

movement, there was a steady ebbing of the egalitarian spirit—a spirit suffusing [Walt] Whitman even as he wrote “Song of Myself”—that had animated the artists of the thirties.

Springsteen’s discovery of Woody Guthrie in 1980 coincided with the advent of an era of accelerating inequality in the United States, a development he chronicled on *Nebraska* and subsequent records. But by the end of the decade even Springsteen had retreated somewhat from his concern with social injustice. Records like *Tunnel of Love*, *Human Touch*, and *Lucky Town*, while hardly rejecting the political stance of his earlier records, lacked the sense of active engagement that had characterized his music in the early eighties.

But during a sleepless night in early 1995 while trying to write new songs, Springsteen picked up *Journey to Nowhere*, a book on the new American underclass written by Dale Maharidge with photographs by Michael Williamson (they would go on to share a Pulitzer Prize in 1990 for *And Their Children After Them*, which traced the subsequent history of Alabama sharecropping families first chronicled in James Agee’s classic 1940 study *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*). *Journey to Nowhere* had originally been published in 1985, which is when Springsteen bought it, but only now was he actually reading the book. Maharidge’s and Williamson’s depictions of the decaying industrial city of Youngstown, Ohio, and their portraits of contemporary boxcar hoboes were the direct inspiration for two new songs, “Youngstown” and “The New Timer.” “What Springsteen is trying to do is something so incredible,” said Maharidge in 1996, when *Journey to Nowhere* was reissued (with a new introduction by Springsteen). “He’s a musical Steinbeck.”<sup>3</sup>

Springsteen made this political and artistic connection clear in his decision to title the ensuing album *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, and in the song of the same name that opens it. But his primary tie to *Tom Joad*, as he has made clear in interviews and in source notes that accompany the album, is the John Ford version. Whatever the lineage, though, it’s apparent that Springsteen sought to make his own imprint on the material.

He does this in a number of ways. One is the use of contemporary details that anchor the songs in the present even as they resonate with the past. So, for example, “The Ghost of Tom Joad” opens with men walking along railroad tracks—and highway patrol choppers coming over a ridge. Steinbeck/Ford/Guthrie focus on poor white Southerners; Springsteen’s locus is the Southwest, and many of his characters are nonwhite (this was

From Jim Collen

true of some of Steinbeck’s other fiction). While the original Tom Joad sought to navigate the shoals of the Great Depression, Springsteen’s narrator, observing a line of people waiting for shelter, dryly welcomes “the new world order” proclaimed by George [H. W.] Bush. Indeed, there’s a bitterness in “The Ghost of Tom Joad” that may even exceed that of Steinbeck. “The highway’s alive tonight,” begins the chorus on a hopeful note—only to end with an acerbic “But nobody’s kiddin’ nobody about where it goes.” Thunder Road, it would seem, is a dead end.

## The Bars of Graceland

*We [the E Street Band] wanted to play because we wanted to meet girls, we wanted to make a ton of dough, and we wanted to change the world a little bit, you know?*

—Bruce Springsteen, 1984

In our day, the term “American Dream” has become a cliché most commonly invoked by real-estate agents and Hollywood screenwriters. The former use it in a tireless effort to sell home ownership, the most concrete vision of the Dream. The latter use it to sell a vision of wealth, fame, and power all the more alluring for its seeming effortless.

It may be logical, then, that both these versions of the American Dream converge at [Elvis] Presley’s baronial home. Here, he took care of his beloved mama, and here he fed his bottomless appetites (sustained via income from his movies). Its very name, Graceland, testifies to its almost totemic power as the supreme expression of the Dream, heavenly grace in earthly form.

But however potent a symbol, Graceland cannot wholly represent the American Dream in its many dimensions. It has gone by different names: “the American Creed,” “the American Way of Life,” or, simply, the “American Way.” All are united by a common underlying faith that runs through the many versions of the Dream. This faith is rarely articulated explicitly, and it has never been formally codified. But it can be summed up in the following assertion:

Anything is possible if you want it badly enough.

Americans may invest in this Dream so heavily because America itself is a product of it. Its earliest formulation was perhaps best expressed by John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in a lay sermon he delivered to the Puritans in 1630 while still sailing the Atlantic. "We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when he shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, 'the Lord make it like that of New England,'" he reputedly said. "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill."

The heart of the Puritans' American Dream was what they called their "covenant," an implicit pact with God that he would provide for them spiritually if they formed a community to honor him according to his precepts as they understood them. This American Dream was a religious dream, as were many subsequent versions of the Dream, including the massive evangelical revivals known as the "Great Awakenings" of the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As time passed, these versions of the Dream tended to become more individualistic, less focused on salvation through community than through personal redemption. But the original energy persisted, even as it diffused across the country at large, most obviously in the case of an increasingly secular work ethic.

