



Memoir Mixtapes

Vol.2: Life in LP

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Letters from the Editors



Dearest Friends, Readers, and Contributors:

Welcome back.

I hope you're ready to have your mind blown because the contributors in Memoir Mixtapes Vol.2: *Life in LP* definitely did not come to fuck around.

We asked them to tell us about an album that changed their life, and they proceeded to take us back in time to revisit those pivotal moments and experiences that changed them irrevocably, for better, or for worse, or just for *different*.

Every one of these 34 voices explores a unique experience, but each piece does have one thing in common: the soundtrack is fuckin' killer.

Growing up. Falling in love. Watching love crash, burn, and die. Losing a friend. Finding yourself. Grappling with the state of the world and of humanity, as well as the meaning of our relatively brief existence on this planet.

Before I bid you adieu and let you do what you came here to do, I want to thank my friend and co-editor, Kevin, for his tireless work and steadfast dedication to the project; my husband, Andy, for fixing any website crashes in 10 minutes or less; and J.S. Robson, who generously offered his time and talents toward creating our beautiful new layout and slick new logo. (Speaking of that logo: would it be weird to get it tattooed on myself? Because I'm probably going to. That's just how much I love MM, you guys.)

I've saved the biggest thank you for last, and it goes out to all of you: Thank you for taking the time to read the words our talented contributors have so beautifully arranged for us. I know you'll give them the attention they deserve because they really don't give you a choice.

Now, get comfy, press play, and start reading.

Samantha Lamph/Len
CREATOR & CO-CURATOR



Hello again.

We heard your origin stories last time; this time around we wanted to know about those moments that changed you, and the albums that provided the soundtrack for those critical times.

Boy did you guys deliver.

Life in LP, Vol.2 of Memoir Mixtapes, has got a bit of everything. We've got heartbreak, awakenings, self-discovery, laughter. It's all here. The work we were fortunate enough to have received, and the work we have been privileged to showcase here, reflects the widely complex and fucked-up nature of the human condition. I'm very proud of this Volume, and I hope that you will enjoy reading it as much as I have.

Once again I'd like to thank my wife, Elise, for her support and enthusiasm for Memoir Mixtapes. I'd also like to thank my dog, Franklin, for being the warmest pug on the coldest winter days. As well, I'd be remiss if I didn't thank my friend and co-editor, Sam, for having this idea in the first place and getting me involved. She's the best and we owe her everything. EVERYTHING.

As you may have noticed, we've received one hell of a facelift for Vol.2. This is due, in no small part, to the heroic efforts of one of my best friends, J.S. Robson, who offered up his very considerable graphic design talents for our cause. I want to offer him my most special thanks this time around for elevating us from scrappy-new-kids-on-the-block to wait-these-guys-look-professional.

Without further ado, settle in and let that needle drop. Enjoy the long, curious journey that is our *Life in LP*.

Kevin D. Woodall
CO-CURATOR / EDITOR

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OK COMPUTER
RADIOHEAD



Radiohead

OK Computer

06/1997

Parlophone / Capitol

Somewhere We Will Meet: My Life with Radiohead's *OK Computer*

Sarah Nichols

I can't tell you that I knew about Radiohead from the beginning. Maybe, in 1993, I flicked the radio dial across Thom Yorke's signature sob-sneer of a voice, unimpressed, a cast-off of the grunge I didn't care about. I was sullen, depressed, and nineteen in 1993; a high school dropout. I was the perfect audience for that earnest despair, but I didn't feel it. I see myself rewinding my cassette of Depeche Mode's *Songs of Faith and Devotion* (released a month after Pablo Honey), the bedroom light off, at least until the end of the first side. I listened to the hold-overs from the last decade; *Republic* might not be brilliant in the way that *Technique* was (and is), but it was still New Order. *Wish* didn't exert the same night-blooming dread that *Disintegration* did, but it was still the Cure. I wanted stability, the same voices that I had devoted hours to in all of those dark suburban bedrooms.

Time drifted, or sank away. I got a job at a local library; started college. I never moved away from home; it seemed like a risky idea. Anti-depressants came and went in my life like un-reliable boyfriends, causing my mouth to dry out and breaking up with me when their power wore out. I had multiple courses of electroconvulsive therapy (shock treatment) in those years, especially in 1995. My head was the detuned radio from "Karma Police." A bad signal; flares of memory. Most of it is gone. Radiohead released *The Bends* that year, and I didn't know anymore about that than I did about Pablo Honey. No one told me about the video for "Just," where Jonny Greenwood alternately humps and shreds his guitar while Yorke twitches and lurks; the band dimly aware that, just outside, the rest of humanity is making a colossal mistake. They did it to themselves, and that's what really hurts. I kept looking for ways to escape. Food. Cinephilia. A Xanax or two. Books. I expected rescue from whatever my life was, but not wanting it. Not really.

The degree I started in 1995 still wasn't finished in the fall of 1997, and that's when I started to hear about *OK Computer*. It was released in June, and I must have read about it; I couldn't have just known. Phrases like "concept album" and "dystopian" were used to describe it, probably too much. I still have the CD of *OK Computer* that I got as a birthday gift in early March of 1998. I had just turned 24. I did the math the other day, and realized that ten months had passed between the album's release and my hearing it for the first time. Time was slower, then. People still feared the internet. You could meet your best friend there, or your death. Either way you turn, they'll be there.

I held the disc by its edges, slipping it into the knock-off Discman. "It's always best when the light is off..." In the dark, I had no body. I pressed play; there were the familiar clicks of a house and an album settling into their grooves. Then, a noise: shuffling, a shambling guitar and bass, dips and blips and peaks: "In the nexxt world wharr/in a jackknifed juggernaut/ I ahm born again." I came to this music with only the barest idea of who its makers were, or what it wanted to do. Should I turn it off? I was scared. I was exhilarated. I didn't know that this sound was going to mutate, and own me for good. Did I understand, then, that "Paranoid Android" is a poem? I think I did. It swaggers,

grandiose, and almost topples over. Yorke sneers, and the instruments match him. He's got a ruined angel voice, running high, then dropping head-first down a well. It almost begs to end, but they don't let it. If "Paranoid Android" is an epic poem, then what is "Let Down"? Yorke can sound regretful when he sings: I'm sorry I have to tell you this, but there's not much to hope for. But I can walk you through it. "One day I am gonna grow wings/A chemical reaction/Hysterical and useless/Hysterical and...//let down."

OK Computer wanted me to know that whatever future I had been planning for was a lie. It was not going to be a place where obedient machines catered to our whims; it was going to be the other way around. It was going to be a hollowed out dream of a dream that didn't exist, a place where wars didn't end. It's taken twenty years for this album to peel its layers away and reveal itself; it was always there, a beautiful machine crooning a nightmare, or barking it in an automated voice. Why would I want to keep listening to this? It's like finding a diary after the end of the world. We're telling you what it's going to be like in twenty years. You can't say you weren't warned. This comforts me, somehow. I can turn off a light and pretend that I'm reading that lost journal for the first time.

Healing Lights

Nadia Gerassimenko

It was 2010 and my heart was shattered, my body ablaze, my soul lost. I didn't know who I was anymore, the child within me slipping away, only a fragmented 'I' remained. Mentally I was suffering from trauma from a former abusive relationship, physically from initial symptoms of Lyme Disease—only in retrospect did I realize that. My being didn't know how to cope. I didn't understand how I could suffer so much from a break up when others seemed to carry on so painlessly, so effortlessly, if not expressing to my face, then with their eyes that I should get over my pain already. I didn't understand how and why every fiber of my being was on fire, and nothing could put it out. There were fleeting moments of freedom and peace, at least I had that.

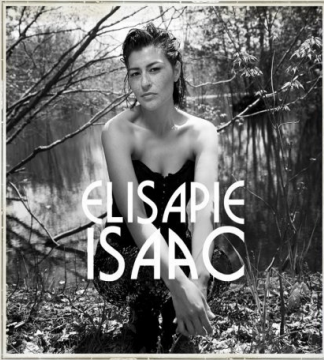
One November evening my grandmother invited me to a concert at a local community establishment. I didn't know who the performer was; I didn't know what to expect. I was hesitating to go, my body heavy and pained, but a little light part of me pushed me to go. As if the child in me crawled her way through and whispered gently to me, tonight there will be stars—healing lights. Before the concert started, all I could find out was the performer was Elisapie Isaac—a singer and songwriter from Salluit, Québec, birthed from Inuk mother and father from Newfoundland. When she came out into the dark-lit stage and started speaking in a tender-hearted voice, introducing herself and her first song, a little part of me sparked, that part kept sparking and expanding all through the starry night.

When Elisapie sang, she was like a soft sparrow; I could feel myself taking flight and being transported to a northern starlit wintry night where the snow was shimmering and crisp, where humans and animals and wildlings co-existed in respect and harmony, where light and love reigned, where my heart felt warm despite the cold. I looked to my neighbors and I could sense they too were spellbound. When the concert ended, I felt so much—catharsis, healing, euphoria—my body could explode with fireworks. I had to buy her album *There Will Be Stars*. When I returned home, I burst out to my mom, I've healed, mama! It was a premature thought, considering it took me more years of healing and re-healing after that, but I had hope that night, and that was a good start.

Since then, I had *There Will Be Stars* playing on repeat, soothing me, elating me, renewing me. There are several songs from this melancholy yet uplifting folk-pop album that resonate with how I felt at the time. Elisapie's words were mirroring my life experiences, and somehow it felt very comforting because someone else was feeling and living it too. I didn't feel as isolated and alone anymore.

In the album's second—rather bouncy—song, "Butterfly," Elisapie coos delicately, a lament:

"In my life there's a dark hole
In that hole there's a future butterfly
I become a shelter of fear and desire
Why, why why, I don' know why
I just end up crawling when I try
To say the simple words kiss me goodbye
Why, why, why, I don't know why



Elisapie Isaac

There Will Be Stars

02/2009

Caprice Records

Always end up crawling when I try
To fly, to fly”

For me, it was arduous to part ways with my former boyfriend because it was my first love, and there was still some love left in me, but most significantly because it had become a manipulative relationship in which he learned how to have power and control over me, and he was masterful at exercising it. Every time I tried to walk away from the push, he knew how to pull me back in. I felt like Sarah in *Labyrinth* seeking to rescue her brother and escape Jareth’s overwhelming grasp; in my case, I was seeking to reclaim the strength within me and escape a potentially dangerous relationship. Jareth was right to sing to Sarah, “I can’t live within you.” Sarah eventually found her words—her strength—and assertively she uttered, “You have no power over me,” breaking the spell, undermining the Goblin King. Eventually I also walked away from my own Goblin King when I was at my weakest, and that’s when I recognized I do have inner strength and I must continue feeding it. “Butterfly” is representative of that looking inward to reclaim your strength and freedom in order to break away outwardly. Fast forward seven years later, in my heart there’s a butterfly—winged and free. I hope Elisapie was able to fill her heart with her own butterfly.

“Why Would I Cry” is the seventh song on the album and is slow-paced, orchestral, fluid. Elisapie’s voice is soft-spoken but strong when she sings, “Before you take me again / I will run / Before you break me again / I will run.” Here, she is the embodiment of a river that is still and gentle but can nevertheless cut through rocks. I felt such potency when listening to it back then. With every sung line Elisapie was like water collecting itself and rising upwards, cutting through all obstacles, wild and free. While it’s a melancholy song, it’s very empowering. To this day, whenever I listen to it, I get all teary-eyed—and it feels very releasing and healing.

“Wish Song,” which follows after, is my most beloved track in *There Will Be Stars*. The refrain goes:

“I wish you, I wish you hope,
I wish you love and tenderness
I wish you strength,
I wish you dreams and happiness”

Sonically, “Wish Song” sounds similar to “Why Would I Cry” in that it’s also slow-paced and symphonic. Whereas “Why Would I Cry” is escalating at moments, “Wish Song” is even throughout. It fills the ears with peace and comfort and wisdom. When I left my former relationship, my perspective on love was distorted. I didn’t think I could ever find love again; I didn’t think I was worth of being loved anymore. I know now it’s not true. This song gave me hope again; it murmured to me, you deserve love and joy. In the meantime, I could daydream and regain my strength. In this song, Elisapie personifies an ancient, sage tree which, with the rustling of its leaves, passes on the truth you knew all along, but it was buried too deep in your gut for too long. This song awakens the child in you full of love and wonder and dreaminess—that’s how I feel whenever I listen to it.

The ninth track, “Nothing In This World Is Free,” is a beautiful merging of two tongues: Inuktitut and English. Personally, I find this song a perfect summary of the entire album. The most striking, poignant lines are “In this weary heart / There will be stars” and “Nothing in this world is free / But I will find the way back to me.” Elisapie acknowledges that she’s aching, but she has the knowing that she’ll be all right, she’ll find herself again. If her spirit is an animal, she starts out like a trusting, vulnerable cub then becomes a fierce, resilient wolf after experiencing something traumatic but awakening. Her voice

sounds brittle in the beginning then soon develops an infectious confidence. Having listened to this song the first time, I felt I could heal from my own trauma. I felt I could recover my essence, find the child within me again. Or perhaps, since you can never go back from the effects of trauma, I could carve myself new, ever growing, ever wondering, ever loving to myself and those who deserve to be within me.

Sometimes I envision Elisapie and me as two white wolves playfully running alongside each other in the Nunavut snowscape. We reach the deep north where the only sounds we hear are the kaleidoscopic auroras and our echoing heartbeats. What a safe and sacred place to be, amongst the healing lights.

On Wilco and *Being There*

Mike Lindgren

February 16, 1997 was a cold, gray day in Boston, and Fenway Park was shrouded and dark. Across the street from the famous left-field wall was a dank, shabby nightclub called the Avalon Ballroom, which despite its rundown interior was the Boston stop of choice for mid-level bands touring the East Coast. The Chicago alt-country band Wilco would have arrived sometime in the afternoon, loaded in their gear, done a perfunctory soundcheck, gotten something to eat. Their show that night would be the seventeenth they had played in the last nineteen days; they were halfway through a bruising tour that had taken them as far south as Atlanta and as far west as Kansas. Their singer and guitarist Jeff Tweedy, guitarist and keyboardist Jay Bennett, bassist John Stirratt, and drummer Ken Coomer were touring in support of their album *Being There*, an ambitious double record that had been out since October.

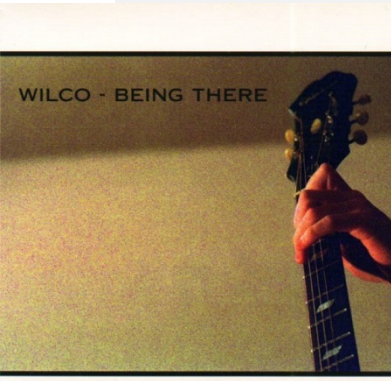
A bare four blocks away, I was drinking vodka and beer in my apartment on Queensberry Street, chewing tobacco, getting ready for the show. It was a Sunday, so I was off work; it was the day before President's Day, so I had no need to even try to keep in check the drinking that was already beginning to devour my life. I had planned on inviting a pretty girl I was sort-of dating to come with me, but she had abruptly ended our nascent relationship, so I would be going to the concert alone. I put on the CD player, hit play, take a shot of vodka, a slug of beer. A drumbeat, martial and ominous, fading in, increasing in volume, a call to arms, a march. The tick of the piano and bass, repeating the two notes that will thrum through the song, all sprawling, devastating, 6:28 of it. The sound backs off a bit, calms, and then Jeff Tweedy begins to sing:

Back in your old neighborhood
Cigarettes taste so good...

His voice, recorded with very little echo, half-obscured by thick swirls of flanger, sounds lost, drugged-out, utterly weary. It is the sound of a man at the end of his rope who is yet taking his first step down a long road. It's a journey we will take together, Jeff Tweedy and I, and it will take us both to places that I hope neither of us will see again. Meanwhile, in the shabby apartment on Queensberry Street, I take another shot, sing along:

You know you're just a mama's boy
You're positively unemployed
You're so misunderstood
You're so misunderstood...

