the croak of the hawk.

But how did we deal with it all?
What made us hold on at all?

And how do you feel staring at this blank page
With the tool of your craft irrevocably changed,
And this mountain of madness between now and the day
When language was innocent, half a life away.

Jerusalem's cold in these January days,
And you never warmed up to the language, you say,
But the song of the sparrow's not gone, it sings deep
in your heart, and the little black notebook you keep

Where your clear, upright hand covers page after page,
With your wit giving way to the wisdom of age,
Despite all the madness between now and the day
When language was innocent, half a life away.

© Amelie Protscher 2016

Jeremiah's Song (Psalm 137)

A metaphor on the transgender experience as Babylonian exile, seen through the eyes of the Psalmist.

I was born and raised amid these fields of grain
Two rivers run right through the cities rising from the plain
majestically.

On Father's harp I taught myself to play,
And hung it on a poplar at the closing of the day
desperately.

And people'd ask me:
How do you know you're homesick for a place you've never been?
How can you miss this distant place your eyes have never seen?
Yet a dark determination drives me on
On this lonesome uphill journey toward home
From Babylon.

My friends who share my longing, they are few
And strangers, they all chide us for we feel the way we do:
You must be dreaming!
You are living in this garden of great wealth,
A band of exiles who would offer up their safety and their health
For this vague scheming.

And after all:
How do you know you're homesick for a place you've never been?
How can you miss this distant place your eyes have never seen?
Yet a dark determination drives us on
On this lonesome uphill journey toward home
From Babylon.

And when this journey's over, this I'll know:
This passage may have left its marks on body, mind, and soul,
But the pain has ceased now.
I've carved my harp from an unfamiliar tree,
An immigrant on strange soil, yet it feels like home to me;
I am at peace now.

© Amelie Protscher 2015

Legacy Of Shame

Written at the height of the 2015/2016 refugee crisis in Europe, and Germany in particular, this song traces a lesbian couple's journey into what they envisioned was safety, but turned out to be another form of oppression, albeit with different means. The mention of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" is intentional, for lynching is not any less of a crime whether it affects racial or sexual minorities.

This behemoth of a city freezes still five times a day,
When the call sounds, men would fall down to their knees and start to pray
While the mothers and us daughters stayed behind closed window panes
Fixing dinner, doing laundry, raising kids our ball and chain;
And the school they sent us girls to in the mornings was a bore,
To memorize the verses of the prophet but a chore,
And then the sadness in your downcast eyes changed my life forevermore
And my mind began to call things by their name,
This legacy of shame.

You would sneak out of your back door when your folks were fast asleep
And the nights we'd spend together were a secret we would keep.
In the morning you'd be on your way, just before the crack of dawn
With the nagging fear somebody just might ask you where you've gone,
And the strange fruit that the cranes bear a stark reminder of our sin
In the cold eyes of the powers of the world we're living in.
It's a cat-and-mouse game, and it's very clear we cannot win,
In the long run, we would come to bear the blame
For this legacy of shame.

When the troops came, we heard gunfire in the valley down below.
Your eyes were wide with terror, and I just said "Let's go".
So you cut my hair in hope I would pass muster as a man,
And with the money from Dad's wallet, our odyssey began.
We would walk all through the daytime, sleep in barns at night,
When we felt we're halfway safe, we'd even dare to hitch a ride.
But the worst part was the boat that took us through the raging tide,
So we came here with ten dollars to our names.

In the shelters, we soon learned that in order to be safe
We had to act like perfect strangers, and that it's foolish to be brave,
For the people right next door are filled with hate up to the brim,
And the guards, tryin' to be helpful, pander to their every whim.
The fake morals of the ones that have them at their beck and call
Make criminals from lovers, and cowards of us all,
Pushing us who never hurt a soul with our backs against the wall
For the love we have that dare not speak its name,
For this legacy of shame.

© Amelie Protscher 2016

We Shall Stand Before The Throne Of Our Lord

The oldest song in the collection, it was written when it turned out the Bush administration's claims that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction was bogus. A Gospel song felt like the right musical medium.

You may be rich, my friend, but we'll be equal in the end
When we shall stand before the throne of our Lord.
You may be rich, my friend, but we'll be equal in the end
When we shall stand before the throne of our Lord.
You may be the Queen of Sheba or you may live in a tent,
You may make a million dollars or you may not have a cent,
Rich and poor, my friend, will be be equal in the end
When we shall stand before the throne of our Lord.

You may cheat, you may steal, in the end we'll have to kneel
When we shall stand before the throne of our Lord
You may cheat, you may steal, in the end we'll have to kneel
When we shall stand before the throne of our Lord
When you see Him face to face, will you proudly plead your case
And all the time you know that you'll reap just what you sow,
You may cheat, you may steal, in the end we'll have to kneel
When we shall stand before the throne of our Lord.

