

## Songs of Defiance

Written by Vivian Bikulege

Tuesday, 14 April 2020 11:46 - Last Updated Wednesday, 15 April 2020 04:57

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John Prine is dead. I never met John, but I loved him. He wrote and sang *Sam Stone*, *Hello in There*, and *Angel from Montgomery* among many, many other songs.

His voice wasn't sweet, it was real. And lung cancer didn't take his life, Covid did. When I learned he was in the ICU in Nashville with the virus, I'd check-in online to learn his status. I was awake and writing at 2 a.m. when a newsfeed lit my laptop screen to inform me that the "celebrated singer-songwriter" had passed. Prine died on April 7 when the moon was full, and pink, and super.

So many writers, bloggers, poets and pundits are digesting this pandemic with words. I am adding to the viral reflux and I ask for your patient consideration. Like many of you, I am gardening, catching up on long neglected reading, and conjuring magic by tidying up. The ping of a text from an isolated friend diverts my attention away from these tasks and reminds me of this new decade's burden. My process is to write about it.

In my quest to stay busy, I move from one undertaking to the next. I've learned how to host Zoom meetings. I made Easter nut bread for the first time ever, a family tradition that immigrated to the United States in the mind of my Lithuanian grandmother sometime in the early twentieth century. I've organized toolboxes, power washed the backyard deck, and scrubbed the roof of the parked RV. I've hand washed an American flag in hot water separating yellow-green pollen from the red, white, and blue fabric. The flag, submersed under dissolving soap bubbles, reminded me of our nation, drowning in a bath of bewilderment.

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I keep trying to crawl out of myself by writing letters, or dropping off gifts of magazines and toilet paper on neighbor's doorsteps. I secured Trooper in a doggie backpack and took him on a bike ride to Brickyard Point boat landing to watch the sun set. I decorated my house with bunnies and Easter baskets, and bought a fragrant, white lily at Lowe's before stricter stay-at-home orders took place. I'm writing poetry.

I fight worry. My gratitude list is endless but anxiety filters through the ether of my conscience when I listen to reports on the dwindling availability of medical equipment, unemployment statistics, and the plight of caring families unable to provide comfort to ailing loved ones.

Every morning, and I mean EVERY morning, a Carolina wren sits atop my brown, plastic Adirondack chair and sings his heart out. His throat swells in a burst of creamy white feathers with each note. He sings into the woods as live oak flowers fall from gigantic limbs stretching over my house and patio. I took time to learn more about the troubadour who pairs with his mate for the year if not for life. Wrens sing in duets. They nest in the natural hollows of trees or stumps, old woodpecker holes, the crevices of fallen trees, or in the middle of a brush pile. I liken the wren's behaviors to what is taking place inside my house, nesting in the bedroom and foraging in the kitchen, but without the sonorous duets.

John Prine's last album, *The Tree of Forgiveness*,<sup>1</sup> was released in 2018. The irony of the album rests in his song *When I Get to Heaven*.<sup>2</sup>

A few of John's lyrics:

[illegible]

□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ *I'm gonna shake God's hand*

[illegible]

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[illegible][illegible]

□ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □ *Vodka and Ginger Ale*

`0000000000000000000000000000` *Yeah, I'm gonna smoke a cigarette*

[illegible][illegible]

We're losing people to this pandemic and it is causing the world to become a more quiet place. That reality causes me to be grateful for the morning song of wrens, my pairing to a mate for life, and time to sort through the brush piles of my cluttered life. Dread will continue to seep into the unguarded borders of my thoughts and time may drag until the order to shelter in place is lifted. I've yet to put the miles on my bike that my body requires or the necessary steps of a Fitbit hungry to count. I want death to be held at bay.

John Prine has left the earth but he got it right. He shakes God's hand during a time when touch feels extinct. He settles into heaven with his parents, sipping a vodka and ginger ale and puffing a 9-mile cigarette, joys unique to him. After the setting of April's pink moon, I still

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have Prine's music and the song of a backyard wren, small gifts of defiance to appease a soul sentenced to staying at home.