The evening lengthens. Tweedy and Co. are backstage, strumming unplugged electric guitars; Ken Coomer, shaggy, dreadlocked, beats a tattoo on the cinderblock walls of Avalon's spartan greenroom. More time passes. Avalon's club manager sticks his head in the door, nods to the band. Down the street I take a last shot of vodka, throw on my leather jacket, head out into the night. On Landsdowne Street I give the other ticket, the one that was supposed to be for Margaret, to a sketchy-looking white guy. Inside Wilco go through the door, up a flight of concrete stairs, through another door, and walk out onto the stage. Jeff Tweedy goes last. Cheers, clapping, shouts. The lights are in his eyes. He fires up a cigarette, scrunches up his face, steps up to the mic. For a split-second, the sound dies out completely.



Wilco

Being There

10/1996

Reprise Records

"Hi-ho," he says, and they're off.

Before there was Wilco, before there was *Being There*, there was Uncle Tupelo, of course. Tupelo was the band Tweedy formed in Belleville, Illinois, in 1990, with his friend Jay Farrar. It has been famously said that only a thousand people bought the first Velvet Underground record, but that all thousand of those people went on to form bands; a similar dynamic obtains with Uncle Tupelo, whose recorded oeuvre lasted for only six years and four albums, but who likewise had an influence all out of proportion to their sales. Essentially, Tupelo founded the genre known as alternative country, whose basic idea was the fusion of punk attitude with traditionalist music: a simple idea, but a radical one.

Uncle Tupelo was Farrar's band: he set the agenda, wrote the songs, chose the covers. Jay Farrar was a talented, forceful presence, a rough, stinging guitarist with a potent foghorn of a voice, and he cast an intimidating shadow over his quieter, more introspective partner. The breakup of Uncle Tupelo, in May of 1994, has received in some circles slightly less analysis than the assassination of John F. Kennedy; what emerges from the still-disputed events is the mixture of freedom and pain that Jeff Tweedy felt upon the band's dissolution. Four days after their last concert, on May 1, 1994, Tweedy gathered Tupelo alumni Stirratt, Coomer, and multi-instrumentalist Max Johnston in Belleville, where they began jamming and writing. Tweedy decided to call the new outfit Wilco, after a bit of trucker-CB slang.

Back onstage at the Avalon Ballroom, Tweedy pulls another of a seemingly endless stream of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket, lights it, and turns back to the crowd. I'm at one of the club's many bars, buying a shot of Jim Beam and a draft. In my drunkenness the bartendress seems outrageously, tragically beautiful, mind-bendingly so; I give her a massive tip and smile at her. I turn around in time to hear Tweedy sing "All my daydreams are disasters...", the opening line to Uncle Tupelo's "New Madrid," an aching country lament that still carries the blurry reverberations of special meaning. "They all come from New York City," I shout along, annoying the people on either side of me. "And they woke me up at dawn..." I clutch my plastic cup of beer and sway. The song clatters to a halt. Jay Bennett comes out from behind the keyboard and plucks up a guitar from the stands behind him, a cherry-finish Gibson SG. He says something to Tweedy, who laughs, off-mic. Coomer clicks his sticks together and with a squeal of feedback Bennett launches into the thumping riff that kicks off A.M.'s anthemic "I Must be High." They race through it, sounding tight and hard. Then Tweedy plucks out an arpeggio figure on his Fender Telecaster, and the crowd gives its only unqualified cheer of the night: "Passenger Side," Tweedy's sardonic ode to driving under the influence. I love this song, of course; like all alcoholics, I seek validation in the words and actions of others. Years later, I come across an old interview with Paul Westerberg, leader of the unregenerately dipsomaniacal Replacements. "Half our audience," he said, speaking ruefully of the band's salad days, "were serious alcoholics who were thinking, 'they're falling-down drunk, it's okay for me to be falling-down drunk.'" Paul Westerberg quit drinking, cold turkey, in 1990; his bandmate Bob Stinson died of a heroin overdose on February 18, 1995.

A. M. came out on March 28, 1995, and the reaction to the album was a giveaway that most observers had their metaphorical money on Jay Farrar and Son Volt. Farrar was the visionary, Tweedy the journeyman, went the thinking, and the perception seemed to color A. M.'s reception. Most reviewers considered it not much more than above-average bar-band rock, reserving their hosannas for *Trace*, which dropped on September 19. I have always been puzzled by this. A. M. seems to me, with its muscular arrangements and countrified yearning, its mixture of bluesy swagger and twangy balladry, to be an ideal

pop-rock recording, whereas Farrar's records feel overthought and labored in comparison. Nonetheless, there is no question that Farrar was perceived to have won round one; *Trace* was greeted with effusive praise and even spawned a minor hit in "Drown."

Being There blew the doors off all this; it was one of those rare musical moments when a band transcends its possibilities, surprising even itself. The idea that an amiable stoner like Jeff Tweedy would be the one to produce a two-disc set of staggering reach and stylistic range was a thunderbolt from a clear blue sky. Not since the Clash unfurled the epic adventure that is *London Calling* had such an authoritative musical statement come from such an unlikely source. The band that hit the road behind *Being There*, revitalized by Jay Bennett's virtuosity and drive, was a different animal than the sometimes tentative outfit that had toured A. M. to half-empty clubs. The old songs sounded tougher and wilder with the revamped lineup; the new material was a revelation. In the years to come the songs on *Being There* would end up forming the backbone of Wilco's live catalogue; the sonic experimentation that peeks through "Misunderstood" and "Sunken Treasure" would bloom into full, glorious weirdness on the celebrated *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*.

Only Tweedy and John Stirratt remain from the lineup I saw at the Avalon Ballroom; the Wilco that tours the world to sold-out crowds now is a tighter, poppier, more professional unit. Today Jeff Tweedy and I are both sober. On that cold night in February of 1997, though, all of this was to come. All I knew at the time was that something was badly wrong with my life, and that I was lonely and unhappy most of the time, and that I had no idea what to do about it; but for those few hours I didn't care. As I drank and watched and listened and sang along, as Tweedy and his band ripped through the uproarious hard rocker "Monday" and the menacing swamp-thump of "Kingpin," as Tweedy sang his kiss-off to Farrar ("Box Full of Letters") and his best offering from his Tupelo days ("The Long Cut"), as he raged through "Gun" and "Casino Queen" and finally a long, shaggy, crazily spiraling "Dreamer in My Dreams," I just felt like I was coming home, at last, even if I didn't know what that even meant any more, and wouldn't yet, for years.

What Is Love

Hawa Allan

This was how
you played: chin
up, arms splayed—

grass, tree and
sky, whirls
of blue and green.

Your body was
a planet; from
crown to toe,

you drew an
imaginary line
and spun

around your
own axis. All
even smaller

than you—snails,
bugs, dew—crushed
under rotating feet,

as you did deeply
dig the depth
of hula groove.

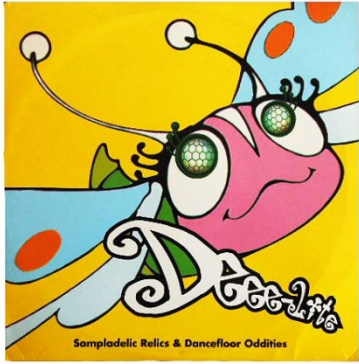
You fell,
ear to ground;
a mini-verse of

green blades bearing
drops of cosmos
moved and mixed,

pitched and
twitched in
the temple

of your mind,
so you wondered
whether you were

in the world
or the world
was in you,



Dee-Lite

*Sampladelic Relics &
Dancefloor Oddities*

10/1996

Elektra Records

though, even
then, you knew
it was all

depending on
how you see
a thing.

As stars spun
circles round
your head,

you lay still,
self-soothed,
and said

*I think I know what love is
I think I know
I think
I'll never stop—*

until you do
or it does,
and you're

a lost soul
found in
grown form.

But to be
an adult is
just a game

of dress up.
So hold my
will and pass

me a suit
that drips in
sequins,

dig my swirl—
I'll send fractals
of you whipping

across the walls.
It will all be so—
how do you say

—delicious,
the mirror
between

you and me.
Call me
crazy,

but I keep
the hope
spinning.



Jukebox the Ghost

Everything Under the Sun

09/2010

Yep Roc Records

On “Everything Under the Sun” by Jukebox the Ghost

Ehlayna Napolitano

The album didn't belong to me.

I'm not sure how many people had that album in their possession that year, my sophomore year of high school, the year I sat in the hallway every morning with my four friends.

The album belonged to a friend of a friend.

It got passed to me by my best friend, who'd had it passed to her by its presumable owner. Had it belonged to someone else before that?

Our connection, friendships, were the driving force behind the spread of that album that happened for me, for others, that year. Upperclassmen, who had cars and a desire to see anything that came within 50 miles of us that wasn't contained within our parentally-imposed borders, had seen the band live. They came back with albums, t-shirts—the manifestation of what we could understand as what we wanted. Bored, eager, devouring any taste of excitement that came their way, and spreading it to the rest of us, like sailor stories passed around to the grounded land-dwellers.

And so, the album got passed, to my friend and me. Perhaps to others after us. Perhaps to others before us. Our connection to each other serving as reason enough to be connected to the album and have it handed to you in the hallway, like some sort of furtive exchange. “You've got to hear this.”

I held it in my hands, memorizing the painted yellow sun, the little girl reaching for it. Or anyway, for *something*.

I kept *Everything Under the Sun* for a few weeks, playing it frequently, forcing my parents to play it in the car. I was eager to like it, eager to return to my friends a believer. And “Empire” was the song that won me to its side.

“Empire” is a relentless tune, ambitious in its vision, improved with age. Like much of this album, upon revisitation, means something new, different. “Everything Under the Sun” is new again.

In return, my love for it connected me to my friends. Four years after the girl under the sun was handed to me in my high school hallway, I found myself laying on a stretched out futon, new friends splayed out on all sides of me, I remember the sun streaming in on my face. The album was playing off someone's computer, as we sleepily sprawled that afternoon.

“This is cool,” someone told me. It was.

The friend who had first passed me the album had gone with me to see the band play, an hour from our houses, two years after we'd first heard it play. “*I think that I would like/to invite everyone I've known/Dead and alive...*”

The venue was a youth center, a small building with a small concert venue and stage, ideal for getting close enough to dangle our arms off the metal barrier all night. A small enough crowd that we could all dance, sweaty in the summer heat of the tiny auditorium. Small enough to hear individual voices of the people behind me, singing.

Like we were friends. Like there was a uniting force for us, all together, in that room. We connected. We danced.

As the show came to a close, the audience expectantly cheered for an encore. The band led us to the lobby, to a piano that had caught the eye of their pianist. He sat to play and the crowd gathered tight around the piano. We were of the throng instantly, pressed in close together. Intimate. Small enough to gather around a piano. Big enough that I couldn't see a thing. Could only watch the people ahead of me, as their eyes started to beam at the lilting piano notes beginning a song they knew by heart.

Someone pushed against my back, my arm. "Excuse me," he said.

A guitar neck parted his way, roughly, through us. We gave.

"Isn't everyday/exactly what we make?/Mistakes."

Another two years later, in the second sophomore year I would have, a few months after laying in bed in the sun, the girl under the sun reached up into me again. A record. Hard, black plastic. The familiar bright greens and yellows and blues, between the hands of my new lover, a friend from the futon down the hall.

"I got this!"

We played it. The scratchiness, the crispness filling the tiny dorm room my friends lived in, just down the hall from my own, where my best friend and I had danced to my curated selection of favorites, interlaced with music I learned about through my friends. My playlists read like a timeline of my growing relationships. Songs that show up over and over, on multiple playlists, again and again, spanning years. Some that make a brief appearance, forgotten until I rifle through the music I used to like.

"Everything Under the Sun" remains a constant, an old friend itself, and a reminder of my oldest friend, my best friend. "Summer Sun," one of three references to that other familiar constant on the tracklist, gets a healthy rotation every spring, just as the feeling of summer is beginning. The feeling of being right on the cusp of everything changing.

My newer friends, too, the ones who made me feel special when they didn't just like the music, but made me feel *heard* when they listened to it, make playlists with the music on it. My phone *brrings* with exclamations of a new song, album, tour. They are the love letter, the one I could write about the way things changed again when I walked down the hallway and they pulled open the door to me.

We are together in it, all of it. The way we were when we laid on the futon. The way we've been since. Old friends, new friends.

"Well it's mine," he said. "But it's yours."

We played it again.

The Rainbow's End: A First Taste of Doom

Eric Bryan

2003 was a strange year to be a young metalhead.

Aside from the looming shadow of global terrorism, a quickly developing surveillance state, the dissolving housing market and the unnamable tension that would become the general social unrest that we currently exist in, it was also very hard to find old metal CDs!

It was the cusp of the reissue craze that would eventually function as the last big burp of the metal CD market, and while the internet was a great tool for finding out about milestone metal albums, actually getting the goddamn things in your hand (or in my case, your Sony Discman) was a challenge that my meager teenage means and limited mobility could not easily meet.

Which is why I made an embarrassing squeal and instantly bought the Candlelight Records reissue of Candlemass' first of four masterworks, *Epicus Doomicus Metallicus*.

I'd read reviews and heard discussions among my more seasoned metal friends about how important the album was to heavy metal, and in particular doom metal. I'd seen the cover, a piked white skull on black, on many a denim vest. I'd read descriptions of the songs long before I'd ever heard them, and seeing the thing grinning back at me, on a rack otherwise tumorous with the Century Media Records dreck from the era, was a wonderful thing indeed. I quickly purchased it with money that should have been spent on any number of more vital things, and walked it home.

It would be a few days before I could actually sit down with it.

I was 16 or so at this time, and in the throes of a "denim vest every day, no it doesn't smell, why don't girls like me?" phase that I would shake, uh, sometime later. Hopefully. I was on a trip to the Getty with my ceramics class, ostensibly to take in the Greek pottery exhibit on display. While that would prove interesting, though not as interesting as the more violent Catholic tapestries on martyrdom (cue intense headbanging), it was the ride there I was interested in. It was 90 minutes of uninhibited listening time, coupled with no desire whatsoever to speak with my peers. Perfect.

I stuffed my backpack with CDs that morning, and between my well-worn copy of Kreator's *Pleasure to Kill* and probably some Overkill albums, was *Epicus*.

I blazed through the familiar initially. Thrash metal had done well by me thus far and I was initially content to listen to Mille Petrozza threaten the masses with grisly ends, or Bobby Blitz bemoan a hard life I would not even begin to comprehend at that age. It was somewhere around Knott's Berry Farm that I decided, "Hey, I'm not just some thrasher, I'm an open minded guy with good ideas and a good beard!" and popped in Candlemass. While I'm not an open minded guy, and certainly did not have a good beard, as soon as the echoing guitar and synth opened up "Solitude," the opening track, it was clear that I at least had the one good idea in me.

Candlemass



Candlemass

*Epicus Doomicus
Metallicus*

06/1986

Leviathan Records

There was something magic to it. Beyond the mere weight of the song's opening, where reverbing guitar plucks and the mournful voice of Johan Langquist floated downward into the simple, brute nature of Mats Bjorkman's guitar, it was the simple, unadulterated sadness present that set it so far apart the path I'd known. A song literally pleading to be left alone to die could be read as immature or overdramatic, but hey, that's also a teen metalhead in a nutshell.

I don't remember if it was sunny or warm that day, but I do know that the tint set by just the first few moments of *Epicus* prevented that from being a reality. The world of the record was a cold one. From that first riff, the school bus became empty, the sky grey, and all motion taking place so far away that it wasn't even registering. The crescendo of "Solitude" came to a close, accompanied not by the explosive rage of my previous metal listening, but with one last request for a lonely death.

I was smitten.

Picking up from there was "Demon's Gate," opening with a youthfully enthusiastic, but ultimately goofy distorted voice, leading me on a walk into a very formulaic vision of Hell. It was more Principal Skinner than Satan, but as soon as the verse kicked in, the quality ceased to matter. Where words failed, music illustrated.

