

Valerie June, Ghost Catcher

Before the mountain I knew the incinerated

cities. I knew another South. But that
was before I was another. The one

I am becoming as the roots reclaim
this soil, as what is felled takes on

a form it could not have imagined,
whose seeds had always rested below

like a sorrow of banjos. – Vievee Francis, from her poem “Happy?”

VALERIE JUNE IS A GHOST CATCHER

I’m watching a video of Valerie June’s 2015 appearance on “Live at Elvis’s,” a performance space housed in Elvis’s former digs on Audubon Drive in Memphis. Valerie June begins upbeat.¹ In “Tennessee Time” she talks about her vision for making art, wisecracks on her own misunderstood and perpetual lateness, and introduces the audience to her banjo, mini-ukulele and guitar, which she’s winsomely nicknamed as the Mama, The Baby, and The Stranger. Even the lonesome “Somebody to Love” is punctuated by a giggle. She gives her version of Jim Reeves’s southern gospel single “This World Is Not My Home (I’m Just A-Passing Through),” lending it her own spacey, funky-fey quiriness, and explains that it was her favorite hymn growing up: “I never felt like I was an Earthling. I don’t know, maybe I was from some magical faerie land that had lots of sparkling turquoise things flying around,” she says. I find this confession endearing, one of the many ways I hear in this charismatic performer twenty years younger than I an echo of my own black queer nerdy self. With her feet, in this song, tapping out the beat on a tambourine set on the floor, I think of tent revivals, folks sweating out sin through the sheer joy of music. But with the next song, June moves to another kind of otherworldliness. June slips a metal guitar slide attached to a floral silk handkerchief onto her pinky finger, flips her long dreadlocks over her shoulder. She says, still smiling, “The thing about organic moonshine roots music is, you have to

1. “Valerie June: Live at Elvis’s: The Audubon Sessions.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOvX2vkJ8JM>

play a murder ballad after a gospel song because just a little wrong keeps you right.” “Organic Moonshine Roots Music” is June’s special take on country, blues, and gospel music—an approach as much shaped by past artists as by her own ingenuity and creativity. June laughs, and the audience and I laugh along with her. Then we all grow quiet, respectful. This one will be a murder ballad from a female perspective, she tells us. It’s a chance for Valerie to join a chorus of other haunted voices, in a tradition dominated by men in blues and in country: Elvis and Jimmie Rodgers, Johnny Cash and Jimi Hendrix, Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan. And, of course, Robert Johnson. Some notable women have tried their hand at murder ballads, too, including Nina Simone and Ma Rainey. June closes her eyes and calls them all forth. The temperature in the room shifts to a dank chill and my fingers tingle as she breathes out the first line of “Shotgun” *a cappella*:

*Oh, baby. You know that I love you, baby.
I’m in love with you. Yes I am.*

It’s a simple defense, the only one offered; a ghostly wail whispered as if from the grave, which it turns out to be. The chords inch along a spooky, barebones blues. Her face grim, eyes somewhere else, her voice raspy with grief, she shares with us her plan:

*So I’m going to get my shotgun.
If I can’t get you, nobody can.*

June conjures the motherless-child loneliness of blueswomen Geeshie and Elvie, the hollowed-out grief of Leadbelly. Next, the song breaks into a fast, furious run, and at the end of each line her fingers wring vibrato from the neck of the guitar she calls The Stranger, as if it were human. She skids to a stop as if she’s seen her own ghost. After three beats, these lines come out as an exhausted sigh:

*Well, late last night they laid you in your lonesome grave.
And you know two nights later they lay me beside you.*

She gives the strings one more wallop, then she hangs her head in silence.

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It was the mid-1990s and my Mom and I are walking just outside of State College, PA, in search of the graveyard that was said to house the graves of the black slaves who ran away to freedom. It’s been a year since I’ve moved to Penn State, my first job teaching English out of grad school, and this is my first visit from my mother, who is here from Chicago. Mom is dressed in jeans and jaunty red Keds high tops, ready to explore. Her cornrows are tied back with a red bandana (all the better to be sighted by the hunters, I think to myself). I have not told my mother yet of my struggles with my new job, the way that this new school and especially the new town nestled deep in a verdant valley have left me lonely deep in my bones. As we walk up the ridge, eyes scanning the ground for grave markers, I venture, “I just feel sad here sometimes, Mom.” But her own thoughts seem to be somewhere else: her struggles at work, perhaps or on my sister, who has just moved back home with her two young children, her marriage on the rocks. “This is so peaceful,” she says, scanning the graveyard and the green just beyond it. “I’m glad to see you settled here. It’s such a relief to me,” she tells me. A little later, we find the grave markers that we’ve been searching for. We almost missed them because the road has been built

right up to the edge of them, so that there are only a few narrow inches of ground before the gravel and then asphalt. I think about those slave bodies, wonder how they feel jammed up against the road. I wonder if anyone knows who they're driving over as they pass.