By the end of the eighteenth century, another version of the Dream, this one more political, was articulated by the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Thomas Jefferson's assertions to the contrary, it was by no means "self-evident," then or now, that "all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights," and that these rights can be summed up as "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." But such was the will and good fortune of the Founders that they did achieve political autonomy from Britain, and bequeathed to us a vision of possibility that we have honored—if all too imperfectly realized—ever since.

There were a number of American Dreams in the nineteenth century. Some, like the Transcendentalists' quest for self-realization, were relatively modest in scope. "I have learned this, at least, from my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours," wrote Henry David Thoreau after his sojourn in the woods of Walden. Others, like the so-called "Manifest Des-

tiny," were far more collective, though not especially communitarian. Coined by journalist John L. Sullivan, the term referred to the drive for a continental empire that stretched to the Pacific, the American Dream as imperial conquest.

In the decades following the Civil War, with capitalism ascendant and technology triumphant, the primary expression of the Dream was economic. In its most powerful and durable formulation, it was a hope that one's children would enjoy a higher standard of living than oneself. A variation on this Dream was expressed in the fictional characters of novelist Horatio Alger, whose poor boys made good *because* they were good (and lucky). Still others, like Andrew Carnegie, tried to couch this American Dream in terms of progress that allows those of modest means to achieve happiness no less than the millionaire. "Material prosperity is helping to make the national character more unselfish, more Christlike," Reverend William Wallace, Episcopal bishop of Massachusetts, wrote in 1901.

Whether or not this was really true, the maturation of American industrial capitalism in the early twentieth century led to yet another reorientation of the American Dream. Now it was less about religion, politics, empire, or money—though each continued to have its adherents—than about personal freedom and pleasure. Athletes like Babe Ruth and movie stars like Mary Pickford were enviable not simply because they were rich and powerful, but because they always seemed to be having a good time. This vision was expressed most perfectly not in real life, but in another fictional character: James Gatz, an ordinary boy from small-town Minnesota, who transformed himself into the fabulous Jay Gatsby to win the heart of the beautiful Daisy Buchanan in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925).

Fitzgerald had a sophisticated grasp of the American Dream. Gatsby, of course, fails to attain his; the woman to whom he pins his hopes is not really worthy of him. Not that Gatsby is so "great" either; in the end, he seems little more than a pathetic man who confuses appearances with reality. But even the clear-eyed narrator Nick Carraway cannot help but be moved by the intensity of the man's vision, a vision comparable to that of a European explorer who encountered a continent "commensurate with his capacity for wonder."

Ten years after the publication of *The Great Gatsby*, Elvis Aaron Presley was born in Tupelo, Mississippi. In an important sense, Presley

was the opposite of Gatsby, because he really did achieve his Dream. That Dream has been vividly described by Greil Marcus in his now classic essay "Presliad,"<sup>4</sup> whose very title suggests the degree to which Presley's life evokes a myth of origin. Marcus's point of entry is country music, and the way in which Presley was nurtured by—and broke from—it. Marcus argues that while the Protestant work ethic in the North "set men free by making them strangers," Southerners, black and white, emphasized (segregated) community, one bound through rituals like music, which could provide solace for the heartbroken and consolation for rebels whose cause was lost. To be sure, there was plenty of hell-raising and good times to be had on Saturday night. But that's as far as it went. Come Sunday morning, there was a service to attend, and on Monday morning, everyone returned to work. What made Presley and his fellow rock and rollers special, Marcus says, was their attempt to make Saturday night last forever. "You had to be young and a bit insulated to pull it off," he conceded. But the promise of the idea was irresistible:

Reality would catch up sooner or later—a pregnant girlfriend and a fast marriage, the farm you had to take over when your daddy died, a dull and pointless job that drained your desires until you could barely remember them—but why deal with reality before you had to? And what if there was a chance, just a chance, that you didn't have to deal with it?

Presley himself put it more succinctly: "When I was a boy, I was the hero in comic books and movies. I grew up believing in a dream. Now I've lived it out. That's all a man can ask for."

As Presley learned, however, the Dream itself turned out to be a "dull and pointless job." In this regard, he was just like Gatsby: his Dream was an unworthy one. Presley became a latter-day King Midas; by 1956, any song his voice touched went gold (a singer far more than a composer, by contractual arrangement he nevertheless received songwriting credit for many records), and simply appearing before the camera guaranteed profits for any of his movies. Lacking an essential curiosity or even simple business acumen about his future, he left most of the crucial decisions shaping his career to the rapacious "Colonel" Tom Parker, who committed Presley to projects that were beneath him. Before long, his work was a profitable joke, and by the late sixties, it wasn't even so profitable anymore.

