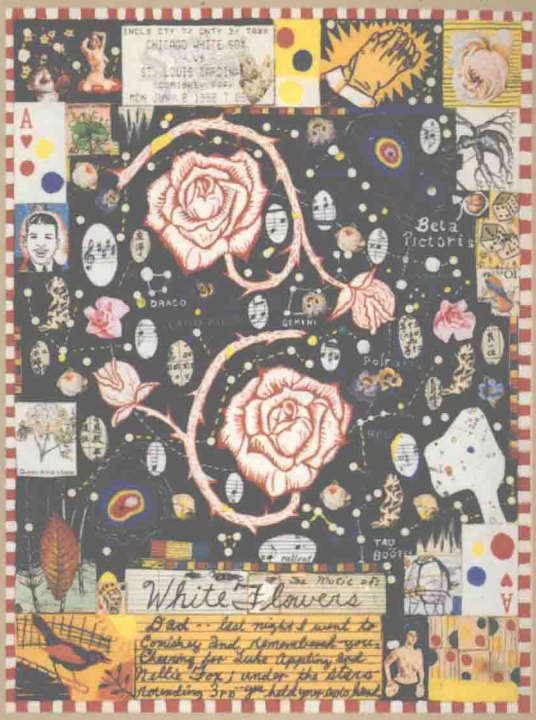

STORIES BY

STEVE EARLE

DOGHOUSE ROSES

'It reads like a collaboration between Steinbeck and Kerouac and Bukowski' Jay McInerney

Steve Earle

DOGHOUSE ROSES

VINTAGE

Published by Vintage 2002

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

First published in Great Britain in 2001 by
Secker & Warburg

Vintage
Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

Random House Australia (Pty) Limited
20 Alfred Street, Milsons Point, Sydney,
New South Wales 2061, Australia

Random House New Zealand Limited
18 Poland Road, Glenfield, Auckland 10,
New Zealand

Random House (Pty) Limited
Endulini, 5A Jubilee Road, Parktown 2193,
South Africa

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009
www.randomhouse.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 09 942242 5

Papers used by Random House are natural, recyclable products made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin

Printed and bound in Denmark by
Nørhaven Paperback A/S, Viborg

DOGHOUSE ROSES

Steve Earle has released ten critically-acclaimed albums since his 1986 debut *Guitar Town* made him an overnight star. A prolonged struggle with drug addiction resulted in a spell in jail in the early 1990s. Since his recovery, his comeback albums, beginning with the 1995 Grammy-nominated *Train a Comin'*, have all been critical and commercial successes. His latest album is *Transcendental Blues*, also nominated for a Grammy.

FOR MY MOTHER,
BARBARA THOMAS EARLE,
WHO INTRODUCED ME
TO WORDS

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Alice Randall for believing in me and sending my stories (without my permission) to Anton Mueller, my incredibly supportive editor at Houghton Mifflin; Mark Jacobson, Nancy Cardozo, and Terry Bisson, my New York literary support group; Tony Fitzpatrick, painter, draftsman, printer, poet, actor, amigo, hero; Elisa Sanders for keeping up with all the bits and pieces; Dan Gillis for communicating with Anton when we weren't speaking; Rosemary Carroll for doing the deal and telling me I was "a good writer" when I needed to hear it; Danny Goldberg for his continued encouragement and patronage. And to Sara for being Sara.

Doghouse Roses

Contents

DOGHOUSE ROSES

PICK ANY MEANS of transportation, public or private, over land, sea, or air. No matter which direction you travel, it takes three hours to get out of L.A. Yeah, I know there are all those folks with a head start for the Grapevine out in Northridge and Tarzana, but hell, to those of us in the trenches, the real Angelenos, those places are only luminescent names on big green signs seemingly suspended in midair above the 101 Freeway. Yeah, yeah, I know all about the good citizens of Encino and Toluca Lake who are always bragging about the convenience of friendly little Burbank Airport, but let's get real — they're not going anywhere anyway.

