

Liner Notes for *The Geography of Light* **By Philip Gulley**

In the summer of 2005, I was speaking at a conference of earnest Methodists in northern Michigan, when a young man, charged with the task of introducing me, sung a Carrie Newcomer song instead, a little ditty about Betty's Diner. Later that year, I met Carrie, heard her sing about diners, women with shovels, and a curious little rock called a geode. I had grown up with geodes and couldn't figure out for the life of me why someone might sing about them. But sing she did, beautifully so, and helped me see anew the miracles clothed in common garb.

Fast forward a year: Through hook and crook and sheer chutzpah, I enticed Carrie to sing at our little Quaker meeting on a Sunday morning. Strapped on her guitar, set her toes to tapping, and in a few songs had us quiet Quakers whooping like snake-handling Pentecostals under an intense visitation of the Holy Ghost.

Fast forward another day: St. Elmo's Steakhouse in downtown Indianapolis at a business dinner with a man from Boston. Publishing stuff. Dry and tedious. I kept checking my watch. "What's your hobby?" I asked, when the conversation sputtered.

"Guitar," he said, brightening up.

"Who's the best you've ever heard?" I asked.

He named some names I knew—names in the upper stories of guitar heaven. Then he paused. "But the best I've heard lately is a woman named Carrie Newcomer. She came to Boston last month, and I took my daughter to see her. Tell you what, she blew us away."

I have made a study of nonchalance, so I said in an off-handed sort of way, as if what I was about to impart were an everyday occurrence, "Oh, yeah, Carrie. She sang at our meetinghouse yesterday morning."

If it had been a movie, people all over the restaurant would have set down their forks and stared at me in bald fascination.

"Carrie Newcomer? At your meetinghouse? Yesterday morning? And I missed it?"

"Yep, yep, yep, and yep," I said.

"How was it?" he asked.

"As good as you can imagine times ten."

I feel the same way every time I hear Carrie sing—amazed, inspired, and envious. Envious that someone can capture in one sentence a feeling that takes me a book to describe. I'm not sure how such a gift is acquired, whether an angel flitted down from heaven and anointed her at birth, or if her music came by dint of hard work and sweat, but I'm leaning toward the angel theory.

There are folks who write well and folks who sing well. But only a relative few who do both well, who can find the just-right word, match it to the just-right note, then sing it with the just-right voice. There are singers more widely known, but few who sing so lovely, so consistently beautifully year after year, each collection of songs better, stronger, more winsome, than the one before it. *The Geography of Light* will only build her legend.