I think of all of the black lives that have been crowded out, pushed back, kicked out, "moved on up" and out, jailed, gentrified, relocated, priced out, starved out, terrorized, erased. Every state in the United States has its history of "racial cleansing" of black people. From the sunset codes of Washington and Oregon to Redlining in Chicago to the downright stealing of land in Florida. Pennsylvania has its own history. It's been both a stop on the Underground Railroad and a witness to night terrors that have driven whole black communities out. Any place with that kind of history is bound to have its ghosts.

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Valerie June is a ghost catcher. She takes on moments of risk and tenderness in her work, honoring moments of mortality and struggle in the music she admires and giving it back to us, with her own spin—whether it's her version of Jimi Hendrix's tender "Little Wing" or her own "Shotgun"—to create something new that honors the past. Like I attempt in this essay, June uses both an artist's and a scholar's tools to help the listener hear and feel and understand connections between experiences and cultures that, we've been told in the past, are separate. Her music is an exercise of freedom and will and risk. Her sartorial style—one part retro, one part hippie—her high-femme beauty, her unapologetic blackness, in the ways all of these things are put together in settings sometimes hostile to blackness, might be a mask of protection. But they also draw us in. She shows us a way to enter dangerous places of history and the heart, and to be brave.

In Valerie June's music, I see a powerful example of African Diasporic music's ability to hold culture in the body and voice, making manifest erased or otherwise lost musical memories. In her embrace of her voice's "perfect imperfections," recalling the styles of less-known black female country blues artists of the past, such as Jessie Mae Hemphill and Elizabeth Cotten, among others, June's performances also make use of manifest in its sense to call up spirits, to conjure the ancestors.

Musicologists Nina Sun Eidsheim and Mandy-Suzanne Wong write that "to play music, especially to improvise, is in part to bring oneself under the influence of other bodies from the past. We perform memories, our own and those of others. . . . To improvise, then, is to call on the resources of our bodies and catapult ourselves beyond the confines and capacities of our singular bodies."² Eidsheim and Wong coin the term *corporeal archaeology* to think about both the ways that individuals understand their bodies through music in light of these social forces, and the ways that societies in turn understand and value that music. For me, Eidsheim and Wong's analysis brings to light the ways performance can capture both what is social about music and what can be deeply personal. In addition, I hear in Valerie June's performances a demonstration of music's power to hold unrecorded histories that glimmer beyond us, not quite reachable through other means.

2. Nina Sun Eidsheim and Mandy-Suzanne Wong, "Corrigedora: Corporeal Archeology, Embodied Memory, Improvisation," in *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, Sound, and Subjectivity*, ed. Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman (Duke University Press, 2016) 217.

A self-taught musician, June brings together multiple black, white, rural, and roots musical traditions in her vocal and performative style. June has not only mastered multiple instruments, including guitar, banjo and ukulele, but also the techniques of known and obscure musicians from the past, particularly 1920s and 1930s country blues artists, thanks to her archival listening work in the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian. June's voice creates a variety of textures and timbres, from the husky rasp that sometimes graces "No Drawers Blues" to the deep and direct frankness in "Workin' Woman Blues" to the higher, nasal keening that easily blends into a yodel in "Living in Tennessee Time" and "Astral Plane." June uses her vocal flexibility to tell multiple stories, moods, and textures across lines of gender, race, place, and genre, and laces her performances with stories, hums, and laughter, honoring past traditions while also giving her own spin on them. In these ways, she makes powerful use of another form of "manifest"—like the ship's archivist, tracking a ship's comings and goings, official passengers as well as stowaways, June is rooted in—and rooting for—those who are known as well as those who remain unnamed. This has particular significance for African American culture. As June tells *Austin City Limits'* Antonette Massando in a 2017 interview,