You that wage war and strife, don't you fear for your lives
When we shall stand before the throne of our Lord?
You that wage war and strife, don't you fear for your lives
When we shall stand before the throne of our Lord?
You that sent thousands to fight, how can you rest your head at night?
You that sent thousands to die, can you still look him in the eye?
You that wage war and strife, don't you fear for your life
When we shall stand before the throne of our Lord?

© Amelie Protscher 2005

It's Our Time

Written around the time of Caitlyn Jenner's high-profile coming out, this blues is a sobering reminder that her case is very much the exception, not the norm for the great majority of transgender women, especially women of color, who face inordinate, staggering levels of violence.

I listen to the news, September's only just begun,
This year, my sisters' death toll is now up to 21,
And you say it's our time, you say it's our big break,
Just because one of us has made it, but one swallow does not a summer make.

Civil rights organizations keep advancing civil rights
But when it comes to us, bang, baby, out go their lights
And you say it's our time, you say it's our big break,
One of us just might have made it, but one swallow does not a summer make.

Police cannot be bothered, a witness hurries by,
A murderer pleads panic, and justice's turning two blind eyes,
And you say it's our time, you say it's our big break,
Just because one of us has made it, but one swallow does not a summer make.

For one of us that's in the spotlight, fifty are raped and stabbed and shot,
It doesn't take a psychic, folks, to connect the dots,
This isn't our time, it's just the dawn of it at best,
A ray of sunshine in our back door that still won't give us any rest.

Just think of all them bathroom bills legislators legislate,
It all just goes to show as long's there's haters, they will hate,
To make this our time, a lot of doing still remains
'Til we can ride first class together instead of the caboose of the doggone train.

© Amelie Protscher 2015

Surrender

A little reflective ballad on love, music, and death, in that order. The first verse mentions the “spherical humans” from Plato’s Symposium (that also came in gay and lesbian flavors), also famously quoted in “Origin of Love” from the musical “Hedwig And The Angry Inch”.

Back in a past too old to mention
Humans had two heads, two hearts rolled into one.
Then by divine intervention
We lost our matches as we came undone.
And if we chance to be the lucky ones who find their missing part
Our minds blank as we give in to the passions of the heart
And surrender to a power greater than the human mind,
Forsaking earthly shackles, we leave them all behind,
When all is light, light’s everything we see,
We’re finally free.

We spent our youth making music,
Going through motions, learning the ropes.
We had no clue how to do it,
Working our fingers right down to the bone.
Then one fine day as we pick up our instruments again
We shed all ego as we watch an angel guide our hands.
And surrender to a power greater than the human mind,
Forsaking earthly shackles, we leave them all behind,
When all is light, light’s everything we see,
We’re finally free.

And as the light of my life is fading,
My body leaning down on a cane,
With all my senses slowly disintegrating,
My lips too weak to speak your name,
With hands too feeble just to hold the guitar or the pen
My spirit trusts I’m going to see my angel once again
To surrender to a power greater than the human mind,
Forsaking earthly shackles, to leave them all behind,
When all is light, light’s everything we see,
We’re finally free.

© Amelie Protscher 2015

Pulse

Not much explanation necessary. My account of the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting, told from a survivor's perspective.

It's the heartbeat of human existence,
It's the force behind passion or play,
It's the motor of all our ambition,
It's the clock that ticks on night and day:

Pulse! Pulse! Pulse! Pulse!

It's the place where we go after night falls
To be safe from the coldness outside
Despite 90 degrees in the shadows,
A womb clad in mirrors and lights:

Pulse! Pulse! Pulse! Pulse!

We were huddled together as always
And dance just some innocent fun
When a crowd charged on in through the hallway
Dodging bullets from an automatic gun.

Electrons circling and galaxies bursting with pulse!
The core of all being, all life that we're seeing is pulse!
You may have killed lovers, but you cannot shoot love,
And if there's a G-d in the heavens above,
Your bullets are feeble, compared to a kiss;
In our struggle for freedom, the last thing to cease is our

Pulse! Pulse! Pulse! Pulse!

I still don't remember what spared me
In the minutes or hours that ensued
There's just one lone thing that persuades me
I've lived through this to tell you the truth:

Pulse! Pulse! Pulse! Pulse!

© Amelie Protscher 2016

Scarecrow

All too often, authority rings hollow. This song advocates for healthy scepticism.

From my window I see a scarecrow on his watch both night and day,
And in his hand he holds a rattle driving all the birds away.

Hear him rattle in the morning, in the evening, and all day round,
Long's the wind keeps on blowin', I can hear that old rattlin' sound.

And the kids sing:

Scarecrow in the fields, what if the birds saw that you're just rags and straw?
Now tell me, scarecrow in the fields, what if the birds saw you're not so scary at all?

Once a sparrow who was busy in a distant tree to build her nest
Dropped a twig that she did carry and in the rattle, that's where it came to rest.