However, it was "Crystal Ball," the dark horse highlight of the album even now, that Candlemass took firm hold of their place in my heart. After an initial looming riff, part Sabbath and part drunk, an open guitar trill hung in the air, quickly cut off by a vocal and riff combination that is still rarely topped. An open stomp of a guitar line, accompanied by the frustrated, grieving lyrics of fortunes desired and lost, "Crystal Ball" was simultaneously fantastic and earthbound, a synthesis that I still seek in my own work. Bassist Leif Edling wrote most of the lyrics for the entire album, but was at his strongest in the song's final verse, choosing the perfect words. Similarly to the verse itself, I was rapt.

*"I saw the rainbow's end
I am raptured, I cannot pretend
I've found Atlantis
The talisman of Seth"*

That phrasing, "the rainbow's end" took the grey drive I was on to a deeper level. The ability to grasp hope and loss in so few words, taking the fantastic and linking it to something so intimately real, was something near a religious moment. Atlantis would not last. Seth's talisman, the eye he lost in revenge, would bring no wisdom. Your dreams can come true, and they can still be truly horrific.

Again, magic.

At that point the songs ceased to be songs as such. They were letters in the same word, and the word was *DOOM*. I did not hit pause, I did not skip around; I sat and listened. The album ended, and I put it on again. The petty interruptions of our trip's arrival and the lectures were just breaths before returning to Candlemass' world. Even as I write this, I find part of me pulling to return there, to seek that dark, still place I was shown that day.

The way I listen to, write and experience music after that first listen was changed forever with *Epicus Doomicus Metallicus*, not necessarily for the better or worse, but changed nonetheless.

It would be overdoing it to say that I returned from that Getty trip a changed person, because that sweaty, "bearded" mess of a teenager would continue on painfully stereotypical paths throughout his youth. With that, there would be plenty of other albums that would hit in just as powerful, though different ways, continuing to shape the Z-list riffer that is becoming painfully aware of his use of the third person here. But from that day, there was some level of awareness triggered within. Of a grey space constantly there, and a desire to not look away.

I may not wish for a solitary death, nor possess a crystal ball, but that world where both exist just outside of the one I live in is a place I did not know until then, and am grateful to know now.

SYLVESTER



STEP
II

Sylvester

Step II

09/1978

Fantasy

Sylvester's Step II: Sylvester Taught Me How to Be Queer

Peter Piatkowski

I'm an atheist, but I believe that Sylvester is my guardian angel. I believe he watches over all of us nelly queens, sissies, nancyboys, and marys who sought solace and escape on a dance floor. Sylvester is no mere disco diva, but our Francis Scott Key. The United States has The Star Spangled Banner but we have "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)."

That song – six and a half minutes of thumping, pulsing glory – was the first song that I remember speaking to me directly as a queer man. It was explicitly queer and unapologetically so. It encapsulated a moment in time in queer history before AIDS destroyed the hedonistic innocence enjoyed by gay guys who partied hard, took recreational drugs, and had lots of sex. Sylvester – born Sylvester James, Jr. – was part of the rich tradition of black soulful singers who found success with disco. *Step II* is his fourth album and his best. It's the kind of album that wedded the frivolity of disco with the church-steeped gospel that informed Sylvester's gravity-defying voice.

Step II is easily dismissed and ignored by music and rock critics because it's a disco record and disco supposedly sucks. It's not a coincidence that mainstream music criticism takes a dim view of a genre of music dominated by queer folks and people of color. Disco has an unfortunate reputation because of "Disco Duck" and *The Brady Bunch Variety Hour*, but "respectable" genres of popular music like prog rock, rap, and rock all have their embarrassing nadirs. Few have inspired such animosity that people staged rallies in which piles of records were burned and after which a riot ensues.

But *Step II* is a fantastic record because it works insulated from trying to be "good" music. It ignores respectability politics and instead urges its listeners to have a good time. It opens with the iconic "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)." It celebrates a moment in every gay man's life when he goes to the local gay bar, spots some cutie's eye from across a smoky and crowded dance floor, and takes him home. What the song does is elevate that experience from merely sex to something more profound, more political. Because after all, being queer – being *openly* queer is often a political act (even more so back in 1977 when Sylvester wrote/recorded the song). The song is revolutionary because it cast being gay not as some affliction to be shouldered bravely (but pitifully), but instead, it celebrated being queer.

The first time I heard "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" was when watching Rob Epstein's 1984 documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk*. The movie was moving enough, but I was hypnotized by the throbbing synthesizer, and was entranced with Sylvester's bouncy falsetto. The song had an urgency and gravitas that belied its lyrics of feeling one's oats on a dance floor. Harvey Milk urged people to come out, insisting that being openly queer was necessary for the queer rights movement to succeed – "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" wasn't merely a party record, it was a call to arms for all of us to strap on our dancing shoes. To the outside world, the gay bar was simply a place for queers to get together – but it was so much more for those of us who found the gay bar to be a safe place, free of bigotry. It's a defiant song because when Sylvester is singing it, he's not asking for permission to be queer. He's boasting, refusing to use coded language to make it more palpable for a straight audience. Being queer is often a revolutionary act –

RuPaul, the most direct descendant of Sylvester, once proclaimed on *The Arsenio Hall Show* that "Every time I bat my eyelashes, it's a political act."

So after hearing "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" I had to get the record. This was the mid-1990s before the Internet was a regular thing, so I had to go to a used record store – 2nd Hand Tunes in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood. I asked the guy behind the counter if he knew the song. I didn't know the title, so I just hummed it a bit and described it to him. "It's a disco song by this guy with a really high voice."

He nodded and walked over to the disco LPs and pulled out a slightly-worn record. I was hoping Sylvester would be on the cover, but he wasn't. Instead it was a close-up of a man's foot, wearing an expensive-looking loafer, while another foot – bare, with red nail polish – was kicking over a glass of champagne. I assumed the foot with the nail polish was a woman's foot, but later realized that *both* feet would've been Sylvester's. He played with androgyny, predicting its artistic potential long before New Wave would make it commercially viable.

I took that record home and wore it out. I played it on an old record player I stole from my grandmother's house during a visit (I played Whitney Houston's debut album and Barbra Streisand's *Memories* album on that player as well). Initially, I only listened to "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)", stopping the album by lifting the needle and putting back to the beginning of the song, so that I could hear it again.

It's easy to see why the album—and Sylvester's discography—is overwhelmed by the song. It's brilliant and it's tempting to reduce the album to that one hit song. But that would be a mistake. The rest of the album is a brilliant mix of dance songs that awoke in me a fierce drag queen diva that I never knew was there. The combination of Sylvester's crazy voice with the giant-voiced backup singers, all wailing their hearts out over percolating beats was too much for me, and I couldn't sit still.

"Dance (Disco Heat)" is almost a duet, with Sylvester singing alongside The Weather Girls. It was a song, which, like "Mighty Real", made me imagine a life of fun, partying, hanging out with hot guys. At the time, I was still figuring out who and what I was (and who and what I was into), and "Dance (Disco Heat)" was aspirational.

The song has a programmed synthesizer that sounded like something Giorgio Moroder would've crafted for Donna Summer. There were weird swirling sound effects, like lasers and gurgling synths that sounded like Foley from a sci-fi movie. The joy was infectious. When the leather-lunged divas shouted from the speakers to "be yourself and choose your feelin'" I wanted to be in that space that existed in that song. I didn't know how I would go about getting to that space, but I knew that it existed because a large vinyl record told me so.

"Grateful" always reminded of Diana Ross and the Supremes' "You Keep Me Hangin' On." Unsurprisingly, I idolized Ross, too, and like a lot of clichés, I sang "Endless Love" and "It's My Turn" into a hairbrush in front of a mirror. There is some neat, quick stuttering of an electric guitar that mimics the clarion call guitar riff that makes "You Keep Me Hangin' On" so memorable and iconic. When I made mixtapes (which back then meant me holding up a tape recorder in front of my record player), I paired "Grateful" with "You Keep Me Hangin' On." I didn't appreciate at the time, the obvious link between Ross and Sylvester, both of whom would loom so large in queer culture as well as Black queer culture. Ross seemingly set out a blueprint for drag queens to follow, and at the time, I was immersing myself in Black queer culture without even knowing it (it took having an older gay

brother of a Black classmate of mine to appraisingly ask me, "How do you know so much about *this*?")

The remaining three songs on the album were ballads and didn't get as much play. I felt as if they were a let down from the dance songs, and I didn't listen to them quite as much. A shame because they were fantastic in their own way. "I Took My Strength From You" has some nifty Spanish guitar strumming, and the female vocalists do some great whistle-register trilling. "Was It Something I Said" was great because Sylvester and his backup vocalists start off with some funny dialogue that sounds lifted from a sitcom, and "Just You and Me Forever" has the singer doing some goose bump-inducing scales.

But it's the dance songs which stayed with me. Sylvester died of AIDS in 1988. Knowing this gives the songs a new sense of urgency, pathos, and gravitas. That his death occurred at the height of the disease's indiscriminate decimation of queer communities throughout the United States, in the face of a hostile government's indifference, made the songs even more important. When I feel I'm getting complacent now, because of the gains of the queer community, I always go back to listening to Sylvester's *Step II* to remind me of a time when I didn't take my out-ness for granted. Listening to *Step II* now reminds me of a time when I was gingerly and carefully stepping into a queer community, not wholly sure of myself, nor my place. *Step II* acted as inspiration, succor, and escapism.



Public Enemy

Fear of a Black Planet

04/1990

Def Jam Recordings

Fear of a Black Planet

Yoshio Drescher

I was eleven years old when I heard Public Enemy for the first time. My family and I were driving from Honolulu to my Uncle's apartment on the North Shore, cruising past rows of pineapples and sugarcane. I was absentmindedly staring out the window, rolling the radio dial back and forth on my black plastic walkman trying to catch a station worth listening to when "Welcome to the Terrordome" by Public Enemy suddenly burst through the static.

Music wasn't totally new to me; one of my earliest memories was of my brother and I dancing in my parent's living room to a vinyl copy of Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. I remember when New Kids on the Block mania descended on my elementary school and I wondered what it was about them that made all the girls lose their minds. To a kid growing up in the late 80s, pop music ruled the airwaves: Milli Vanilli, Madonna, Wham!, Debbie Gibson, Michael Jackson. The hair was big, the outfits loud, and everything sparkled.

I knew within seconds that "Welcome to the Terrordome" was completely different. There was nothing fun or catchy about it. The music was brutal, uncompromising: a massive wall of synthesized noise. It was the sonic equivalent to an electric shock.

*'I got so much trouble on my mind
Refuse to lose
Here's the ticket
Hear the drummer get wicked'*

Chuck D's voice boomed, seething with anger and righteous indignation. Instead of saccharine lyrics about love or broken hearts, his lyrics were angry and intensely political; one bar highlighted the death of a 16-year old boy named Yusef Hawkins who was killed by a group of white men in Brooklyn.

*'First, nothing's worse
Than a mother's pain
Of a son slain in Bensonhurst'*

Other lyrics explored the assassinations of Huey Newton and Malcolm X and Chuck D's metaphorical crucifixion by the media.

When I got back to California, I biked to a nearby record store and used my allowance money to buy *Fear of a Black Planet*. It was my first album and it was revelation. The Bomb Squad's production created an impossibly tense, paranoid landscape - full of ruthless, pounding drums, layers of distorted samples, heavy metal guitars, and air-raid sirens. But what struck me the most was the lyrics. Chuck D and Flava Flav wrote about issues that affected them in real life: the police ignoring the black community ('911 is a Joke'), racist stereotypes in movies ('Burn Hollywood Burn'), and the need for unity and revolution in order to overthrow the established social order ('Fight the Power', 'Power to the People').

Everything about them was designed to shock: their logo, which depicted a black man in the crosshairs of a gun; their stage outfits, military garb that echoed the Black Panthers; and even their names (i.e.: their DJ, Terminator X). I began hearing about them on the

news. They were dangerous. White people were afraid of them. Chuck D was interviewed on CNN, and people were calling him a prophet.

I'd never directly thought about issues of race and identity before, but Chuck D's lyrics opened up something dormant in my mind. I grew up surrounded by Latino, black, and Asian students in Oxnard, California. I never had white friends until 8th grade when I moved to a wealthier town nearby. Growing up, I vaguely understood that I was mixed race (white and Japanese) and that I was brown - but so was everyone else I grew with. I didn't fully understand and appreciate how different my friends and I were. It wasn't until I heard that album that I started to think about what it meant to be a person of color in America.

I began noticing things around me in a new light: the gang of teenage skinheads who used to circle my neighborhood looking for someone to attack; the difference between the poor, Latino barrio that surrounded my elementary school and the pristine, palatial houses by the beach; the hunched rows of migrant workers picking strawberries in the fields by my house.

After that album, I got more into early 90s hip-hop: Tribe, Wu-Tang, Cube, Pac, Biggie. I'd stay up way too late on Friday nights listening to 'Friday Nite Flava with the Baka Boyz' on Power 106 - one of the few radio shows devoted to underground hip-hop. I moved to Ventura for 8th grade and started interacting with white people for the first time. I was the only kid in school who listened to rap which made me a pariah. One kid on my basketball team was forbidden by his family to hang out with me once they found out that I listened to 'black music'.

Public Enemy's music exposed the hidden structures of the world around me, the assumptions about class and race that allowed some people to advance and kept other people in the shadows. Their songs were like a scalpel that allowed me to peer beneath empty slogans about peace, equality, and fairness, and glimpse our society's rotten heart. I never saw the world the same way again. Those songs shaped my reaction to all of the things that I have lived through since: Rodney King and the LA Riots, 9/11, the Wall St. financial collapse, the 99% movement, DACA, Black Lives Matter, everything. I don't know if I would've become a different person had I not heard that song, but I'm glad that it happened. Public Enemy changed my life.

THE DEATHRAY DAVIES



DRINK WITH THE GROWN-UPS AND LISTEN TO THE JAZZ

The Deathray Davies

*Drink With the Grown-Ups
and Listen to the Jazz*

06/1999

Idol Records

Drink With The Grown-Ups And Listen To The Jazz

Prewitt Scott-Jackson

Eschaton half-past nigh
1999

Don't buy the Book of Stories
but
can't help chewin' on the collective anxiety teeming all around me

He never understands why everybody plans for tomorrow and not today

Class of 2000

the last senior class on the planet 'cause that 'dere
Y2K insect gonna kill us all y'all!

Then,
outta nowwheres,

John D. saved us with his song

A messianic one-man band

Sir Ray Davies must be soooo
proud

For you words aren't a crutch

I imagined the album title as instructions
for the last night on Earth

Big Mama's li'l Swiss cuckoo
chirp-screamed

Midnight! Midnight!
Midnight! Midnight!

And clouds roll by

DRD > Revelations
What now???

Enjoy the new planet



Fiona Apple

Tidal

07/1996

Work Group

Heavy with Mood: On Fiona Apple's *Tidal*

Emery Ross

The bedroom of a teenager is her entire world, or at least it was for me. When I think of my teenage years, I always come back to those rooms – first, the one in the small town where I grew up, where I hung tin foil over hideous blue-flowered wallpaper. Next comes the larger town with the room next to my parents' and later the converted third garage bedroom. In those last two rooms, I pinned dozens of photographs of my friends, square inserts from my favorite CDs, and one large poster. In those rooms, I discovered music and writing and used both to work through the torment of adolescence.

Jim Morrison's poetry/spoken word album *An American Prayer* made me a writer. I discovered him and his poetry accidentally, somehow stumbling over The Doors songs on the radio and into his brilliance. I hung his naked torso in black and white on my wall in the 90s. I wrote to the drums and his singing and poetry recitation, finding a cadence and a foundation of psychedelia and poetics that still bleeds through everything I write. In many ways, I think *that* album is my formative album, the one that defines me or led me to become. But I can't think of it, or of any of my musical history, without returning to Fiona Apple's debut, *Tidal*.

As I had with *An American Prayer*, I wrote frequently to *Tidal*, late at night, by candlelight, letting the rhythm guide my hand. When I reread poems from those days, I can easily identify the ones that were written to "Pale September" (mostly because I did a lot of mimicking of beat, sound, and words). Though it's one of the slowest, and dare I say moodiest songs, to me it's also the most hopeful: "And my winter giving way to warm / As I'm singing him to sleep." I listened to that one a lot.