When I find something that I like, I study it and I go as far into the root of it as I possibly can, because I want to know how did we get to where we are today in music, and I want to know that whole journey. And I feel like, especially as a colored woman, a lot of the music that makes us who we are today—we had to leave that because of different memories that we didn't want to have any more. We had to leave that, and we're always creating something new. But I'm curious about the root. And how that leads us to now. That's what I do. I study all the different kinds of music that America has.³

June's willingness to court with ghosts is one of the many ways that she participates in an Africanist Aesthetic. In his introduction to the volume *Black Performance Theory*, Thomas F. DeFrantz includes as an aspect of an African aesthetic the willingness "to include the voices of those gathered in the fabric of the event."⁴ Riffing on shared traditions, June engages the audience both in terms of sharing the feeling of past and known resources and involving them intellectually in the process of revealing difference, a dynamic that Amiri Baraka calls the "changing same."⁵ This call and response includes listeners in the audience as well as any ancestors who might be listening.

In a 2013 interview with NPR, Valerie June describes her hunger to know and understand music from a historical vantage point, one that is interested in the varieties and innovations of folk music in everyday life. She remembers the childhood experience of going to church and listening to the variety of voices—perfect and imperfect—around her. She describes soaking in these different, non-professional voices as a means for understanding the role of interpretation and personal idiosyncrasy in music. Like many African

3. Valerie June, online interview with Antonette Masando, *Austin City Limits'* Austin Underground, 2017. <https://youtu.be/yaax-qduFCU>

4. Thomas F. DeFrantz, *Black Performance Theory* (Duke University Press, 2014) 5.

5. LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), "The Changing Same (R & B and New Black Music)" in *Black Music* (DeCapo Press 1966) 18.

American artists, church was her first resource for heartfelt music and the varieties of beauty to be found in non-professionalized human voices: “I found that if I sat beside different people I would hear something totally different on the same song. . . . I just started to mimic what they would do with their voices. It was just a silly, playful way to learn how to use my voice as an instrument.”⁶

Along with Elizabeth Cotten, June cites Bessie Smith and Nina Simone among her many influences, as well as lesser-known performers of the southern blues and gospel traditions collected by Lomax and others, and uses her skills as a musician, performer, and interpreter to “overstand” their work. For example, she describes the influence of Jesse Mae Hemphill, a contemporary country, blues, and folk artist who recently passed away: “She didn’t have the traditional voice that we expect to come out of a woman from the South, or a black woman from the South, in particular. And neither did Elizabeth Cotten, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith. All of these women just had beautiful voices that were perfectly imperfect; they had a lot of emotion and a lot of character. And I shouldn’t feel bad that I don’t sound like, you know, the number one pop singer or the number one soul singer. I should just feel good that I sound like me.”⁷ When curating a list for a Smithsonian Folkways Records website highlighting lesser-known songs from their collection, June praises white gospel folksinger Polly Johnson’s cough in the middle of her song “The Three Maids”: “I love it when recordings have perfectly imperfect things in them,” she writes. The sound of Polly’s cough is not only a mark of the recording’s folk “authenticity,” but also a mark of Johnson’s presence, a sign of this struggling human life that has come and gone.

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One day, I visited a neighborhood bar in Bellefonte, which is about 10 miles from State College, the town where I lived and taught. I had a girlfriend who lived in Bellefonte, on a street of modest homes uphill from the town center. When I’d drive to visit her, I’d have the feeling that others were peering into the car to see me, shaking their heads over the two of us together, as much because of our races, black and white, as that we were two women together. Maybe no one assumed that we were even a couple, but sometimes when we were in her apartment, H. would swear that she heard the same car circling as if checking in on us. The only black person I ever saw in Bellefonte was at the gas station near that first exit into town, a small dark-skinned man in a university windbreaker, putting gas in his car. As I gassed up, the man stared openly at me but didn’t say hello. I don’t know what I expected. Friendliness, at least. Some sign of the southern-at-the-heart-of- the-Southside-of-Chicago connection that I was raised with, I guess. In the same way, I’d go to diners in search of soul food, or at least some good pie, but never found it. But one day, I went into this bar in Bellefonte. The bar was in the basement of a downtown building, and as I went down the stairs, I saw these photographs of black men, professional stills in black and white. The men were in tuxes, arranged in a pyramid, crooning into a microphone, with close haircuts that could only be called “smooth.” “Those are the Mills Brothers,” the