I'm talking about the other side of the hill — Downtown, Hollywood, Santa Monica, Venice, and Silver Lake — the transient heart of the city, the L.A. of Raymond Chandler, Chet Baker, and Tom Waits. A place where folks come to do Great Things — make movies and records, write screenplays and novels, which they hope will become screenplays someday, because that's where the money is. And every-fucking-body's got a "treatment" that they're working on, including half of the L.A.P.D. Most of these folks only wind up as minor characters in the work of the fortunate few. You've seen them — aging bit players with tough, brown hides, mummified from years of sitting around motel swimming pools waiting for the

phone to ring. The drug-ravaged former rock stars in raggedy-ass Porches and Saabs on an unending orbit of the downtown streets. Even the lucky ones only get as far as the Hollywood Hills or maybe Malibu, where they live out their lives with their backs to the world's widest and deepest ocean, waiting for wildfire to rain down from the canyons above. And should they decide to get out? Well, like I said, it takes three hours, and most people simply don't have the resolve.

Bobby Charles certainly didn't. He left L.A. in disgrace, low-riding in the passenger seat of his soon-to-be ex-wife's BMW. Not that he wanted to go, but this town kicked his ass so thoroughly there was simply no fight left in him. Kim West (she had never taken Bobby's last name, for professional reasons) had finally given up on her talented but troubled husband of five years, and now she just wanted him out of her town.

When Kim and Bobby met, he was a country-rock singer whose first marriage had already begun to buckle under the stress of constant touring, the distance alone taking a considerable toll. His wife and two kids were back in Nashville, but his real home was a forty-foot Eagle bus he shared with his band and crew. At age thirty-five Bobby was somewhat of a cult figure, the kind of recording artist who, thanks to a loyal following, sold one hundred thousand records per release, although this was barely enough to recoup his recording costs. The critics loved his work, however, and he lent a certain amount of integrity to a record label's roster. Before Kim came along, he had always considered L.A. a nice place to visit, at best.

Bobby had always avoided strong women like the plague, but something about the diminutive, up-and-coming producer fascinated him. Kim came out from St. Louis to attend the UCLA film school, switching to a business major midway through her second year. She went on to an M.B.A. and a job

at a major studio. When a mutual friend introduced the pair at a party after the Grammy Awards, Kim thought Bobby was cute, in a primitive sort of way, like Crocodile Dundee or something. She was bored to tears with dating other "industry" types, who saved all the receipts from dinner and talked shop in bed. Bobby was a little loud, a little reckless, and she knew her mother would hate him.

They left the party together in a rented 5.0 Mustang convertible. They wound up parked somewhere way up Mulholland Drive with Kim's panties hanging on the rearview mirror, breathlessly gazing down on all those lights. From that moment, L.A. had Bobby Charles by the balls.

Bobby didn't discover heroin in L.A. Hell, he grew up in San Antonio, Texas, 150 miles from the Mexican border. Despite the much publicized efforts of the U.S. government, brown heroin steadily seeped across the Rio Grande like tainted blood from a gangrenous wound. Bobby first tried it at an impromptu party at a friend's house when he was fourteen. For years he managed to get away with his off-and-on habit. He always managed to detox in time for this tour or that record, and even if he was dope-sick he never missed a show. By the time he met Kim, though, it was starting to catch up with him. Once Bobby left his family and moved to L.A., cheap, strong dope, guilt, and a long, nasty divorce combined to provide him with all the excuse any addict needs to bottom out.

At first it was just a matter of L.A.'s dependable supply of heroin, but pretty soon Bobby discovered speedballs — deadly intravenous cocktails of heroin and cocaine. It wasn't long before he had two habits to support. In L.A. time passes in its own surreal fashion — too subtle to even be detectable to folks who are used to four seasons. So if you asked Bobby, he couldn't tell you exactly when his habit got to be too much work. He only

knew that at some point, in what passed for a moment of clarity, he enrolled in a private methadone program. He woke up early every morning to line up at the clinic with the other "clients" to take communion at the little window — a plastic cup of the bitter powder dissolved in an orange-flavored liquid, chased by water from the cooler. Bobby was then "free" from the need to run down to Hoover Street to buy heroin twice a day. So he took up smoking crack.