Now the scarecrow, he fell silent and the curious bird drew near
And she saw just how mistaken she had been a scarecrow to fear.

And she twittered:

Scarecrow in the fields, what if the birds saw that you're just rags and straw?
Now tell me, scarecrow in the fields, what if the birds saw you're not so scary at all?

The four seasons have come and gone now, time marches on at one steady pace,
And four fearless pairs of sparrows have made the scarecrow their nesting place.

Now the moral of this story, let it ring out loud and clear,
Is don't let power go unquestioned before you run away in fear.

Now let's all sing:

Scarecrow in the fields, what if the birds saw that you're just rags and straw?
Now tell me, scarecrow in the fields, what if the birds saw you're not so scary, no?
Scarecrow in the fields, what if the birds saw that you're just rags and straw?
Now tell me, scarecrow in the fields, what if the birds saw you're not so scary at all?

© Amelie Protscher 2015

Stotesbury Mines

I grew up in a place right on the Western side of the West/East German border – what was known then as the Iron Curtain. The industry in the area (90% ceramics) was artificially propped up by subsidies. So when the Wall came down in 1989, this industry went down the drain and to this day, there's mass youth emigration from the area which is devolving into "ghost town" status. The phenomenon is universal, and this song transports us to Stotesbury, West Virginia, a former mining town that suffered the same fate.

In the town where I live, or rather, its remnants,
The sun sneaks its rays through these leaden grey skies
Upon boarded-up houses whose last living tenants
Are the shadows of mem'ries of days long gone by.

Take a walk right down High Street and I'll show you the tavern,
There was music and dancing some nights until three,
Further down is the church, where Jack, proud and handsome
In his rented tuxedo strode the aisle down with me.

We lived our lives amid coal dust and rubble
We had a home, we thought we're doing just fine
Then the company said our coal ain't worth the trouble
And the pit lamps went out in the Stotesbury mines.

With our men down the shaft, us girls ran this city,
We were shopkeepers, bank clerks, or chefs, like Louise,
We had things to be proud of, and thought we had it pretty
'Til we lost our poor husbands to black lung disease.

We lived our lives amid coal dust and rubble
We had a home, we thought we're doing just fine
Then the company said our coal ain't worth the trouble
And the pit lamps went out in the Stotesbury mines.

Now the city's deserted 'cept for me and Miss Henry
As everyone young enough to leave moved away,
But I'm bound to stay as this town's living memory
And it's there when my time comes I shall die someday.

© Amelie Protscher 2015

When Your Train Comes Through

My stab at the “break-up song” genre, in train blues form. The letting go may feel miserable, but it’s an inexhaustible fountain of song.

I’m going to the river, I swear I can’t stick around,
I’m going to the river, I swear I can’t stick around,
Because my baby quit me, packed her bags and left this town.

It was early in the morning, just ’fore the break of day,
It was early in the morning, just ’fore the break of day,
I found this note on my table, saying, “Girl, I’m goin’ away”.

And the tracks are gonna take you to shores I may never know,
And when your train comes through, it hurts my heart that I loved you so.

I’m gonna sit down by the river, hang my head and start to cry,
I’m gonna sit down by the river, hang my head and start to cry,
And watch the waves of the water catch these tears and roll on by.

Don’t it feel so lonesome when you’re oh so sad and blue?
Don’t it feel so lonesome when you’re oh so sad and blue?
But there are millions upon millions feeling just the way I do.

And the tracks are an endless highway made of steel and wood,
And when your train comes through, babe, I’ll know you’ll be gone for good.

There’s the river and the railroad tracks running side by side,
There’s the river and the railroad tracks running side by side,
So my aching heart can jump that midnight train and ride.

When you get back to the city, baby, please drop me a line,
When you get back to the city, baby, please drop me a line,
I may have lost your love, but let me know you’re doing fine.

And the tracks keep running where the land meets the steel blue sky
And when your train comes through, babe, I’ll wave my last goodbye.

© Amelie Protscher 2010

Serenade

This is almost too idyllic to be included here. Written quite literally by the riverside – and, almost by accident, first performed there three months later, on the occasion of my hometown's 750th anniversary – this closes the album on a romantic note with a canon between the cello and organ.

Open plains lie silent as the night begins,
A crickets' chorus sings its song, a whippoorwill joins in,
Gentle falls the darkness over waters and sand
While gently white steam rises from the lowlands.

The man who worked the fields all day is homeward bound
And daytime's rush fades to a barely whispering sound.
Sitting by the riverbank, we're passing our time
Singing songs while distant boats float calmly by.

Now deep blue blankets swiftly dim the last rays of light,
And as we part, we wish us all a restful good night
And may G-d keep us safely in the palm of her hand
And may her hand protect us 'til we all meet again.

© Amelie Protscher 2017