I remember coming to Apple the way we came to most music in the 90s, via MTV. In my memory, I find her writhing in various states of undress in her video for "Criminal." She is rarely standing, her sexuality flowing all over the floor, the tub, and the closet. She is skinny in a way that makes me simultaneously hunger for her and not want to eat for a while after I first see it. I ache for her and I ache to be her. I like that the faces of the men are never shown and all I have to see are her lovely blue eyes and her bony appendages. It's a confusing sexual awakening of sorts, but also more than that.

My memories here are a bit cloudy, however, because while *Tidal* was released in 1996, the "Criminal" video debuted in the fall of '97, with "Shadowboxer" and "Sleep to Dream" preceding it as singles. I had to have heard those songs on the radio or seen them on MTV, but as an adult I've remembered "Criminal" as my introduction. Now I know I'm wrong about that, because of how my discovery of her and the subsequent purchasing and nonstop consuming of her album integrates into my recollections.

During 1996 and 1997 I was 16 and 17. These are huge years for anyone, marked by milestones, friendships, breakups, and high school angst. In those years, my home life was a mess. I was a mess. Young friends died of overdoses and in car accidents. I remember now that in the summer of '97, just before the start of my senior year of high school, my tightknit group of girlfriends split up a bit, with some of us spending most of our time with a group of older guys and their friends. I fell fast and hard for one of them

after a steamy evening at a party. A few nights later, his roommates threw a kegger, and I knocked on his closed door. He was stretched out on his bed, so naturally I sat next to him. The lights were off and music played softly. He wasn't talkative.

"I have this album," I lied. "I love it."

A wry smile pulled on his lips. "Really. Which album is it?"

It was Nirvana Unplugged, but I suddenly wasn't 100% sure, so I tripped over some excuse about forgetting the name, my face hot and tears threatening to fall. Further attempts at making conversation failed, and I could feel his annoyance. I said so long, closed his door, and went immediately to the keg. I actually fucking hated Nirvana.

I can still feel the agony of that unrequited love, how it felt to be screaming into my pillow and playing Apple's "Never is a Promise" on repeat. I obsessed over him for weeks, even after getting together with another one of his friends. I had minor heartbreaks now and again, but nothing like this. It's absurd that I would fall into what felt like love with someone I barely knew, particularly because I tended to keep boys at arm's length, never really committing or sticking around for long. Then again, there are a lot of absurdities from that time.

But that heartbreak is the nameable pain I remember most clearly, as though the surrounding events and traumas in all their actual awfulness have become a numbed part of me I cannot access. Instead, what I recall of Fiona Apple's place in my life is the way I studied her and how much she inspired me – and inspires me still. Mesmerized as I was by "Criminal," I intuitively recognized how out of place it was within the confines of the album. Later I'd learn that Apple wrote it in under an hour to satisfy studio execs and show she could write a hit if she wanted.

At some indecipherable point, I picked up the CD and I don't think I took it out of my CD player for a long time. I listened to it every night as I went to bed. I listened to it habitually and persistently in between other CDs. I internalized her words without really realizing her profound impact on me. I can see now how I scrutinized her and drew inspiration from her work, but at the time I only recognized the comfort it gave me and the thrill that I could focus on her pain instead of indulging only in mine.

"Criminal" and "Shadowboxer" are her best known from *Tidal*, but it was her lesser-known songs that enchanted me. "Sleep to Dream," a tough and devastating takedown of, well, anyone, probably, and an assertion of independence, is her flawless opener. I remember the swell of my heart during those first beats the first time I pushed play. It's the second song, "Sullen Girl," with its lilting piano and gorgeous lyrics that astonished me from my initial listen.

I've read that she wrote it about being raped at age 12. She croons, "But he washed ashore / and took my pearl / and left an empty shell of me." For me, that line meant different things at different times. Whenever I cried to this song, it might've been because of a father or a rapist or a boy who broke my heart. The song also reads like the embodiment of the depression that took me years to recognize, which is another reason why it's so cutting.

I obsessed over her language. I'd already discovered Jim Morrison and poetry, so I wrote poetry all the time. I loved going through my thesaurus and finding new words. I'd find a single word and write an entire poem around it. Yet Apple had these amazing words she used all throughout a song. I think of "Never is a Promise" as the best example. In the pre-

chorus she sings, "But as the scenery grows, I see in different lights / The shades and shadows undulate in my perception." I paused the song and started it over just to hear the way those words worked together. And the last lines, "You'll say I need appeasing when I start to cry / But never is a promise and I'll never need a lie" get me every time. In fact, I still can't listen to that song without getting a lump in my throat.

Years later, when I read Joan Didion's idea that "the ability to think for one's self depends upon one's mastery of the language," I thought of *Tidal*. Fiona Apple wrote the majority of that album when she was 16 or so, and it's clear she had insight and self-awareness that most adults lack. And she captured not only my teenage angst, but also a universal feeling of disconnection, sadness, and hope. I am the writer I am in large part because of her. I know every word of every song on that album and I still appreciate the way she tapped into and enveloped emotion with strings of good words. Just take a moment to admire the poetry of the first few lines of "Pale September":

Pale September, I wore the time like a dress that year
The autumn days swung soft around me, like cotton on my skin
But as the embers of the summer lost their breath and disappeared
My heart went cold and only hollow rhythms resounded from within

I'm talking a lot about darker emotions and darker experiences, but of course there is much more to *Tidal* than those. There's empowerment in there, too – in "Sleep to Dream, of course, and in "Criminal," I found an outlet and an acknowledgement of sexuality. In many of her lines, I found permission to feel and to exist in my flawed form. And, again, I found out more about how words can be used to give voice to the pain and the terrible work of being human.

It's easy to find think pieces and odes to Fiona Apple, even now. With *Tidal*'s re-release in 2016, a spate of articles hit the internet reminding us of her genius and just how many girls found solace in Apple's first album. Kanye has called her an inspiration, articles discuss her "sexual confession," and so on. I'm glad to know how many loved and still love her, but there's something about her album that feels so personal to me that I find myself frustrated by others' take on it.

In my room, I alone had Fiona Apple. It was in my bedroom that I discovered and studied her, that I invoked her in my own writing, and that I shut off the world to escape in her voice and lyrics. I don't recall ever sharing my love for her with anyone, even my very close friends. Writing and reading in general were very personal to me then, so I doubt I even thought of it at the time. With friends, it was singing along to pop hits on the radio, not a critical analysis and deep appreciation of craft. My love for it is private and I struggle with trying to describe how meaningful it is. Years later, her album *When the Pawn* would give me the courage to leave a bad relationship and that particular album remains one of my favorites of all time. I can list specific moments listening to it and being affected by it in great detail. But there's something about *Tidal* that I can't shake. My attempts to articulate its power and significance feel trite and unworthy of her greatness. There aren't even many tangible memories that I associate with it – only a general sense of reverence and a squishy timeframe – but I know it's part of the fabric of me and I know that I relied on *Tidal* during times that were so harrowing that I've cut them off of me completely.

Perhaps part of that is because our love for albums is so bound up in our emotional resonance and histories that to share the love is to risk rejection of a part of us. I can't fully explain why *Tidal* meant so much then, nor why it still gets to me more than two decades later. But maybe she tells me herself in "Slow Like Honey,"

But my big secret
Gonna hover over your life
Gonna keep you reaching
When I'm gone like yesterday
When I'm high like heaven
When I'm strong like music
'Cause I'm slow like honey
And heavy with mood

An American Prayer was completely divorced from cultural context for me – I knew only the basics about Jim Morrison – but Fiona Apple had a little more. There were her videos, of course, and I cheered on her 1997 acceptance speech at the VMAs (“This world is bullshit”). I didn’t realize then what a cultural icon she was becoming, but I think that speaks more to the ways we exist as teenagers, firmly in the center of our own egos. Regardless, I know I recognized the bravery inherent in her confessions as well as the genius in her writing skills. *Tidal* was a constant for me, there whenever I had another broken heart or needed to pull back from the world. As she sang me to sleep every night, her words became ingrained in my psyche. Just as Jim Morrison influenced my writing, *Tidal* has flavored everything I’ve written since my first listen.



Tori Amos

Under the Pink

01/1994

Atlantic Records

Year of Dismantling Myths

M. Stone

I heard it on the radio station
broadcast from a college town fifty miles away,
reaching my backwater Bible belt notch
through intermittent static:

a piano that roared, then a rich voice—
honey with an orange peel tang, purr escalating
to a wail—Tori Amos singing about a Cornflake Girl.

I bought the album with allowance money
and squirmed during my first listen. Such sentiments
laid bare in song were sinful. I couldn't follow along
when she lambasted God for his negligence
(blasphemy, sacrilege)

but soon I knew her verses far better
than any found in Scripture. This was the year
I left behind spoon-fed top-forty pop music,
the year my cubic zirconia cross lost its shine.

The Waitress and Anastasia, led in lyrics
to dreary fates and ominous endings:
sisterhood myth disassembled. I recognized
myself in each woman betraying and betrayed,
recalling all the times I gripped the knife
before the blade nicked my spine in turn.

Under the Pink
prism refracting God's light into cold slivers,
mirror catching my reflection and that of every girl
I called friend.



Jewel

Spirit

11/1998

Atlantic Records

Jewel's *Spirit*

Laura Gill

"All people want is to be touched. They don't care if it's Celine Dion or Meat Loaf or me."
— Jewel, Rolling Stone

The year Jewel's album, *Spirit*, came out, I was in ninth grade, and transitioning into life at boarding school. I was learning to blow-dry my hair and put on makeup, and Jewel was twenty-one, navigating the life of a famous musician. What she lacked in being edgy, hip, or cool, she gained in being earnest and sincere. She kept her crooked tooth; she wrote her own lyrics; she lived with her mother.

That Christmas, my mom gave me *Spirit*—the square case poked out of my stocking, and when I opened it, I was thrilled. I was starting to discover that Jewel wasn't "cool," but I wasn't yet at the point where I couldn't embrace her music because of it, at least privately. I wouldn't have told any of my friends it was one of my favorite presents, but then again, they probably weren't telling me about their actual wants and desires either: we were fourteen, only two years past twelve, only four years past ten, and yet those years made a world of difference in what we were allowed to want.

As soon as the first line of the first song played, I was following Jewel, and I was following her eagerly, as a kind of guide not just to her interior world, but my own. "Deep Water," the first song on the album, starts— "you find yourself falling down/your hopes in the sky/But your heart like grape gum on the ground." Her voice was welcoming and comforting. As she sang "you find yourself," I could feel she didn't mean herself, but someone she was imagining, someone far off, and I obviously thought it was me. What is adolescence if not a continual "falling down?"

My first collapse happened on the first day of school. To welcome the boarding students, there was a picnic on the quad, and I wore sweatpants because I thought it made me look like I wasn't trying too hard. When I realized my mistake, I combatted my embarrassment with brash behavior—I walked over to a boy I thought was cute and asked him to be my friend. After, there were numerous missteps: I let a senior in my dorm pluck my eyebrows, which I subsequently ruined when I tried to maintain them. I talked a lot about sex I'd never had, and I said "oh yea, I loved that part" when people talked about Chris Farley's performance in an SNL skit I'd never seen. Luckily, I had enough social sense to protect what I really thought when I saw myself in the mirror, lipstick on, hair straightened, missing most of my eyebrows: *I am a fraud, and I want to go home.*

Over the winter break, I allowed myself to indulge in *Spirit*, going up to my bedroom at night and listening to the entire album, over and over. Every song spoke to a kind of strength in vulnerability, an emotion I was not only learning to keep at bay, but an emotion I was also desperate to harness, in the right way. Like most teenagers, I was full of emotions; like most teenagers, I thought I was the only one; like most teenagers, I wanted to make sure I did it all *the right way*. Listening to Jewel was not necessarily the right way, but she allowed me to channel my emotions in ways that felt right to me.

In my transition to boarding school, I was dealing with some dissonance—where I had always seen myself as mature for my age, I suddenly felt childish and innocent. The people I met smoked cigarettes and drank alcohol. They cheated on tests. They had already touched penises. They stole from stores at the mall. They were advanced in ways I wanted to be, and in ways I thought I had plenty of time to become. I was disappointed it was all happening so fast, and when it came to romance, I wanted the kind Jewel was talking about in “Kiss the Flame,” the kind that hinted at physical intimacy, but didn’t focus on it; the kind that spoke of love as a way of being brave, the kind that lead to transformation and belonging. Yes, I thought, as I sang along to the song, yes, please—“show me one man who knows his own heart- to him I shall belong.” Perhaps it wasn’t what she described, but that she described it at all: she was direct in a way I was finding hard to come by.

After her first album, *Pieces of Me*, Jewel said she was embarrassed. She said it felt like an airing of dirty laundry, and she wasn’t proud of the work. With a quick listen to both *Pieces of Me* and *Spirit*, one could argue that she didn’t change very much from one to the next. In some ways, the albums are incredibly similar, at least lyrically in that they are focused on sentiment and emotion. A closer look, however, you can see a slight shift—in the first, the emotion has gotten the best of her, and in the second, her emotions are something she owns and embraces, and her desires become central to her strength.

Even so, I haven’t gone back to the album since: it is not a great album—it doesn’t have a beautiful arc or dive into complexity, and some lyrics, like “your heart like grape gum on the ground,” make me laugh. That’s not why I hid the fact that I liked it, though, and it doesn’t explain why I never shared my love for it with anyone else. I didn’t share it because Jewel was a joke to most people, and I knew it was not “cool” to like Jewel in the same way it was not “cool” to be sincere about one’s emotions. The coolest thing you could do at fourteen was to joke about everything, and so when “Hands” would come on the radio, I’d do what everyone else did: laugh and sing, “these hands are small I know/but they’re not yours, they are my own” with a smile, putting my hands out in front of my face and pretending to sing to my *precious, little fingers*, using every ounce of irony I could muster. I likely went above and beyond to make it clear I was not a Jewel fan because I was. After all, that’s the first rule of shame: hide it behind visible disgust.

And yet, there was Jewel, gathering up herself, and putting herself out there, even though her first album embarrassed her, even though many critics were harsh—her music was too maudlin, too sentimental, too cheesy. Certainly every artist is tasked with creating amidst criticism, but if it was me at twenty-one, I would have looked at a peer like Fiona Apple and thought: she’s the real rockstar. Then, I would have packed up my stuff, and gone home.

In many moments of my ninth grade year, I wanted to go home. I wasn’t just comparing myself to people that seemed more advanced, but I was also comparing myself to those that seemed smarter than me, people who wore their intellect like a cloak. Somehow, they knew just what to read, to listen to, to see. When *American Beauty* came out, they knew it was an impressive film; when it came to music, it was Lauryn Hill whose album rocked their worlds. I wanted to be a part of their club, even though I knew I was actually a part of Jewel’s club, one full of longing, one with the gall to beg: “take these stars from my crown/Let the years fall down/Lay me out in firelight/Let my skin feel the night/Fasten

me to your side/And say it'll be soon/You make me so crazy, baby/Could swallow the moon/swallow the moon."

I wanted to feel that crazy, and I wanted to make those requests. I wanted to be "fastened" to someone's side, but I was learning quickly that I could not admit that to anyone, let alone those who I wanted to be fastened to the most. In some ways, I feel badly for how I treated Jewel's album: I went to her to learn what I needed to reject. I used her, I indulged in the music, and then I pretended like I didn't know who she was. All the while, Jewel knew exactly who she was and she embraced it. It never really occurred to me I had that option.

Even if *Spirit* didn't help me become a confident teenager, I saw myself in it. In the album, I saw a person attempting to grapple with feelings of disappointment, longing, and desire, and I saw a woman writing her way through her experience, trying to figure it all out. I was in an environment where we were being educated not just to have proper grammar but to also have good taste, and yet I couldn't help but wonder if the focus on quality was an effort to hide behind experience, to steel ourselves against the kind of feelings that Jewel wasn't afraid to express. I was glad to have Jewel as a different kind of guide, as perhaps a more immediate instructor in matters of the heart, even if I didn't exactly know what that meant. Sure, I could see that Shakespeare was guiding me in *Romeo and Juliet*, but it was Jewel's reference to the play in "Kiss the Flame" that resonated with me: "And wherefore art thou, Romeo?/Where have all the brave men gone?" I never knew if there had ever been brave men to begin with, but it sounded right and good and true at the time, and I wanted them to come back, whoever they were.