Presley's career was not simply a tale of perfect decline. All through this period, he showed flashes of commitment, and when it became unmistakably clear to him that he'd lost his touch, he turned Colonel Parker's plans for a 1968 Christmas special into an astonishing display of his resiliency and the springboard for his celebrated comeback. He recorded some of the best work of his life at this time, went back on the road for the first time in a decade, and conquered America all over again. But after the first few appearances in Las Vegas, Presley acted like a man with "talent so vast it would be demeaning to apply it." In his words, becoming a hero onstage "was all a man could ask for," and after attaining this goal in the fifties, losing it in the sixties, and recapturing it in the seventies, he apparently had no idea what else to do except to take refuge in the dreamless sleep of narcotics. And so Presley's American Dream became his prison, and, ultimately, his tomb.

Reflecting on Presley's life and death in 1987, a decade after his death (and a decade after his own pilgrimage to Graceland), Springsteen called Presley's dream "a cult of personality" in which fame and wealth were the only objectives. He did so as a superstar in his own right, featured as the lead interview in the twentieth-anniversary issue of *Rolling Stone*.<sup>5</sup> Once the voice (and even conscience) of the counterculture, the magazine was now itself devoted to cults of personality, attaining its commercial preeminence in the 1980s by stoking sleek, updated versions of Presleyesque fantasies.

But if Springsteen was in this world, he was not quite of it. "When I jumped over that wall to meet Elvis that night, I didn't know who I was gonna meet,"<sup>6</sup> he reflected. "And the guard who stopped me at the door did me the biggest favor of my life. I had misunderstood. It was innocent, and I was having a ball, but it wasn't right. In the end, you cannot live inside that dream."

## Notes

1. See Jefferson Cowie, "Fandom, Faith, and Bruce Springsteen," *Dissent*, Winter 2001.
2. Woody Guthrie, *Dust Bowl Ballads* (1940; Buddha, 2000).
3. See Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson, *Journey to Nowhere: The Saga of the New Underclass*. Introduction by Bruce Springsteen (New York: Hyperion, 1996; Doubleday, 1985). In *Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition*, Cullen also cites Tom Schoenberg, "Professor's Research Inspires a Rock Star," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 19, 1996.

4. Greil Marcus, "Elvis: Presliad," in *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976), pp. 137–205.
5. See Mikal Gilmore, "Twentieth Anniversary Special: Bruce Springsteen Q & A," November 5–December 10, 1987, in *Bruce Springsteen: The Rolling Stone Files* (New York: Hyperion, 1996), pp. 238–46.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 246. Springsteen discusses the night he tried to meet Elvis at his Graceland mansion with Kurt Loder of *Rolling Stone*. See Kurt Loder, "The Rolling Stone Interview: Bruce Springsteen," in *Bruce Springsteen: The Rolling Stone Files* (New York: Hyperion, 1996), pp. 162–63.

## Tom Perrotta

■ Tom Perrotta is the bard of a particular brand of adolescent New Jersey angst. His Jersey-inflected fiction includes *Bad Haircut: Stories of the Seventies* (1997), a collection of short stories that follow the life of Buddy, a small-town New Jersey boy; *Election* (1998), set in a New Jersey high school on the eve of the election of the school president (and adapted as a smart 1999 movie starring Reese Witherspoon and Matthew Broderick); and *Joe College* (2001), a novel about college life circa 1982. His coming-of-age stories are astute and universal in their observations, and often wickedly funny. In *The Wishbones* (1997), from which the following excerpt is taken, we meet Dave Raymond, a thirty-one-year-old musician (he plays guitar in a wedding band) who is not quite ready to give up his dream of adolescent freedom—as the ubiquitous presence of New Jersey's favorite son, Bruce Springsteen, looms over him.

### from *The Wishbones*

■ DAVE HAD TWO courier runs that afternoon—a quick in-and-out to Wall Street, followed by a trip to Morristown to drop off some X rays at a doctor's office. He liked driving for a living, especially since it meant he got paid for time spent listening to tunes on his car stereo. There was no better way to experience music, cranking the volume as high as it could go in an enclosed space, singing at the top of his lungs as he zigzagged like a stuntman through slow-moving traffic on the Pulaski Skyway. He could never understand how people managed to survive entire days cooped up in an office, with nothing to listen to but ringing phones and hushed voices. Even worse, a few of the places he visited had piped-in Muzak, the sound track of living death. Just thinking about it gave him the willies.

Another cool thing about his job was that it brought him into the city two or three times a week. Manhattan was always a jolt of crazy energy, a reminder that life wasn't meant to be safe or easy, the way it was in the suburbs. Dave even appreciated the stuff that gave most drivers headaches—the insane cabbies and squeegee men, the pedestrians who swarmed around his car at red lights like ants around a piece of candy, the whistle-tooting bike messengers and Rollerbladers who zipped past his wind-