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Robert Wrigley

A Cappella

for Marnie Bullock

Sensitive fellow and bellow of brimstone,
our two preachers warred
until the younger—married, soft-spoken—suffered
what the congregation called “a nervous breakdown.”
We mulled this over and knew
a line had been drawn. Benny left
for the Methodists, flushed with luck and liberalism.
Mark muled off with his homely sister,
Sunday school and two church services per week,
a lost soul sure to sell insurance.
So there I was, child of equal time,
compromise-kid, left to face the abyss alone,
the rib-rattling, stentorian doom
of the right Reverend Mr. Christian J. Kuhlman.
But I could sing, so worked undercover, robed,
a godly doo-wop a cappella spy
dreaming of revenge.

How I found it,
slim trap-door in the furnace room closet,
I don't remember, but shinned up through
every Sunday for a month to squat
among the organ's pipes, doxologically drunk
and reeling with the heart-rattling air.
Through lattice I could see the congregation
chewing their gristly hymns, heads
bobbing in the battle with sleep.
I could see the righteous and the wretched,
the plump girl I'd talked out of her blouse

in the sacristy, the boy who would die
in five more years, in a jungle
the rest of us had yet to learn.

And so it is the way with spring, old
Dionysian horniness afflicting the lewd
and lonely alike: *This is your seed!*
the Reverend Kuhlman roared
to the catechismal boys, who knew better
than to giggle, but half-believed
the church filled up on Easter
for the bulbs of gladioli, gratis and fraught
with the mysteries of fertility.
We made our glum procession,
junior choir in robes of angelic white.
Christ was risen again, one thousand
nine hundred, sixty-six times—
an avalanche of rolled-away stones,
a gangland, machine gun massacre of nail holes—
but we sang "Today! Today!" a cappella,
from the steps below the altar
while the Reverend Kuhlman beamed
for the seeds we'd become.

After the singing, the procession back out,
most of the choir hung around the flowery foyer,
where crates of bulbs sat like arks,
but not me, easing off, sprinting around the building,
my robe and stifling suit coat flung in the bushes.
I leapt down through the basement door,
the furnace room, and up the trap door hole

to the place of held breaths, the forest of pipes.
All the while he raged through a sermon
on sacrifice, I sacrificed my one white shirt
and plucked up pipes and switched their holes,
untuning an instrument seventy-five years old,
stuffing a pile of rags in the heavy basses,
sweating, wild to be back in time
and beaming, my hand held out,
hearty, hilarious, smug as the saved.

Lucious Hart, the organist, went apoplectic
at the first chord. I slid back
in time to see him, aging, kindly,
effeminate, fluttering down the stairs
behind the altar, his undone black robe
arcing out like insufficient wings.
And if I guessed the Reverend Kuhlman
would blame the Jews or the Catholics,
it was an honest mistake, the Crucifixion,
cards, whiskey, and the Communist Party
all blamed on them before.

But he didn't say a word, only stood
at the pulpit, his head to one side,
chin slightly up. He looked like Jesus,
shaved and beatific, neither bellowing nor braying
but waiting, until the wave of chatter
washed against the church's back wall
and returned as silence, then waiting a moment more
before closing his eyes and singing of God,
from whom all blessings flowed,
in our church, almost a lament.

So we sang, and for a moment
even those of us who had vowed
never to give in, gave in
to so many ordinary voices trying
to make up for fiasco, to believe in real wings, to sing.
Through all the handshakes after, the hugs and mugs
of aunts and great aunts and grandmothers,
no one noted the smudge of coal dust on my cheek.
I was, after all, almost a child, dirt magnet,
dog-tailed, my voice barely lower than soprano.
The Reverend Kuhlman's hand on my face
was a tenderness I might have known him by.
"Your gift," he said to me, "is music,"
and there was Aunt Betty, snapping our picture,
the one so many years on the wall,
then in the album, for years spoken of
humorously, then ironically, then worse.
It was the day—Easter it was!—
when the Reverend took back his earlier prophecy.
No, he said, I wouldn't preach after all,
but would find another way to make my peace
with music.