6. “Valerie June on Learning to Love ‘Perfectly Imperfect Voices’ “The Record,” National Public Radio, 9 August 2013. <https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2013/08/09/209857975/valerie-june-on-learning-to-love-perfectly-imperfect-voices>

7. Ibid.

bartender called out to me. “They were from here,” he said, then went back to drying the beer glasses. I asked him if he knew anything more, and he just shrugged. This wasn’t the first time I had heard of The Mills Brothers. I remember my Grandmother singing “If I Didn’t Care” as she worked on Sunday dinners in my Chicago childhood. I knew that The Mills Brothers produced the soulful crooning that would give birth to doo-wop. But I had trouble connecting them to Bellefonte, a place that seemed so distinctly white to me. Pittsburgh, maybe, or Philly, for sure. But where was the evidence of the black lives who lived in Bellefonte? Where were their neighborhoods? Where were the plaques and the childhood homes? When I saw these photos it was the late 1990s—the 1930–40s were not ancient history. Where was everyone?

Later on, I learned that Bellefonte had been a major site for the Underground Railroad, and black folks who had been enslaved settled in there. Bellefonte and the surrounding area were on the “Jefferson Route” of the Underground Railroad, and the area beckoned because of its hills and greenery, great for hiding, and for the population of Quakers and Free Black People who lived there and provided shelter. The Mills Brothers were descendants of those first fugitive slaves. Their grandfather ran a barbershop right there in downtown Bellefonte, part of a community of black-owned businesses that are no longer there, and preached in the St. Paul’s African Episcopal Church. On the local news, Donna King, current pastor of St. Paul’s who also leads Underground Railroad tours in the area, states that the all-black church is the last of its kind in Bellefonte. The church now only has a handful of parishioners, but from one hundred years ago up through the Great Depression, it was a busy meeting place for black folks in town, including those ex-slaves who settled there.

According to the census, in the late 1990s African Americans made up 1.5% of the population of Bellefonte. Out of 6,187 people in total, that’s 92 people (really, 92.8 people.) That’s not as bad as I thought. In a room, in a bar or a church, 92 is not a bad crowd. 92 people could feel like a community. Back in my department at the university, I was one of six black professors. (Sometimes people would also mistake me for Christine, who taught in the French Department upstairs from mine—even though we looked nothing alike. So, for the sake of numbers, I’ll make Christine an honorary seventh.) Sometimes we felt like a community, grabbing drinks at the campus bar. But then we’d scatter to our homes and the lonely was still there.

Valerie June is a ghost catcher. Her voice slips through our ribs, like a ghost, attracted by our hunger, space made for her in our shrunken, unfed bellies. Her voice is the ghost, or it conjures up ghosts. It makes my hands ache as she snatches at my heart, mistaking it for a ghost, and weaves through the cathedral of hard bone that protects me.

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Joseph Roach has written about the ways that performance can “sing” erased bodies into history. He writes, “Performances so often carry within them the memory of otherwise forgotten substitutions—those that were rejected and, even more invisibly, those that have succeeded to be erased.”⁸

8. Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead* (Columbia University Press, 1996), 5.

In *Valerie June: Manifest* (2015), a seven-minute documentary by Alan Spearman, audiences are introduced to a figure with whom they might not be overly familiar: a young African American country and roots artist who describes her music as “vibing off spirits.” Songs, she says, “are where I began my spiritual journey in this life. They are the root.” The video first aired on MTV as part of its short-lived Reality TV show, *\$5 Cover Amplified*, about struggling musicians in Memphis. June is the only African American woman and certainly the only black country music singer featured on the show. The video presents her doing yoga, laying out tarot cards, exploring a swamp and touching the roots of the trees as they rise from the water, practicing her guitar on an unmade bed and on top of a clothes washer in a basement. The video asks us to see her as a study in the active process of reconciling tradition and self-invention, as both grounded and otherworldly. I am aware of how the video seems in love with her beauty, her open face and connection to nature making her seem more spiritually enlightened than the rest of us, and I find myself wondering what of this is real. But even as I think of this as a performance, I admire the deliberateness and care with which she integrates these gestures of everydayness into her process of creativity.

