

tri-district sings, monongalia county, wv
by Mary Linscheid, 2023

1.

we'd all go to our own churches
sunday morning sunday morning
and go on back to our homes
for dinner

roasts in the oven with carrots
and potatoes or maybe just sandwiches
didn't even bother getting out
of our sunday bests

best sundays of the month
were the ones where we
at two pm congregated
we the congregation at somebody else's

church or maybe our own
for an afternoon sing.

2.

an afternoon sing we didn't call it that
we called it a tri-district sing
we sat and stood in the pews with
our hymn books open but not looking at them

singing those old hymns you now play back
into these old places into this humid air
a sanctuary for us sinners oh yes
we sang out our hopelessness

our abscesses of lost but not forgotten
and we forgot about the professor's
tape-recorder in the corner
spinning a tale full of holes

and now there's you with your ear
up against one of them listening.

3.

you lean up against a pew listening
to our distorted voices
through some newfangled device and it's
clear mr. carvell was sitting too close

to the electric guitar amp that day in 1958
at mount union methodist
when we sang we shall not be moved
(because really it was mr. carvell who

should've moved but who's to argue with a professor)
we did our best
to send our voices to the rafters
and that's where they are now

did you expect to see us still
there in the pews too?

4.

there in the pews is your grandma
where she once sat about sixty years ago
bowing her head as her dad
our rev. camp lead us in an opening prayer

dear heavenly father
shuffle of shoes creak of wood
cough cough sniff whisper warble
of tape amen a—amen

we were all she knew she knew
how to play the piano and piano accordion
while her mom & dad
our rev. camp sang

build me a mansion in the corner
of glory land—a mansion not a cabin.

5.

we none of us lived in mansions
maybe a few of us cabins
and some of us lived in cheat lake before it was
built up with mansions

a lot of us knew what it was
to live and work and die
in one spot one plot for a hundred years
or more our family names

household names dropping like
fruit from the apple trees
in the backyard and growing right
there where they landed

we watch you apple tree watch you
walk through our stones wandering.

6.

you wonder at our stone silence
even as we belt it out with feeling because the feeling
was always there
even if we didn't have time

to practice like we should've
and stood up there spouting testimonies
a preface to a sermon we weren't
about to give because the tri-district

sings were about singing 'though
you seem to want more and we'll give you more
after the tape recorder clicks
off at the applause

and amens.

just listen here to these stories.

7.

just listen here to these stories
she tells you at the
kitchen counter you with your laptop
open playing

our songs the ones she remembers
and the others she doesn't
on those seven-inch reels
made into mp3s

it was providence
that they ended up with you
so she could hear our voices
as they were back then

take us back to our home
let us get a picture of the place

8.

you pictured the place as it was
back then and it didn't look that different
we'll tell you the back balcony wasn't
there but that's about all that's changed

we'll tell you we usually didn't keep
christmas decorations in the back pews because
they used to hold the young
families who had babies

babies who you heard cry on the tape
recordings babies who
are all grewed up now probably
the ones who brought these big faded candy canes

to sell at the next church yard sale
because lord knows it needs a new roof.

9.

- *for John "Junior" Martin, 1928-2023*

only the lord knows when our time will come
and it came for most of us already
and that's why you didn't get an answer
when you called the numbers

in the phone book and you and your
grandma thought mr. junior martin
had already gone too
mon county's own hank williams

who could sing the high lonesome
into any of the old hymns just like it was
meant to be done
and while your grandma was telling you his life

story at the kitchen counter
we were just getting him settled.

10.

we all settled in our pews again
at highland park methodist
the martins from calvary methodist was there
the choir was there and albert williams was there

from mt. herman baptist a black church
and we know why you're confused
given the strife
the cloud and fire

we know you've seen the fray of doctrines
denomination against denomination
and no we weren't perfect
but god transcends all our differences

so today is for singing the old hymns
and today we are our own church.