The Jewel who made *Spirit* is no longer the Jewel who made *Spirit*. Her recent album, *Picking up the Pieces*, harkened back to her first album, *Pieces of You*, the one she denounced soon after it came out, the one she tried to turn away from when she created *Spirit*. And yet the form of *Picking up the Pieces* itself is a return, as a critic said, "to her roots."

I am no longer the fourteen year old who loved *Spirit*, but I am interested in the question of roots, and the kind of tree my fourteen-year-old self was building when she took comfort in Jewel. I'm at times as embarrassed of her as I was to be her, and yet, I can't discount her. In the same way Jewel returned to *Pieces of You*, I return to my ninth grade self, who was absorbed in herself but also stuck within it, desperately looking for a voice to give meaning to her discomfort, confusion, and desire. I can't claim there was no one else but Jewel who could have provided that voice, but it's in the looking back that I can see why it was the voice I needed and craved. In her words: "come on you unbelievers/move out of the way."

Sarah McLachlan Surfacing



Sarah McLachlan

Surfacing

07/1997

Netzwerk / Arista

Undertow: A Valentine to My Father

Inspired by Sarah McLachlan's album
Surfacing

Gavin Lakin

*The winter here's cold, and bitter
It's chilled us to the bone
We haven't seen the sun for weeks
Too long, too far from home
I feel just like I'm sinking
And I claw for solid ground
I'm pulled down by the undertow
I never thought I could feel so low
Oh darkness, I feel like letting go...*

With unparalleled vindictiveness, El Niño chose Valentine's Day 1998 to undermine the foundation of what had been our family's treasured beach house. Our sixty-feet of bluff, dotted with pampas grass and ice plant—over which we'd immersed ourselves in years of picturesque sunsets and the thunderous pulse of the crashing waves—had mostly plummeted into the tidal tempest some one-hundred-fifty feet below, taking our haven out to sea.

What remained dangled perilously over the cliff above Agate Beach: cedar wood ripped from its frame, toppled towers of chimney bricks, open air where once was a roof, electric wiring resembling Medusa's snakelike hair along the soggy wood floors, a lone wood burning stove, deck remnants jutting out like pirates' planks leading toward Hawaii, and the cement foundation with rebar twisted and uprooted like iron weeds.

242 Roundhouse Creek had been so much more than a physical structure; it was twenty-four years of memories and reverie—forever unmatched to this day—that had abruptly perished. Under a rainy, silver sky, that February interloper, *undertow*, had initiated a series of events that for much of my life since has subjugated the best part of me.

*And sweet, sweet surrender
Is all that I have to give*

It became evident quite quickly that it was much too late to lift, relocate, nor rebuild the house. The Humboldt County community gathered. Friends and strangers arrived to offer both emotional support and physical strength. A flurry of activity ensued as pickup trucks filled the driveway, dollies rolled out appliances, electricians and the gas company ensured our safety, and growers from pot country arrived to offer (and provide) their services. Local news stations covered the story. Someone brought pastries and coffee. Neighbors also in peril offered empathy as they wrestled with how best to save their homes. Enveloping us was that tried and true togetherness brought on during times of catastrophe; a theme for which currently, we are becoming too familiar as climate change doles out its revenge on those who would deny, and those who have not done enough.

Meanwhile, below on the beach, colossal chunks of concrete had found a new plot of land. Other dangerous, weighty shards of our past ceded to nature and plunged onto the sandy shore, refusing the call to sea. Engineers, who had years ago guaranteed us a bluff with one-hundred years of worry-free erosion, arrived to insist we take immediate action. Already, looky-loos were scavenging below, even as more houses threatened to somersault down the cliff's face. We literally had no time to come to terms with the devastating and inescapable decision to demolish our precious getaway gem.

Just prior to the demolition team's arrival, stunned, with troubled soul and shadowed self, I ambled inside the gutted skeleton. Where had our gold-colored couch been taken, and how many novels had I read encased in its pillows? By the rectangular, flattened cement scarred with reddish coloring and faded impressions of bricks, how many cups of cocoa had I sipped? Glancing overhead, feeling the ardent raindrops, where was the roof from where we perched ourselves with hot brandy, admiring the thrill of August's meteor showers?

*You are pulled from the wreckage of your silent reverie
You're in the arms of the angel
May you find some comfort here*

In the northwest corner with undeniably the best panoramic view, thousands of meals had been eaten at the hauled-off table where we'd glimpsed the migrating humpback whales and their calves, warmed ourselves with clam chowder, feasted on fresh king crab, fish stew, smoky omelets, and washed it all down with bottles of delectable California wines. In that sunset-laden site, an announcement of my first niece's birth was made.

Within the walls there had been ruthless games of Hearts and Spades, agates returned in bags and added to collections having been found at six a.m. with flashlights, balsa wood gliders built then tossed off the cliff's edge. Here, friends gathered, bands practiced, dogs frolicked. In the master bedroom, I remembered a woman from long ago and how we couldn't help but fall in love in such an environment. But I lost her too.

I stood adjacent to where once had been a wall spotlighting a painting created by a neighbor. She depicted our garden filled with hydrangeas. But this place had become void of warmth, as its semi-intact sections of the original frameup gazed at me, lifeless. There was nothing left for me to see.

*From where I can't return
Where every step I took in faith betrayed me
And led me from my home*

Traditionally, recurring dreams involve the dreamer trying to work through a personal issue. One of my most enduring recurring dreams involves my valiant effort to reach the top of a house. Though the abode's configuration might change, the idea remains: Find a way to its elusive pinnacle. I stumble through dim corridors and climb spiral staircases. Trap doors collapse and engulf me. Voices of ghosts line the wallpaper, while basements beckon me. *Uh, why would I descend?* Welcome to the Hall of Mirrors at the amusement park. No matter the circuitous route, I resign myself to resignation. *What could this possibly signify?* When and if I ever reach the apex, will I have a Number 1 Hit or novels published? Will true love stop playing hide and seek with my heart, permitting me to settle down with *her* and no longer face the incessant ribbing from friends and family? Should I get a real estate license?

Psychologist Carl Jung would identify that house represents foundation. One haunts my dream state. Another nosedived over a cliff.

"After clearing the land, planting the orchard, building the house and barn, and surviving the Great Depression, our father died suddenly one winter night when we were small, leaving us to learn about loss before we even knew its name."

-Virginia Wolff

I became a member of the Loss Club by virtue of my father's untimely death when I was an infant. Handsome, brilliant, a scientist, mathematician, and enthusiast of poet Robert Burns, my father left me his intelligent and soulful imprint and DNA. But more tangibly, in the aftermath, I was left holding a crutch; one I could lean on whenever I needed to feel "special" or "unlike others." Neighbors looked after me. My elementary school principal asked my mother if he could sponsor me for the father and son evening. Girls in summer camp, junior high and high school talked to me, sensing in me the vacuity of a young man without a clue. I learned to shave by watching the men on TV ads. Sex? *What on earth was it?*

When I encountered kindred spirits with similar stories of loss, more often than not our lives intertwined seamlessly. One young woman I met at college responded to my narrative with such reverence, I believe it defined our intimacy and galvanized us with a romantic depth I'd not yet experienced. But I lost her too; she didn't like the way I chewed my food, and by the way: the entire time we were together, she was in love with another man back in her home town.

*Can you look out the window
Without your shadow getting in the way
Oh, you're so beautiful with an edge and a charm
But so careful when I'm in your arms*

When I had to put down my sweet, big-hearted Golden Lab, I sobbed so brutally, the vet and his team left the procedure room uttering simply that I could take all the time I needed. *Where were those tears coming from?* I pet her ears of felt, breathed in her fur, grasped her neck like it was tethering me to some kind of lifeline, and held her for a long enough amount of time that eventually the doctor returned and encouraged me to take the first steps: stand up, breathe in, and say goodbye to her one last time, then walk out the door and don't look back.

Over a year later, I put down my Black Lab mix, my buddy of nearly sixteen years. When his body fell silent, I'd been better prepared. Still, I cried like the thirteen-year-old who discovered his light brown Labrador along Coldwater Canyon, prone, cars passing by, the world uncaring. *Why was I effusively shedding tears for dogs whereas rarely did I display such emotion for people?*

I took the therapy route. He kept pushing me. Stop dancing around what matters here. My father. Yes, you loved your dogs. But those tears were not only about them. Sure, you claim to have loved women, but why has every relationship crashed and burned, whether by her, you, or mutual agreement? You say "crutch," I wonder if this isn't about the absolute need to face your father, say what you have needed to say, and allowing yourself to finally let go? I would argue that once that work has been done, your heart will be truly open to love, your music will soar, the novels will sell.

I did what I usually would do in similar situations; I bailed. I cited the expense. Yep, seeing a professional at the cost of paying out-of-pocket was a convenient excuse. Sounded a bit to me like leaning back against the crutch.

*The road is long
The memory slides
To the whole of my undoing put aside
I put away
I push it back to get through each day
And all I feel is black and white
And I'm wound up small and tight
And I don't know who I am*

Stubborn to the very end, my calling, eighty-eight keys of infinite sonority, with only twelve notes at hand, prevailed. In my room, I'd do my own catharsis, hold the invoice thank you very much. Hey, I've written over 450 songs. How familiar are you with my name? From all corners, be it L.A., S.F., N.Y. and Nashville, I channeled Peter Gabriel's song "Don't Give Up" from his 1986 Grammy-winning album *So*. His music video with Kate Bush is the very definition of inner fortitude with an undertow of bittersweet.

That would be me.

However, his acclaimed album gets set aside in lieu of the singer-songwriter who got me through not only the Grunge garbage-filled 1990s, but the precise three-year span of losing my dogs, and the true precipitating event, a beloved house cartwheeling over a cliff.

Somewhere in there, I lost myself.

Sarah McLachlan, Canadian singer-songwriter, founder of Lilith, carried me like the angel she wrote of. Her soprano, exotic persona, purveyor of love for all humanity, with lyrics that are broad strokes from a palette of mixed oils, and a discography featuring hit songs as well as themes as varied as her hair color, gave me the simple gift of solace.

Surfacing had critics issuing praise and rants. Descriptions included ". . . a knack for intelligent, emotionally forthright lyrics," "monumental banality," it demonstrated her "tremendous growth as a songwriter and musician," "rigid in her introspection," "lushly atmospheric" or it had a lack of "compelling craftsmanship and textural daring." Hey, critics, the proof was in the "Poor Man's Pudding": in the United States, the album earned RIAA's platinum rating eight times over.

"Last Dance," which won the 1997 Best Pop Instrumental Performance Grammy, is a carousel-sounding piano waltz, with what I infer as overtones to endings, farewells, loss and even death. I feel the slightest sense of closure with my father, though I know I never will have that in my lifetime.

"Full of Grace" urges me to call upon "all of the strength and all of the courage come and lift me from this place" and to "claw for solid ground." I know I can love you much better than this. *Amen*.

"Black and White" could be my middle name. I'd taken Joni Mitchell's advice far too long, you know, the thing about *both sides now*. Yet these two sides are notoriously ready with the word "but" as a response to someone's feelings, defensiveness, opinions. I can't claim that this song specifically turned me around; it did contribute to my "and" approach to

conflict and building mysteries. Ideas are not restricted by two perspectives, and there is room for many more.

"Angel" can be about distraction, which can be a beneficial way to get through a trauma. It has for me on numerous occasions. Can anyone say *Planet of the Apes Marathon*? She needs "...some distraction, oh, beautiful release, memories seep from my veins" and she wishes to be "empty and weightless" then "maybe I'll find some peace tonight." Secretly we all crave distraction, some with more access than others. But, true angels don't flitter in the clouds and wear wings; they sacrifice, they put others first, they say please and thank you. Angels still exist, though their numbers are dwindling as we appear to be too distracted by technology.

"Witness" is a passionate expression of Sarah's views on the state of humanity:

*Will we burn in heaven
Like we do down here
Will the change come while we're waiting
Everyone is waiting*

This one didn't do much to cheer me up.

"Do What You Have to Do" hits home with this particular lyric:

*And I have the sense to recognize that
I don't know how to let you go
Every moment marked with apparitions of your soul*

Let. You. Go.

Possible: Yes, it can be done. Therapy. Time. Other drastic measures I would never condone. Lobotomy. Distractions...daily.

Impossible: No, it can't be done. The Limbic System in our brains (memory). Our amygdala (lizard or reptilian brain, which is highly emotional, i.e. fight or flight). Songs that you associate with the other person and you ain't throwing away the CD! Everyone we encounter inhabits our lives for a reason, forming Carole King's tapestry, no matter whether you want the threads or not.

"Adia" is about best friends unable to resolve their differences. I found it refreshing as very few popular charting songs are about friendships. As for many of us, we wonder how we come to be born into the families we have. Lives are inherently bound to be screwed up, because that's what happens when humans interact. But Sarah reminds us that things start off pretty cool:

If you'd only let yourself believe that we are born innocent...It's easy, we all falter . . . but does it matter?

"Sweet Surrender" has Sarah commenting that "you strip away the ugliness that surrounds me." I miss this aspect most when you have formed a special bond together. You bring your best self. You face your shit. Is this like letting go? But, how could it be "sweet?" I hear the voice of a therapist from long ago.

"I Love You." Damn original title, Sarah. A plaintive ode to love. I would have placed this track lower in the batting order.

"Building a Mystery" tapped into the vampire and zombie culture building up at the time. (By now, I thought we'd be done with those walking dead. Apparently, we are entertained by the undead living it up. Yet, what of *Buffy*? Sarah's songs appear on the show's soundtrack. Make up your mind, people!) On my first listen, I remember hearing a cool woman singing the "F" word. I mean, on the opening track? And selling millions of records? Lilith was an empire, kicking ass; female performers were showing they could whip any Grunge dudes. The actual mystery Sarah McLachlan was building was no surprise to me: It is a world propagated with "beautiful fucked-up men."

I'm one of them.

*Let me surround you
My sea to your shore
Let me be the calm you seek*

I wake up some mornings and wonder how my life would have turned out had my father lived to be an old man. Would his presence, modeling love with my mother all those years, prodded me to marry, have a family, and dump the pie-in-the-sky music dream? Would his passion for space and engineering fueled a similar ardor in me, one that would have allowed me to pursue his field with its stability and notoriety, or something else without dealing with coke heads and egomaniacal label heads?

I have absolutely no memories of Henry. Not the sound of his voice. The way he walked into a room. How he roughhoused with my older brother. The texture of his briefcase. What he liked to eat. If he ever fed me. The kisses he planted on my mother's cheek. The equations he worked on in his notebooks. In plastic storage containers, only stories, photographs, ephemera, and various personal items are what remain.

I believe my father I never knew would be proud of his youngest son he barely knew.

He's always there—just below the surface.



Michael Penn

Free-for-All

09/1992

RCA Records

Michael Penn *Free-for-All*

Christie Wilson

We are bones, liquid, and organs sealed in skin and sent off into the world to do the best we can, sent off to create some sense of meaning. Our brains pave private pathways culling the materials for our internal architecture from our perceptions and interactions with others, even fictional others because not everyone who helps us fall into who we are possesses a tangible body. I met the narrator of Michael Penn's *Free-for-All* when I was fourteen.

Ours was not a subtle friendship; it was all or nothing at first. I wanted to impress him with my willingness to nod and move, sing along as we traversed his corridors of insecurity and facades of apathy. He warned me with the first two tracks. Indeed, it was a long way down, and, as promised, my free time disappeared as I sat in front of the speakers and made the journey with him, again and again, but my reward was his acknowledgement of the absurdity that was already becoming apparent to me. "Should I remind you," he asked, "that this is the end of camels and masking tape?" I wasn't alone, and sometimes that is the best news of all.