June seems to be negotiating her relationship with her family to find her own place within this rich spiritual world. She sweeps and soaps the bricks on her family’s front porch in Jackson, Tennessee, her hometown, and we watch as she cooks and eats with her parents and grandmother in a dining room surrounded by photographs of ancestors. The video highlights the sometimes-comic drama of intergenerational misunderstanding—a hook, perhaps, for humanizing, and for making her art more universal. We watch June explaining the meaning of her song “No Drawers Blues” to her mother, who assumes it’s “just a raunchy song about thongs.” In her lyrics, she sings, “I want to be free,” rebelling against the constraint of bras, pantyhose, and thongs. Her mother nods warily at her explanation, and we get the sense that she’s just not buying it. A little later, June’s mother shows to the camera an old photograph of June in high school. In the photo, June’s hair is pressed and curled, and she is wearing a preppy black sweater and a conventionally winning smile, a contrast to her current long dreadlocks, green and golden hippy wear, and dreamy look. “This girl here,” she says, shaking her head, proud and puzzled both. Still, it’s noteworthy that even though the film tries to universalize June’s experiences—a reflection perhaps of its aim of translating June’s aesthetic for mainstream audiences, she grounds herself in a particular history of African Americans in Southern rural life: sewing, growing herbs, making her own soap, rising with the sun, praying, conjuring, writing down the hymns—all practices that link her to her grandmothers and greats.

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Valerie June is a ghost catcher. How is she able to sound both like your mama’s voice calling you in when the streetlights come on, and yourself singing to yourself while you fold laundry? A split voice that sounds like that growl mamas get when they’re salty, and like the quiet voice you use when you’re all alone before you realize that no one can hear you.

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That’s when I decided to let myself be haunted by this place. I began to frequent antique stores and used record marts, fingering through the debris of folks’ everyday life in this

region, looking for a sign of “us.” I once took home a church pew from my favorite thrift store in Lockhaven just because it was painted black and white and reminded me of the gaudy décor of Leak and Sons Funeral home on Chicago’s South Side, in the neighborhood where I grew up.

Unlike my great-grandmother from New Orleans, who had many stories of spiritual encounters with haints and visitations, mine are limited. But thrift stores were, for a time, the place where I would court the spirits of those who came before me. For a while I was drawn to the grotesque smell of decaying wood, of dust and someone else’s old skin and sweat. Chair seats woven in leather shiny with the grime of others. I was haunted by loneliness and sought out company, living or dead. Maybe I could learn something about survival from those ghosts. Sometimes, like my real-life courtships, these courtships of spirit were met with anger, resentment: chilly breezes that filled me with sadness and grief; once, the touch of a cold hand and a vision of green that filled me with fear.

On Saturdays, after cleaning my apartment, I’d get into my car to explore antique shops in the towns around me. Sometimes I’d go with a friend, and sometimes I’d go alone. I’d sift through these leftovers from other people’s lives, looking for something solid and familiar, making what I hoped would be a stronger sense of home in the present from others’ pasts. I had standards, though. When I looked through old sets of dishes, I’d avoid ones with cracks. I didn’t mind resting with other people’s dirt, but I wasn’t sure if I wanted to ingest it. Looking for the perfect couch, I went by smell, buying one that had a busted spring just because it smelled the nicest of the bunch. One day, I ventured to a new place and town, following a sign posted by a highway exit. The store seemed to be the only place open for miles. The proprietor, a white man with a mangy dog at his feet, wouldn’t make eye contact with me. It took a minute for my eyes to adjust to the dim light, but when I did, I noticed a table of Nazi paraphernalia: copies of Mein Kampf, banners of red and white and black. I let out a small Oh and hightailed it out of there.

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June sings, “I’ll be somebody. Will I be somebody? Will I be somebody to love?” and I worry about her. I know what it feels like to be the only one for miles around. I think, “Are those people good to you, the ones who come to listen while they drink, the ones in your band?” Watching her perform live in 2018, even here in Chicago—June and I among the small handful of other black women here. I worry about how free she is, whipping her locks so they fall in her face as she dances on stage, hiding her eyes. She loops them around her ears like a puppy. I worry that she’s forgotten who’s out there. Sometimes I worry that she’s gone too far in her life among the ghosts.