Because he no longer used needles, Bobby told himself and anyone who would listen that he was back on track. He'd get smoked up and rattle on for hours about the "next record." Kim listened dutifully, but she knew it was only talk. Bobby hadn't written a song in more than three years. How could he? All of his guitars (along with a few that didn't belong to him) were in the pawnshop.

Kim knew Bobby was a junkie when she married him. She just didn't know he was a *junkie* junkie. At first she saw dope as part of Bobby's "thing," his mystique. It made him seem more dangerous, and after all, she was slumming. It stopped being cute when money began to turn up missing from her account. Or when he called her at work, whacked out of his skull and thoroughly convinced that their little craftsman bungalow in Larchmont Village was surrounded by police. Kim, having little or no experience in such matters, immediately called her lawyer and rushed home to find Bobby hiding in the hall closet with a loaded shotgun and a crack pipe. When she opened the door and stood there in tears, Bobby only stared back indignantly.

"What?"

That was the day that Kim decided to bail, but she couldn't bring herself to simply leave. After all, she really loved the guy;

she was just at the end of her rope. She decided that if she could just get Bobby out of L.A., back to Nashville where his friends were, or maybe just as far as Texas where his folks lived, maybe — well, at least she wouldn't have to watch him die.

So Kim went to Jeff Shapiro, her boss at the studio, and asked for a leave of absence, which under the circumstances he was more than willing to grant. Shapiro always considered Bobby a hick and beneath Kim anyway. So Kim then canceled her subscription to the *Los Angeles Times*, notified the home security service that she and Bobby would be out of town indefinitely, serviced the car, and picked up some cash at the bank on the way home.

Bobby never knew what hit him. It took Kim less than half an hour to pack some T-shirts and the few pairs of jeans that still fit Bobby (he'd lost an alarming amount of weight) and a few changes of clothes for herself. She told him it would do them both good to get away for a while. Bobby went through the motions of putting up a fight, but before he knew it he was in the car headed down Beverly Boulevard toward the 101.

They didn't get far. Junkies can't go directly from point A to point B like other people, mainly because another hit always lies somewhere in between. First they stopped at the methadone clinic on Beverly and picked up Bobby's daily dose and a week's worth of "take-homes" for the road. Kim had already called the doctor in advance and begged for these, because doses "to go" were a privilege and Bobby hadn't been able to manage a single "clean" urine specimen in six months on the program.

Between the clinic and the freeway, tucked in between the innocuous little bungalows, were at least fifty corners where street kids and soda pop gangsters sold crack cocaine (called

"rock" on the West Coast) to the drive-up trade. Kim and Bobby made it as far as the left turn onto Vermont Avenue, just before the 101 on-ramp, then Bobby threatened to get out of the car if Kim didn't drive him to a nearby spot. Reluctantly, she agreed, telling herself that this would be the last time.

They headed north on Vermont and took a right into a little rundown corner of East Hollywood. Two more rights followed by a quick left brought Bobby and his reluctant chauffeur to a cul-de-sac, cut off from the rest of the world by the freeway viaduct — a great graffiti-covered concrete monstrosity that bore the rest of the world noisily over the heads of the folks who had to live in this desperate little neighborhood. It was after dark, so anybody out on the street was either selling rock or "plugs" — little pieces of soap carved up to look like the real thing. Bobby was no stranger to this neighborhood. He ignored the hucksters and had Kim drag the block slowly until he spotted Luis.

"There he is."

Bobby rolled down the window and whistled; a skinny kid with Mayan features — long, sloping forehead, almond-shaped eyes, and angular nose — came running over to the car. He was all of fifteen years old.

"Hey, vato! Where you been, homes?"

Luis wasn't Bobby's only source, merely the nearest to the freeway.

"Around. What's up?"

"I got the *grandes*, homes. The monkey nuts. Check it out." Luis reached down into his sock and produced a large prescription medicine bottle, half full of off-white chunks of cooked-up coke, rattling them around like the pebbles inside a pair of maracas. Bobby noticed that Luis was acting strange, a little more wary than usual. He kept glancing nervously, from side to side,

over his shoulder as they talked through the passenger-side window of Kim's BMW.

"What's up, kid? Five-O been through?"

"Naw, just some guys. Don't worry 'bout it, homes. What you need?"

"How much for all of it?"