My new friend talked to himself, saw love as a battle, felt he had been or was certain to be betrayed, but could not keep himself from reverence for the strangeness all around him. He prodded, "Do you want to know that ignorance is bliss?" and as he repeated this phrase, I felt his wink and shared his grin. The fierce reservation in his voice echoed through my days.

I was a kid who knew she wasn't as smart as some of the other kids, but I desperately wanted to be. In elementary school, some of my friends were sent to a class called Resource. It was for gifted students, and I wanted to be included. I would watch them walk out of our classroom and wonder what they could possibly be learning that I wasn't capable of processing. I begged my mom to ask if I could go, and one day the gray haired teacher took me into the little room and gave me a test. It must have been some sort of IQ or spatial reasoning test. I was never asked back. I compensated by reading, constantly. Books were the only way I knew to staunch my craving for complexity.

By the time I made it to middle school, I was searching for sophistication in other mediums as well, even behind plastic jewel cases. The cover for *Free-for-All* is a sepia toned image of the entrance to an incline railway. Four naked figures inhabit the corners of the image on an overlaid border made to look like concrete. The first figure's bulging belly sits behind his spindle legs as he tries to look confident from his perch. The second figure has turned his back on the audience. The third bears an unidentified weight, and the fourth has buried his head, willingly or not, and is no longer able to remove it. They are him. They are me. They are all of us. I still cannot clearly articulate what this cover said to me, but I knew that I needed to listen to the music inside.

In so many ways, adolescence is about subversion. Looking back, it is no great wonder that I was so taken with this person and the world he had constructed. Successful subversion can only take place when one can demonstrate complete competence and understanding of the original materials. The melodies and arrangements, the guitars and repetition – in lesser hands, *Free-for-All* would have been a more commercially successful record because it would have stopped at mastery. Instead, the album uses organs and bells, strange interludes, darkness and silence to push further and further, to crawl out

from under popular expectations and right across the line into exceptional. I was busy digging my own way out from under piles of assumptions and presumptions. "If this ain't by the book, then the book must be wrong," he sung, and I responded, "Amen."

Originality isn't something that can be taught, but I can trace my first understanding of any number of concepts back to the time I spent inside this record, inside his world. "Free Time" and "Drained" taught me the power of meta commentary, first by making me chuckle, and then by showing me how much freedom a writer can weld through chinks in the fourth wall. The juxtaposition of battlefield language in "Bunker Hill" with natural imagery in "Strange Season" and the repetition of this pairing showed me how to put internal conflict on display. Cover figures framing the uphill journey ahead of us all showed me how varying mediums can add layers of meaning. The unorthodox use of instruments and intrusions to create measured chaos in "By the Book" made a stellar argument for the strength of non-traditional organization and how it can be a metaphor for the absurdity of modern life. All of these elements helped to route my mind and to shape how I think.

One of the tasks of aging is looking back and examining earlier iterations of myself. What have I kept? What have I thrown out? When I first encountered this record, I played it front to back, needing it as a whole entity, but time fragments. It is one of time's jobs. Now, I'm much more likely to listen to an individual song, almost always because it has come to me before I've even opened my eyes for the day. Whether Penn intended these songs and the cover art as the voice and vision of one character as I have understood them over the years, matters not. What matters are his words and music still lingering, still providing a sly smile, still reminding me that I'm not alone in this surreal and duplicitous world. And, this world is indeed a free-for-all. May it always be.



David Bowie

*The Rise and Fall of Ziggy
Stardust and the Spiders
from Mars*

06/1972

RCA Records

TO BE PLAYED AT MAXIMUM VOLUME

Alan Gann

Recommendation on the back cover saved this twelve year old sci-fi nerd from a lifetime of John Denver A.M. bubblegum and silly love songs.

One minute and twenty-two seconds into Soul Love Mom came running inside and screamed. I was grounded and yard mowing money went to replace Dad's Altec 604s.

But I was converted
believed world would end in five years
everyone would dye hair neon yellow
be bisexual and wear turquoise jumpsuits.

Turns out turquoise isn't my color
but Ziggy—wild burning Ziggy—doomed
star-bound Ziggy—you shattered me
exactly how I needed to be.



Johnny Cash

American Recordings

04/1994

American / Sony

The Silences

Steven W. McCarty

When Kurt Cobain killed himself on April 5, 1994, I was a brooding fifteen year-old in a small trailer park in West Virginia. I was watching MTV when Kurt Loder came on to make the announcement. I called my girlfriend to tell her the news. We both loved any music that seemed to find its way out of Seattle and into our little corner of Appalachia. I made her mixed tapes of Alice in Chains, Temple of the Dog, Pearl Jam, and Nirvana. When I hung up the phone, I think I may have cried.

I imagined my upbringing in the panhandle of West Virginia was not all that different from Kurt's childhood in Aberdeen, Washington. We both came from broken homes. We both were lower-class white trash. My bedroom was a little box in a little metal box at the bottom of a hill. I only had three pieces of furniture in my room: a bookshelf/desk that my dad made from plain boards (not a bevel or adornment on the whole thing), a chest made of the same upon which sat my 17-inch television and CD player, and my bed. I had just enough room on the floor to do crunches during wrestling season, although not quite enough to do full push-ups. On the other side of my bedroom wall was the spare room, in which I kept a weight set and my dad kept his guns. Somewhere in that room is a convenient metaphor for my adolescence. It was exactly the type of "toxic masculinity" that Kurt sought to escape and mock every time he wore a dress.

Today, I think too much is made of Nirvana, and the misty-eyed reverence that my generation has for the band annoys me in the way that the baby boomers' reminiscence over the Beatles irks me. But in April 1994, my musical world had collapsed with the discovery of Cobain's limp body at his Seattle home. I grew up on my father's music, which consisted of hard rock from the late 1960s and early 1970s. Led Zeppelin. Black Sabbath. AC/DC. Speaker stacks and interminable guitar solos with an assload of crunch and distortion. I had endured bad music in my early teens: Warrant, Whitesnake, Slaughter and dozens of other hair bands. Then Nirvana came along and became the hard rock arrival of my generation.

It was appropriate that Kurt Loder deliver the news to me rather than Tom Brokaw. MTV was my portal to the outside world, something larger than the trailer park or even my hometown. I would stay up late into the night watching *Headbangers Ball* and the horribly, if appropriately, named *120 Minutes*. That April I watched both programs, intent on finding another band to attach myself to. It might have been during an episode of *The Real World* that I turned the channel and found Johnny Cash.

Johnny Cash released *American Recordings* in late April 1994. My memory tells me that VH1 broadcast a video of him singing "Tennessee Stud" in a live performance at the Viper Room in Los Angeles. I wondered how Cash had managed to find himself there. My mother and grandmother had seen him five years earlier at the Maryland Theater in Hagerstown, Maryland. The Maryland Theater is where country acts go to complete a quiet and not-quite dignified death. I saw Kenny Rogers there with my grandmother in 2015. The show was in December, and he set out to perform all of his hits, which were supplemented by holiday songs. During the first set, he chided the audience for not singing along to "Islands in the Stream" (to be fair, the crowd was mostly over seventy and didn't have much singing left in them), and during the second set he made a Bill Cosby rape joke during a rendition of "Baby, It's Cold Outside." All of this is to say I can imagine how Johnny Cash felt before he stepped out on that stage in Hagerstown in 1989,

and I can imagine the fear that wrapped itself around his heart: that he would become nothing more than a bitter flame waiting for the end. It must have been with this knowledge of the abyss that he agreed to make *American Recordings* with Rick Rubin.

The music collection in our trailer held hundreds of vinyl records, cassette tapes, and CDs, but the only country album was a double vinyl of Flatt and Scruggs my father bought so that he could make a tape for his father-in-law. My maternal grandparents loved country music. My grandfather, who died when I was eight, was a painfully shy man who rarely ventured out in public for anything more than a pack of Camel non-filters and a canister of Folger's instant coffee. He loved country music, but he would never go to a store to actually buy an album. I think no small reason for this was because he was illiterate, and finding something in a store without the assistance of others would have been panic-inducing and shameful. So my dad made him a tape of Flatt and Scruggs, and my grandmother ordered eight-tracks from television commercials so that he could listen to them in his Ford pickup. Conway Twitty. Don Williams. Johnny Cash. I loved my grandparents, but country music was their music. But after watching that performance in the Viper Room, I decided to purchase *American Recordings* on my next trip to the Valley Mall in Hagerstown.

When I peeled open the shrink-wrap of the CD, a small insert fell out. It was a photostatic copy of what looked like a very long letter from Johnny Cash. In it, he explained how he came to know his first guitar (his mother's) and how he came to play the Martin that was used for the album. The letter seemed like an apology for the album, one directed at me.

The album cover is simple but powerful. Cash stands between two dogs, which he nicknamed sin and redemption, and he wears a long, black trench coat, a black shirt, and black pants. And black shoes. His wardrobe is so black that it is a hard to make out the black guitar case that Cash holds in front of him. His face is just under the words "CASH" in bold white letters. The look the man has on his face is that of an Old Testament prophet, a man come to tell you that you'd better get your shit together before divine retribution levels its barrels at you.

I put on the CD and lay back on my bed. In the current age of on-demand music, I miss the days when I would devote thirty minutes or an hour, a type of prayer, really, to listen to a full-length album. When the album was through, I could not believe that the whole recording was just one man and his guitar. The early 1990s was the age of MTV *Unplugged* performances. Being "unplugged" was a gimmick, a one-off before a band went back to kicking ass. In my mind, a guitar should have pickups and they should hum with the menacing potential for noise. Angus Young's Gibson SG. Jimmy Page's Les Paul. Cobain's Fender Jaguar. All Cash had was an acoustic D-28 Dreadnought. Even though he claimed the guitar was the first black one Martin had ever made, it still seemed a poor weapon to combat a man's demons.

In *American Recordings*, I learned the power of silences. When Kurt Cobain recorded "Something in the Way" for the lost track of *Nevermind*, legend has it that the engineers could not get the studio quiet enough to pick up Kurt's whispering vocals. *American Recordings* is nothing but a dark whisper, an album full of death and regrets. This is most noticeable in the song "Oh, Bury Me Not." The song begins as a prayer, but then shifts into a plea from a dying cowboy for his friends not to bury him on the "lone prairie." His pleas mean nothing, as practicality over-rides sentimentality and they, of course, bury him on the high plains, far away from the comforts of home and nothing but sage and coyotes to keep him company.

In this way, *American Recordings* is a gospel album that is decidedly not a gospel album. In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the ultimate punishment is not in the grisly methods of torture, but in the sufferer's distance from God. In *American Recordings*, people are far away from heaven or family or home, and they are desperately trying to make their return on the backs of horses or riding the high whine of a train. The speakers of Cash's songs seek redemption, but it is never guaranteed. The album occupies a dark place, one without clear or easy answers.

If anybody gains redemption in these songs, it is by sheer luck and the grace of God, not any kind of inherent goodness of the speaker. What makes the songs of *American Recordings* anti-gospel is that their focus is not on the power of God, but rather on the sufferings of the sinner. The songs are populated by down-on-their-luck sinners, like the Everyman in Cash's performance of Glen Danzig's "Thirteen" or Loudoun Wainwright III's "The Man Who Couldn't Cry." Wainwright's song is an excellent study in theodicy; it is the book of Job compacted into five minutes. The ultimate message of the song seems to be "life sucks, then you die."

Cash never forgot about the wild nights of his youth. He sings about redemption like a man who knows that he needs it more than anyone else. One of the highlights of the album is a Cash original, "Like a Soldier," an autobiographical song about the pain that he caused other people in his younger days. The tone of the song is one of thanksgiving. Cash is a man surprised with his good fortune, but he is still haunted by demons.

*There are nights I don't remember
and pain that's been forgotten
and a lot of things I choose not to recall.
There are faces that come to me
in my darkest secret memories,
faces that I wish would not come back at all.*

I like to think this is the type of song that Kurt Cobain would have written had he survived.

American Recordings taught me simplicity. Cash's voice had not given out like it did in the later albums. It is weary, yes, but no less urgent for being weary. I have heard the isolated vocals from "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and something is similar. It is the voice of a man wrestling with himself, the world, and his place in the world and his journey on it. Cash's guitar playing is nothing fancy, but it is distinctive. His go-to is the alternating bass strum, with a few hammer-ons occasionally thrown in for variation. I have read several biographies about Cash and I have seen enough pictures in those biographies to say that I've never seen him with an electric guitar. I have never seen a picture of him making a barre chord. He didn't need to. Three chords and the truth. He did not use a song to express himself; he used himself to express the song.

With the exception of "Something in the Way," *Nevermind* is a study in studio layering. Kurt's voice is laid on top of Kurt's voice, which is then supplemented by Dave Grohl's voice laid on top of Dave's voice. For all of its touted "grungy" sound, *Nevermind* is truly a studio album. The slick polish of "In Bloom" is in its jangly melody line that is not all that different from the early Beatles albums. Kurt must have known this as he smiled throughout the Ed Sullivan-esque music video. *American Recordings* is not lo-fi, but it is raw. The liner notes state that the songs, except for the two in the Viper Room, were recorded in "Rick's living room and Johnny Cash's cabin." The sound now reminds me of campfires along the Cacapon River. Saturday nights in the toolshed of my friend's

grandfather. Music at its most elemental level, that of people gathering for a story and a song to keep away the encroaching night.

Much of what we think of the original *American Recordings* comes from what happened afterwards. The second album with Rubin, *Unchained*, won a Grammy. Nearly a decade after the performance in the Viper Room, the video for his cover of Nine Inch Nails' "Hurt" solidified Cash's legendary status. I thought the cover was not that great. His voice was shot by that point, an animal separate from himself that he could not control. Even if "Hurt" and the movie *Walk the Line* had never happened, *American Recordings* would have been a solitary act of redemption that would have saved him from falling into the same trap that Kenny Rogers did.

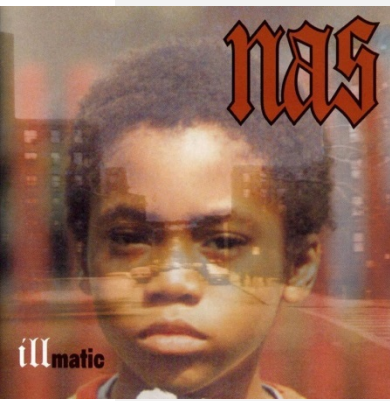
I always wanted to play the guitar throughout high school, but I never actually bought one until my late twenties. I shudder when I think of how good I would be now if I had my idle teen years to practice, long before I had adult obligations. My first guitar was not a Stratocaster or a Les Paul. It was an acoustic Seagull S-6, and the first song that I learned to play was "Folsom Prison Blues."

I played that guitar until I wore an extra hole below the sound hole. This year, with my fortieth birthday approaching, I was willing to spend a few extra dollars on a better guitar. I narrowed my options to two Taylor acoustic-electric models, the 210e and the 214e. Indecisive to the end, I asked the salesman for his opinion.

"Well, the 214 is good if you are quiet and want people to hear fingerpicking, but the 210 is good for volume," he said.

"In that case, I'll go for the 210."

Even after two decades of *American Recordings*, I am not yet ready yet to hear what my silences have to say to me.



Nas

Illmatic

04/1994

Columbia

4/19/1994

Julio Cesar Villegas

Litter the skyline with burning pages & carve your name into these turnstiles
youngblood: bend the streetlights into necklaces, messiah of the genesis.