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Another night, I’m with my friends, driving somewhere outside of town to a bonfire. I don’t know where I’m going, embrace, in fact, that feeling of not being able to see what’s in front of me, not knowing how to read the signs. I can’t really explain my hunger to get outside of that town, the way I catapulted myself into the context of dangers, woods, unpeopled roads. Me, raised by my mama to be so watchful. The bonfire was Jeffrey’s idea, hipster a sweet from Milwaukee. But Nan was afraid. Sure, she brought the bourbon, the consummate Kentuckian, in a silver flask, along with Dixie cups for all of us to share by the fire, but she told us that she

was afraid for us, going to a bonfire in the woods made by people we didn't quite know, but especially for me, the only black person in the group. Nan is a historian and has written about white terrorist movements in the South. The blood that she knew in order to find out what she didn't know, she said. "I don't trust White people," she said, ignoring for the moment that she herself was white, or maybe informed by that fact. But I laughed off Nan's comment, the same way I laughed off driving so drunk home one night from the one gay bar in our town that the road wavered, when the difference between waking life and sleeping safe at home in my single bed seemed very dim. As I saw the flames leap up between the trees, I heard those voices of warning, too, inherited from my mother, and her mother and hers. But with each month here, something was being eaten away, that caution replaced by the urge for sensation and beauty and danger, the leaping glow of the bonfire itself.

Camille Dungy, a black female writer and academic, knows this feeling, and writes about it in her essay "Tales from a Black Girl on Fire, or Why I Hate to Walk Outside and See Things Burning." "Now and then something startling broke loose and knocked hard on my rear window, my moon roof, my windshield. An acorn. Maybe a pine cone. A twig. Dead ropes of kudzu dangled here and there, and all my people's horror stories worried through my head. Why was I out in the country at night? Didn't I know better?"⁹

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It's a ghost of a feeling, that lonely feeling that you don't tell others about, that you yourself can't look at, lest it take your heart and squeeze the life right out of you.

Some nights, alone on a drive when I couldn't sleep, I'd watch the yellow lines passing and find myself bending toward them. Once I had to pull over because it scared me. I couldn't feel myself in the car any more, no sense of the seats or my seatbelt holding me in, no sense of the speed of the car any more. I had joined the darkness. The rhythm became like it feels when you say the same word over and over again, danger, danger, danger, danger, danger. Until it means nothing but sound, nothing but the curve of a word over and through your mouth, what your teeth feel like as they scrape your tongue, the way the r sound seems to go on until it ends in a breath or until your breath gives out.

You've got to be careful with ghosts. They can grow bigger than you, whip you. But June is brave. She sings to grow brave, and so you sing with her, too. She catches the ghosts before they catch her.

Is there a light
You have inside you
You can't touch?
▪ Valerie June, "Astral Plane."

I left for Chicago before I had the chance to solve the mystery of The Mills Brothers and the other missing black people of Bellefonte. I needed black folks and brown and queer folks, all kinds of folks and languages around me. I needed community. I needed someone to love

9. Camille Dungy, "Tales from a Black Girl on Fire, or Why I Hate to Walk Outside and See Things Burning" in *Guidebook to Relative Strangers: Journeys into Race, Motherhood and History*, (W.W. Norton, 2017) 171. [First published in *The Colors of Nature: Culture, Identity, and the Natural World*, 2002]

me back. I found it and made home, a life richer than I had even imagined for myself, with good work and a child and love. But I hoped when I left that at least one person would miss me, even if that person wasn't among the living. That would be enough for me.

*I am a ghost catcher, too.
I've walked among them, sung with them,
heard them on the radio between the static
in the whine of a bottleneck guitar.
I've wanted to be a ghost sometimes, too, and so they trust me.
They look out at me from photographs, from the flames of a bonfire;
From the worn pages of a book and the bottom of a chipped cup.
I've slept among ghosts and they've pulled me
out of my dreams. I've courted ghosts.
They've tapped me on the shoulder, brushed my hand,
Asked me to listen to their stories. Sometimes
I've wanted to be a ghost, too, and so
They know they can trust me.
Like June, I've courted ghosts.*

Listening to June and to some of the older musicians she's learned from, I've realized the power of music—black country music—to recognize the ghosts that haunt us. Music helps us meet our demons, to name them, to humor them, and maybe exorcise them. It can be a way of awakening our own spirit—that light inside that we can't quite touch. And by connecting us to a line of other struggling human beings, black country music helps us feel a little less lonely. ■