Luis looked down at the bottle, rattled it some more, as if he was weighing it and doing the math in his head at a pace that belied his sixth-grade education.

"How 'bout two yards?"

"Come on with it." Bobby handed Luis a wad of twenties, took the bottle, and turned to Kim. "Let's roll."

They made a U-turn in the cul-de-sac and headed back toward Vermont and the 101. Kim couldn't wait to get out of the neighborhood, and Bobby had to tell her to slow down a little. About halfway up the street they met a customized Chevy van rolling toward the cul-de-sac with its lights off and the sliding cargo door locked open. Bobby looked in his side mirror just in time to see little Luis break and run as the van's headlights suddenly came on, freezing Luis in the middle of the street. Kim jumped as the van came alive with gunfire, the muzzle flash of at least three weapons visible through the open door. The last time Bobby saw Luis, he was lying face down in the street as the van circled like a great, hulking predator over a fresh kill — then it sped off, passing Kim and Bobby as if they weren't even there.

Kim drove on, her heart pounding in her throat while Bobby navigated.

"Next right. Now left. OK, one more left and we're out of Indian Country."

Kim turned left back onto Vermont. When she stopped at the light before the 101 on-ramp, she looked over at Bobby for

the first time during the ordeal. He was cutting up one of the big rocks with his Buck knife, using the leather-covered console for a cutting board. His own car had hundreds of tiny slices in the upholstery by the time the police confiscated it last fall. Kim started to say something but caught herself. *Why bother? This is the last time. I'll just have it re-covered and it'll be just like new. Jesus fucking Christ, I just witnessed a murder! A fucking murder! OK, it's over. Just drive.*

She turned left across traffic and onto the 101 headed east.

"Get all the way over to the left lane, unless you want to end up in Downey or someplace."

She complied, but it irritated her to take directions from someone who had lived in L.A. all of two years. *How does he know these places?* But she knew the answer. Bobby could show locals parts of this town they never knew existed. Dope does that. It creates its own parallel geography, dark, scary places hidden from the real world behind a facade of palm trees and stucco. If you aren't looking, you won't see it — and you probably don't need to. Most of the folks on the freeway that night were simply following well-worn grooves in the asphalt to and from work or school or wherever. They only knew where to get on the freeway and where to get off. They had no idea where they really were, what kind of places and lives they were passing through or over.

Bobby did. It was an obsession with him. He roamed the freeways at night, exiting here and there just for the hell of it, to have a look around. He could tell you about the different styles of street signs and lights in the old L.A. neighborhoods. Each neighborhood had its own look — one for Hollywood, another for the Crenshaw District, and so on. He even knew a fair amount of L.A.'s checkered history, the scandals and se-

crets that had shaped it. Sometimes Kim was actually jealous, as if the sprawling city was a great glittering whore with whom Bobby had been unfaithful. It never pays to know this town too well.

Bobby licked his finger so that one of the pieces of the cut-up rock would adhere to it, then he stuck it in the end of his "straight shooter," a glass tube, three inches long with a piece of copper scouring pad stuffed in one end. Street addicts prefer this type of pipe for its easy-to-conceal size. Bobby liked it because he could drive and smoke without being too obvious. He turned up the flame on his disposable lighter and the rock crackled and sputtered as it melted into the copper. He inhaled slowly, deeply, and then expelled the dense white smoke out through his nose in a sort of visible and audible sigh. Kim fought back a gag, more of a Pavlovian reaction than anything else, but she just cracked her window and said nothing. In fact, nobody said anything for what seemed like an eternity. In real time only about fifteen minutes had elapsed, just about the time it took to reach the 10, before Kim had to ask, "So what the fuck was that all about?"

Bobby was suddenly forced to deal with the image of Luis, lying in the dead-end street. "I don't know. I guess he owed them money or somethin'."

Bobby's matter-of-factness bothered Kim more than anything else. His tone suggested he'd seen things like this before, which made her more than a little uncomfortable.

Bobby put another piece of rock on his pipe and hit it again. "Drag. He was a good kid. Hey, get off at the next exit. I need some smokes."

Kim complied, bitching just a little under her breath. This was their second stop and they weren't even close to being out