I swear to God New York was smaller before Nas built a telescope. Rakim
mastered the hieroglyphics that Nasir Jones transcribed into a new form

of collapsing stratospheres into the shape of pens, shape of Queensbridge
motherfucker, and there was not a soul prepared for the gates to unfold

in the manner that they did— the pilgrimage to Mecca began with Illmatic
and it was on the 40th side of Vernon that the prophet wrote his letters

to the world. The headphones and the boomboxes were the messengers:
look closely at those old windowpanes, youngblood, they're breathing

and about to rip from their frames if we keep replaying N.Y. State of Mind.
this is more than just navigating the dungeons of rap. close your eyes,

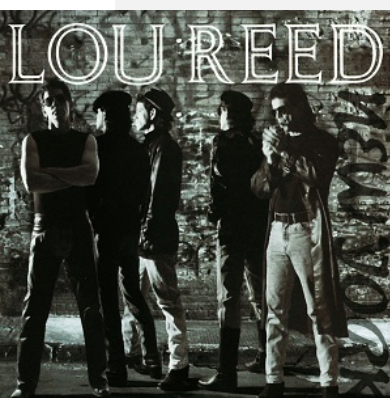
and with only a microphone's cord I want you to merge skylines into one
I want you to tie rope knots across the boroughs, bind them, find me

in the tundra learning to build telescopes. the jungle is concrete for today
but every day after we'll remember how the sun tore through the sky

to mold itself into the shape of intersections, project housing, headphones
blown into debris and transported onto shores we would never know

had Nas not looked into the night and said that *today I'mma become God*.
wear those streetlights proudly, youngblood. Illmatic is our cathedral.

wear those streetlights proudly, youngblood—
our diamonds sleep within us.



Lou Reed

New York

01/1989

Sire

My Baltimore City and Lou Reed's *New York*

Joey Sheehan

Baltimore is a city with cancer. Every year, the situation gets worse. The growth in the upscale areas near the inner harbor and the Mount Vernon district is unsustainable while the rest of the city deteriorates. It's a city constantly at the tipping point. It's crowded and hostile and the homicide rate is soaring. In 2015, the world watched as Baltimore's youth clashed with police in the Penn-North area in Sandtown-Winchester, not far from where Freddie Gray had his spine broken by police. The event was reactionary. People had had enough. The National Guard was called in to protect the property of the elite as the rest of the city was essentially told to go fuck itself as riot cops implemented what was essentially martial law. The mayor was baffled as usual. The state's attorney was posing for the cameras. None of this felt abnormal. It felt expected.

Lou Reed described his album, *New York*, as being about "man's inhumanity to man." From first song to last, the listener is confronted with issues of gang violence, AIDS, economic inequality, environmental devastation, child abuse, abortion, the drug war, racism, the hypocrisy of our political leaders, and almost everything else that goes into the molotov cocktail that is the modern American nightmare. I first heard the album when I was 15, the summer after my freshman year of high school. I had just recently discovered The Velvet Underground and the rest of the major Lou Reed catalog. I was bisexual, into heavy drugs, my middle school situation had been abusive, and I was generally angry. Lou Reed's songs gave me something I could relate to, a context for my unhappiness and they blessed me with a kind of romantic outlook on being a total misfit. Lou Reed was able to lend poetry to the proclivities and emotions that would have otherwise landed me in a mental institution.

To hear *New York* when I was 15 wasn't entirely a revolutionary experience. Lou Reed wasn't telling me anything I didn't already know. I had already been exposed to the toxic elements that pollute the landscape throughout the album. None of it seemed so abnormal as to say anything. That's not to say I wasn't moved by it, the material just seemed so familiar and not at all anything that people were unaware of. I've come to interpret that as a symptom of my own preternatural jadedness. However, it's also the truth. *New York* presents nothing that the general American public doesn't already know. It presents a vision that the American public generally ignores.

Trauma builds. There's a crescendo element to life in the urban landscape. There are moments when the fear and the rage reach fever pitches and recede like waves crashing against some polluted shore. Those waves are harder and harder to handle as I get older. I'm 33 now and I'm aware of lost possibilities, the implications of my history, and the threat of my own environment in a way that I simply couldn't be when I first heard *New York*. Every year, the whole scene gets worse. Every year, *New York* sounds better and better and more relatable. Part of me wishes the album would seem obsolete. The other part of me absolutely relishes Lou Reed's vision simply because I know that it won't change, that it will continue to get worse.

To write about Lou Reed's lyrics is something of an exercise in futility. Lou Reed's songs speak for themselves directly. The lyrics in *New York* are not above metaphor or

allegorical devices but they are above explanation and interpretation. Each line hits its mark from the jump. To me, the greatest opening line ever written is probably "Caught between the twisted stars, the plotted lines, the faulty map, that brought Columbus to New York." It sets the stage completely for the rest of the album and demands that each lyric that follows capitalizes on its strength. We know from the very first words that the whole American dream is predicated upon a very grim and cruel accident that has plagued who we are since.

To me, poetry is about demonstrating a certain level of humor and sensitivity that reflect pieces of the poet. For all of its thematic ferocity, it's a really sensitive record, and not without humor. It needs to be. An album like *New York* doesn't get made exclusively out of anger and frustration, that anger and frustration has to get born out of a really acute sense of empathy. Throughout the album, Lou Reed empathizes with drug dealers, AIDS victims, abandoned Vietnam vets, abuse victims and the other characters that populate the album who are all, ultimately, victims of their circumstances.

In 2012, I got stabbed in the neck during a carjacking. There are a lot of frustrating emotions that come out in the wake of something like that. The police never caught the guy who did it and I know that it wouldn't have mattered they did. There's no way that the man hadn't been to jail before so it's not like that's some kind of a solution. But I had to think about that guy's story. I don't know if he had a family or if he had a job at sometime, if he was on drugs or mentally ill. He could have been a veteran. Who knows. Those kinds of variables are endless. All I can really make sense of is that there is no way, judging from where this event happened and the description that the guy fit, that he wasn't a victim of circumstance, that this was just another example of man's inhumanity to man. There's no way that that would be the sense I made of the experience if I had never heard *New York*.

The rhetoric of leaders and people in positions of public influence will always be obscene. I never expected much from Barack Obama and he never really delivered on anything. Baltimore has always been on the decline and the situation that occurred in the aftermath of Freddie Gray's murder seemed emblematic of his audacity of hope televangelism. The only sense he made of the situation was that the kids who were fighting the police in Penn-North were "thugs." To look at Baltimore in the wake of the Obama administration and the dawning of Donald Trump's America isn't at all different than Lou Reed's vision of hypocrisy and waste on "Strawman." Nobody needs another politician or preacher "caught with his pants down and money sticking out of his hole." It continues to happen though. The album ends with "Dime Store Mystery (The Beginning of the Last Temptation)" and when I look out at my city and its relationship to the American scene, I feel like that a lot. My faith is not just constantly tested but hanging by the thinnest of threads.

I could have chosen *Sally Can't Dance* or *The Blue Mask* or any other Lou Reed album for this essay but I chose *New York* because I just heard on the news that a gang of youths attacked a man riding his bike today. These attacks have been occurring with greater and greater frequency, a gang of between 10 and 20 or so young people set upon a random victim, take whatever they have, and beat them senseless. It's not exactly terrorism, so much as a reflection of where we are now. All I can make of the random violence, the economic despair, the boarded-up houses, and whatever other detritus that Baltimore city oozes out on any given day is that it's just a product of man's inhumanity to man. All I can do is to try to stay human in it.



Little Feat

Sailin' Shoes

05/1972

Warner Bros.

Sailin' Shoes

Ellen Austin-Li

I had lost so much after that May night in 1978 — my summer on the Cape, the college man with whom I had fallen in love, my spleen and part of my liver, and three days of consciousness. Above all of these, I had lost the youthful cloak of invincibility that had seen me through countless daring escapades, mostly fueled by alcohol. I was left raw and vulnerable.

I almost lost my life the night my car crashed into the side of a barn after a night of drinking. My forehead was etched in a puzzle pattern of scars from lacerations; my abdomen sported an angry scar that ran from stem to stern. I had healed quickly, thanks to the vigor of youth, but was left with a psychological wound that was much slower to heal. The car accident left me suddenly exposed, aware of how the body, even a young and strong one, could suffer crippling injury or death in an instant. I vowed I was finished taking risks. No more drinking.

By mid-summer, I was sufficiently healed to venture plans with my friends. In July, Karen, Susan, and I rented a cabin for several nights in nearby Green Lakes State Park. The cabin was without TV or phone, but had electricity; we brought a stereo and a supply of albums for a soundtrack to our evenings. Karen and Susan had summer jobs during the day, but we came together every evening. For our last night at the cabin, we planned a special dinner celebration — a barbecue and a campfire.

Late that last afternoon, Susan arrived at the cabin laden with dinner supplies. We fixed our salad and prepared the burger patties as we waited for Karen. When the salad was ready, and the burgers were ready to grill, Karen had not yet returned from work. We decided to wait.

As the sun sank below the treetops and the late evening sky filled with glowing amber, Karen was still not there. Dinner time was long past. We were certain she would not miss our last night at the cabin. Wonder turned to worry.

"Where is Karen? She was excited about this dinner," I said, pacing around the cabin.

"I know. It's not like her to blow us off," Susan replied.

"I wish I knew some of the people at her job. I don't even know the name of the company. Do you?" I asked.

"No, I feel bad I never asked her," Susan said.

"Maybe we should go ahead and eat. We can save a plate for her," I suggested.

Twilight descended, quickly followed by the enveloping pitch-black of night time in the woods. We stared into the crackling fire and listened to the cheeping crickets. I stood up to rearrange logs on the fire, stirring up sparks, red floaters that melted into inky blackness. Our worry was starting to morph into panic.

"What are we going to do? I'm getting really worried," I said. "Something bad must have happened to Kar. No way would she miss this. We have to call someone."

"Maybe we can go use the pay phone and start calling around," Susan offered.

"Yeah, I think the closest pay phone is in Fayetteville. Let's go call Danny and Michael. Come on," I said.

None of our friends knew where Karen was; no one had heard from her. My belly burned, a churning knot of anxiety. There was no one else to call but her mother, a decision we knew to take only as a last resort.

"Susan, we have to call her mother. We don't have a choice. She has to know about this," I said gravely.

"I know," Susan said. "If she's been in an accident, her mother may have heard something. Who knows, maybe she had to go home for something."

We looked at each other with grim faces. We knew the chances of her being home were remote.

"I don't want to scare her mother, but we have to do it. We're going to get her in lots of trouble if she's just out somewhere," I added with a weak laugh. I doubted she was out socializing. We had already spoken to most of our friends.

Our fear for Karen's safety outweighed these concerns. We called her mother. Karen's mother had no more information than we did. We arranged to call back in two hours to give her mother time to call the police and the local hospitals. Vague panic gave way to sharply-focused fear; something bad had happened to Karen. I was sure of it.

The follow-up phone call yielded no results. There were no reported accidents. Karen was not in any of the hospitals. It was as if she had vanished.

"The police don't consider her a 'missing person' for 24 hours," her mother told us with a weary voice. "We just have to wait. You girls go back to your place. There's nothing we can do about it right now."

We returned to the cabin in heartbroken silence, numbed by the possibility that our worst fears were coming true. Susan retired to bed, while I began an all-night vigil, hoping for the miraculous return of my friend. Surely she would have an explanation for this whole nightmare.

I lit a fire in the stone hearth and put "Sailin' Shoes," one of my favorite albums by Little Feat, on the turntable. Only music could loosen the grip of the dark thoughts taking hold of me.

The title track's lyrical nonsense began to penetrate my perception; some central lines felt like an anthem for this experience:

*Doctor, doctor, I feel so bad
This is the worst day, I ever had*

The long night was spent in a continuous loop of songs from this album. I was struck by how different these same songs sounded from before all of this horror. I attended to each note, each lyric, as if they offered some sort of message. Each song took-on special meaning. The song "Cold, Cold, Cold," described the ache in my bones in the middle of the night, as I was wracked with worry:

*Cold, cold, cold,
Freezing, it was freezing cold in that hotel
I had no money, my special friend was gone...*

Each time the album finished, I stood to lift-up the arm of the turntable and return the needle to the beginning groove of the LP. My eyes burned from a combination of fatigue, worry, and wood smoke. I rubbed them as I studied the lyrics of "Trouble," which seemed to mirror how I felt in those moments. It was as if the song was written for me:

*Well mama lay your head down in the shade
'Cause your eyes are tired, and your feat (sic) are too
And you wish the world was as tired as you, whoa
Well I'll write a letter, and I'll send it away
And put all the trouble in it you had today*

As skies lightened and song birds chirped to signal the predawn hour, I was still immersed in the sounds of Little Feat's Lowell George; the plaintive strains of "Willin'" filled my mind:

*If you give me weed, whites, and wine,
and you show me a sign,
I'll be willin', to be movin'.*

I begged Lowell to send me a sign, to give me back my friend. I would do anything to have Karen back safe.

The rays of pale yellow dawn streamed through the window in a beam of rectangular light, illuminating thousands of dust motes suspended in a silent march. I listlessly stared at the beam of dust. *Now I understand how my mother felt those nights when I was out partying*, I thought. I pictured her, who on so many nights had kept vigil in the Queen Anne armchair in the living room — how she had sat long hours and prayed for my safe return. How selfish I had been.

The driving guitar strums at the beginning of "Easy to Slip" captured my attention again, the lyrics mirroring my fatigue and resignation:

*Well the whole world seems so cold today
All the magic's gone away
And our time together melts away
Like the sad melody I play*

*It's so easy to slip
It's so easy to fall
And you let your memory drift
And do nothing at all
All the love that you missed
All the people that you can't recall
Do they really exist at all*

Lost in my drifting reverie of loss, I heard the door knob rattle. I watched, disconnected, as the door opened. As if in a dream, Karen stepped into the cabin wearing a halo of sunshine. I stood, stunned, looking in wonder at the friend I had spent the night believing was lost to me. I burst into tears, sobbed with relief.

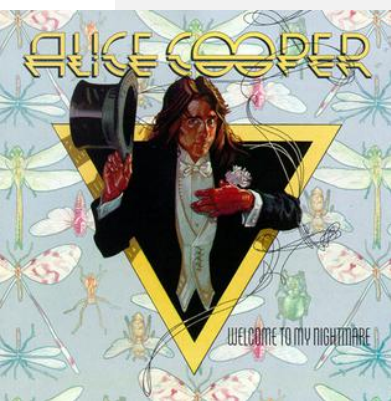
"Oh, my God!" Karen exclaimed. "What have I done? What have I done?"

"We th-thought something b-bad had happened to you!" I cried. "I th-thought you were d-dead! You didn't sh-show up for the dinner we planned...."

"Oh, my God! I'm so sorry," Karen said as she hugged me." I forgot all about our dinner! I went to a party with the people from work. I had too much to drink — I stayed overnight. I'm so sorry that I worried you guys! I can't believe I missed dinner. I'm so sorry!"

I cried with relief that this whole night had been the result of a careless indiscretion, and that my friend was alive and whole. I had not lost Karen. Life could be cut short so easily. More than anyone else in my circle of friends, I knew the truth behind the lyrics of the songs I had listened to in the darkest hours of that long night: *It's so easy to slip, it's so easy to fall*. At least Karen's slip had only led to a night of worry for her friends and her mother — my slip had led to my own near-death and to another person's grave injuries.

Yes, it was easy to slip. I knew that I had slipped, badly, but I had not fallen — at least not yet.



Alice Cooper

Welcome to my
Nightmare

03/1975

Atlantic

Welcome to my Nightmare

Gabrielle Gilbert

It trickles in. It tricks you in. Door locks. And you're not happy, but you laugh.

Has a song ever truly made me feel welcome? Only one.

I'm breaking the rules already. It's not just a song for me, but an album of the same name, and a video recording of a concert of the same name: Alice Cooper's *Welcome to My Nightmare*. My mother introduced me, I couldn't tell you what prompted her to put the DVD on for me - 109 minutes of the most twisted carnival I had ever seen. Or was it more sacred ritual, or straight chaos? He had the skinniest legs for a man and wild black hair. Were those bugs in his teeth? Or under his skin? The most extraordinary display of dirty, demonic androgyny. Alice. Vincent. Steven?

My mother showed me *Welcome to My Nightmare*, "digitally restored and remixed," of course. I must have been around 9 and I was bewitched, could feel it under the skin, as well as a bit confused and freaked out. The costumes were elaborate and the choreography playful and beautiful. Vincent Price was there! And there was this woman, who I found out was Alice's wife, who didn't just dance, but float. More importantly, there was incredible, haunting music. He was telling a story, a few stories, of childhood trauma and loss, of fame, of the worst of people, of fear of oneself, finding honesty in youth and fear in death. In a way, he was resisting death through a sort of rebirth - as if rebirth wasn't starting completely over, just indulging in the hard parts until you start to like it, or finally you just forgive yourself. This is evident in *Some Folks*, a number made of jazz and death and the things we can become addicted to - drugs, companionship, even death at one's own hand - the things that can come to rule our lives, the hardest vices to shake. The idea of "there are worse people than me" or "people kill people every day" or "what if I just did this?" Of course, the show in its entirety was dirty and kinky and an honest to god great show, but it was more than theatrical because it was evident that the theatrics were not an option. Alice knew how to entertain, yes, but he also knew how to inhabit. And he inhabited more than his character, or many characters, but he inhabited individually strange parts of those who listened to his music.

When it was over, I restarted it, and I did that for weeks, even watched the behind the scenes interviews and completely failed the memorabilia quiz. I brought it to a sleepover. My friend's parents must have exchanged curious looks before popping in the DVD - scratched to shit and cherished - but I didn't catch them. I just sat criss-crossed in pink fleece pajamas, eager to share this dark world I had fallen into. They turned it off right around *Cold Ethyl* and I wasn't allowed back. Like I'd want to hang out there anyway. I had my mother then download it onto her Ipod mini and I'd sit under the table while my family ate and I mouthed the words to songs about death and sex and revelry. Every eye that checked on me as I rolled between human legs and chair legs alike made me anxious. An uncle would ask, "What are you listening to down there?" I'd blanch and whisper out "Alice Cooper," giggling at the look on his face.

Welcome to My Nightmare was Alice's first album after the rest of the band split consequently due to Alice's near-constant intoxication. He was on his own for this one. Just Alice. Should I start referring to him as Vincent? That doesn't sound right. But of course, before Alice Cooper, there was Vince Furnier, a boy who hit puberty right when rock 'n' roll became a thing. You can hear it in his voice sometimes, between the rough,

guttural shouts, his voice slides into that of an Everly Brother or a dignified Englishman of the 18th century or a lost child, near seamlessly at times. In some songs, his voice is so smooth, that I'm taken aback for a second. A reminder. On a first or fifth listening, I remember my mother saying, "Those different voices? All him!" with a smirk. As a child, not really understanding how the fuck one could change one's voice and unable to think of why, I lingered on duality. Duality in fame is something I've been interested in since, thanks largely to Alice. The name Alice Cooper came from when Vince and his bandmates got high and played with a Ouija board. They asked about past lives. Vince had once been Alice, Alice Cooper, a woman burned at the stake in England for being a witch. Alice could do everything Vince couldn't and, for that matter, everything kids in America were told they couldn't. Moved, not to violence but, in fascination of it. Unfortunately, It's no surprise that Alice suffered in the come down. When your inner circle is just those inside of you, well, you shatter when they scatter. Alice, of course, fell out of my memory for a short time and I heard his voice on the radio - not singing, but introducing music, taking calls - and I fell right back in and haven't let him shake loose since.

There is remorseful sadness in Alice, an acknowledgement of the damage one does on the people around them - whether it's all in "good" humor, such as *Cold Ethyl*, or in mournful lament, as it is in *Only Women Bleed*. I have drawn connection to those two songs in particular upon numerous (numerous, numerous) listenings. Alice's role, in one song, as a gleeful killer, and a sorrowful observer in the other. Is Ethyl the same woman in *Only Women Bleed*? Was Ethyl and the woman in *Only Women Bleed* stand-ins for his wife, or manifestations of his wife, or previous women in Alice's (the character) life? The answers aren't quite as important or interesting as the answer to the question: Is it the same Alice? From an artistic standpoint, yes, of course. Duality, yet again. From an interior and characteristic, or maybe caricaturistic standpoint, it is left a little more loose, left to sway back and forth in the wind as an arm swings. His arm? His fist? His intentions? Whatever the answer (let's leave it self-examined), between the apparently heinous motif behind *Cold Ethyl*, the observation of domestic abuse, the, at times, vulnerability of women, which can be translated into the vulnerability of people in general (how easily we break), what a self-proclaimed patriarchal "upper hand" can do, especially if that hand is broken in more ways than one.

It took me so long to get over my actual fear of listening to *Years Ago* and *Steven* - the carnival-driven songs of schizophrenia taking over as the body's coping mechanism for tragedy (Crazy, right? Listen to it). From the skeletal jack-in-the-boxes that appeared to me and, of course, Alice, although a new childlike Alice, barely recognizable at first, though still in his red, skin-tight bodysuit. His voice small and then damnably large, panicked and desperate and constantly struggling. Was it his mother whose eyes he covered with pennies? How much had she seen? Of course, Vince's parents were alive and well, taking care of him when he couldn't take care of himself, even following the release of *Welcome to My Nightmare*. But what of Alice's parents? What had they endured, and baby Alice as a result? What trauma made Alice this way? It's something that Alice the artist, or Vince, I suppose, had to psychologically manifest and endure himself, even if it was solely musical. But with empathy that encompassing, this was no small feat. The story stretches across a lifetime, one Alice had to live alongside his own - through fame and family and formulated ideas of self, this strange self. From the initial deranged and damaging event all the way to Alice's mistaking of wife for his late mother, calling for him, at every age in between, unable to place himself and, eventually killing his wife. Something hinted at throughout? Something planned? Something malicious and gleeful or something confused, accidental, sorrowful and near observed? Out of one body through to the other, violence springs from one body to another, confused between another, or another three, maybe four? The desire to damage has little to do with

individually placed anger and more to do with a sort of release. The desire to hurt can manifest outwards onto others, especially when the desire was passed down from outside of yourself, the desire to control and destroy comes from some place never fully healed, accidents can be planned without complete realization and people die easily. When did Alice learn this? I can hear it sometimes ("Steven!" Come home!) I'm sure Alice does too, I wonder if it chills him as much as it does me. It genuinely makes me happy to know that he's sober and still performing and living so loud. I think of Alice. I think of Vincent. I think of Steven. Steven? I think of writing him sometimes.

The song. The song! The song *Welcome to My Nightmare*, well, if it were up to me, I'd radiate it off of me so people could hear it when they meet me. It's a song I could never skip or get sick of. It's an anthem for the weirdos, but it's also the acknowledgement that the scary parts of ourselves, or the world around us, can be made comfortable if you turn it on it's head. Sadness can be comforting. Fear heightens instinct and will to live. Freedom means having nothing, or maybe just nothing to hold on to. One of the best things about this song is that it is ultimately about drawing a community out of all the scary shit, coming together. He uses "we"! He is opening his doors to the worst parts of him and his life and, once we get over the fear and disgust and our own vulnerability, we, too, can feel right at home. Alice lays it all out there for us, on stage, in his music, and I think it still surprises him sometimes how he's able to do that. Pay attention to the instrumental in the middle, it's almost a marching tune to draw people in; to dance together, to shout together, to make a home together! (Why even write a song like *Department of Youth* if not to enact a communion?) The line between good and evil is there, but it is not thick, and we will dance with Alice over it with every beat.

Welcome to My Nightmare is just the beginning. Alice Cooper was the twisted ringleader for the youth! And I don't mean killing babies or black widows inhabiting the earth, but in the sense of frightening others to hide that you're frightened, to examine the gory and horrible parts of life through humor and oddity, and to overdress always.



Violent Femmes

Hallowed Ground

06/1984

Slash / Rhino

On *Hallowed Ground* by Violent Femmes

Steve Goldberg

The fall of 1983, my junior year of high-school, I finally shed my heavy metal skin; I shaved my wispy mustache, flipped my shaggy mullet into a new-wavy long-in-front/short-in-back, took out my David Lee Roth gold hoop earrings and tried on Robert Smith eyeliner and lipstick.

Sure, this all (mostly) began because of a girl. A girl who loved Culture Club and more specifically Boy George, to the point of single-minded obsession. "You look AMAZING!" I remember Julie saying to me as I sat perched on the edge of her black bedspread, as she held the small pencil up to my eye, her thin index finger gently pulling the skin beneath the lid down. "Don't move." I didn't, but that didn't stop another part of my hormone-ravaged body from moving around and I started to fantasize about Julie and me conjoining our deep red and black lipsticks.

Alas, my role would remain a willing, shy boy mannequin, and when my seasonal allergies acted up—running nose, itchy, watery eyes—it would put the kibosh on my newly sculpted goth persona. And send Julie slinking off to find another eager lad to dress up.

But the makeover had begun. I craved new music that pushed boundaries—anything that represented the polar opposite of my old Van Halen and Iron Maiden records. I rode my bike to Tempo Records on Reseda Boulevard and approached the clerk—who looked like the singer of A Flock of Seagulls—and asked him who the most daring new bands out there were. "Have you heard of Violent Femmes?" I shook my head no. He rolled his eyes. "Have you heard of Hoodoo Gurus?" Again, I shook my head.

I left the store a proud new owner of the sophomore albums of both bands, *Hallowed Ground* and *Mars Needs Guitars*.

I certainly enjoyed the fun, twangy, garage-rock of Hoodoo Gurus, but "Hayride to Hell" didn't pack the same devilish punch of the Femmes' cowboy-noir opening track, "Country Death Song." Gordon Gano's nasally and dramatic delivery sounded unlike any lead vocalist I'd ever heard before. He sang of *fathers' throwing their lovely daughters in wells; of digging black girls, oh so much more than white girls; of digging white boys oh so much more than the black boys*. My suburban San Fernando Valley-boy mind was being blown. Lyrically, *Hallowed Ground* would cover the gamut of taboo subject matter: religion, race, bisexuality, infanticide, drug use, and other topics my sheltered teenage self could not possibly fathom.

And it wasn't just the lyrical content that shook me to my musical core. The instrumentation—snare drum, vibraphone, stand-up bass, jew's-harp, marimba, clarinet, saxophone, acoustic guitar—it wasn't new wave, it wasn't punk rock, it wasn't folk. I couldn't find a label for it and this both scared and exhilarated me. Brian Ritchie's nimble bass often played the role that lead guitar usually held. The epic third track, "Never Tell", is a veritable showcase for Ritchie's fantastic four-stringed fretwork. And Victor De Lorenzo's frenetic percussion, often using only a snare, hi-hat and bass drum, forced me to consider the prospect that less can be more. I'd been raised on John Bonham and Neil

Peart, so for me to be so impressed by a drummer playing in such a stripped-down style really altered my whole world as to what defined a great drummer.

I was a middle-class Jewish kid, so a lot of the Christian imagery that soaks *Hallowed Ground* like so much holy water, may have gone over my head. But it was abundantly clear, even to me, that Gordon Gano was working through some conflicted feelings regarding his religion. That Gano, even at 19 or 20 years old could offer views both critical ("Hallowed Ground") and celebratory ("Jesus Walking on the Water"), is a testament to the creative and spiritual fire that fed such auspicious songwriting. Jesus was a Jew, so I suppose it's not so strange that this album would stand out for me as a musical marker.

I had never heard Violent Femmes' self-titled debut album before purchasing *Hallowed Ground*. "Kiss Off," "Blister in the Sun," "Add it Up," "Gone Daddy Gone"—it's no secret that the Femmes' first was their most successful release and arguably one of the most important albums of the '80s. Even the 20-somethings of today know at least one of those classic tunes. But we don't always access our favorite archchronologically. I had been a metal-head in 1983, and so didn't discover Violent Femmes until their second album's release.

So much is about timing. If *Hallowed Ground* had come out a year earlier, or if that clerk at Tempo hadn't recommended the album to me, it may never have rooted its place in my musical garden. If Julie hadn't tried to turn me into her personal Boy George, I may still be rocking a mullet. And writing about how Scorpions' *Blackout* changed my life.



Mother

1914 - 1958

John Huey

Seldom was a man stripped down this way,
Laid out while still alive on a slab of his
own construction.

Beauty translucent as his skin got tighter
wrapping his face in contortions as a personal
center was opened and dropped in the Liverpool
mud, the war hardly over, still raging loudly
in the child's veins while pounding out the
poverty and ruptured schoolboy dreams
saved by an aunt who cared for him.

Out of such loss he rose and art being art he
ignored the Northern gloom as dark shapes
covered the deserted, private penitentiary
there with neglect.

The deafening sound of crowds, screams,
projections, crazies in the night with no rest,
all running crossways across the now grown
boys head, adulation incarnate, the irony not
lost on the lad.

This cry went through all of this and cut the
peasants to the quick, all mass movements
suspect under his damp brow, the storm beading
off the vocal cords, bleed out, giving it all.

Gods were not in their heaven, nothing manifest,
fools innately gullible and self-evident, easy for
this one to see, and no one gets a pass on this road,
no Zimmerman or poor Elvis left to worship.

He was bereft, alone, left out in the rain by parents
too selfish and willful to care and the boy took a pen
and a guitar and made it to the station himself somehow,
the benevolence of that rare mask called genius in
control guiding the hand and eye even at his most
cruel and extreme in the remarkable feat of not
becoming even more of a monster than he was,
money and an addled brain and a piss poor attitude
to confound those closest to him and within a year or
two of this almost to extinguish him in a wave of brandy,
smack and hard times.

John Lennon

*John Lennon/Plastic
Ono Band*

12/1970

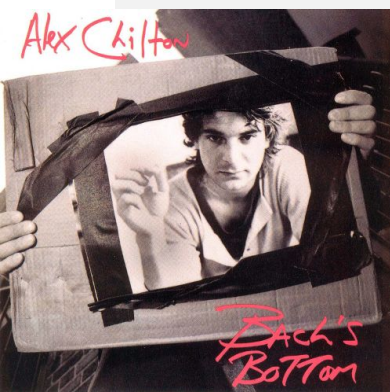
Apple

Down to us the coldest look at a terrible
calamity of loneliness, a walk by the deadly
river and a plunge across, a Rio Grande of
his devise, setting out for the territories, no
law, no justice, he firm on the rock of self-
belief through his bridge of intractable sorrow.

And even though there was this, even here there
was love, this fractured liberation both fearsome
and born of some great well of confirmation, as
in the early days of Technicolor, the Wizard and
the White Witch popping up everywhere in
bright delight.

The dead mother rose in a child's tune with the
scratches moving across the ancient shellac and
the voice was out of sync with time and he was
through explaining his pain, expecting you to
live through yours as the gathering tribes
somehow learned to do,
free of each other.

To grab your name and run with that.



Alex Chilton

Bach's Bottom

1981

Line Records

On *Bach's Bottom* by Alex Chilton

Elizabeth Barker

Not too many years ago, I stole a rock star's likeness for my novel and then he asked me on a date. He's the singer for a band I've loved since I was 14, one of the most enduring infatuations of my life. The character I based on him was very minor: my protagonist's most adored ex-boyfriend, who wore beaded necklaces and ate his ice cream from the pint, with a butter knife instead of a spoon. He existed in flashbacks where kids drank warm beer on back porches in the New England summertime, Rickie Lee Jones on the radio. In one scene he dragged his finger through the melted frosting of a lemon danish, on a front stoop on a Sunday morning when he and his girl had barely slept and both had exciting hair, unwashed and ocean-salty.

There wasn't much point in adding that character to the story. I mostly stole the singer's likeness so that I could infuse some of his goofball aura into my book. His aura was the exact sunny-yellow of the nucleus of a lemon danish, and I wanted to use him like a filmmaker uses pop songs to siphon off the sentiment of the melody.

A few months after I wrote that section of my book, the singer moved to Los Angeles, to my side of town. And it unthrills me to get to this part of the story, because no one ever wants to use the word *Twitter* when they're talking about love—but I suppose that's the reality of the world today. The singer and I were *Twitter* friends, and within a month of moving to L.A. he messaged me his phone number. So suddenly we were texting friends, and then he asked me out, a whole two weeks in advance (he was out of town at the time). We were going to eat spaghetti and profiteroles at an Italian restaurant on Hillhurst. The spaghetti was his idea, the profiteroles were mine. In hindsight I wish I'd picked a more beautifully named Italian dessert, like *sfogliatella*. *Sfogliatella* is absolutely a word I'm happy to use in any kind of love story.

For the two weeks leading up to our date I slept like hell, I was always hyper. I kept telling everyone, "I had his picture all over my wall in high school!" And then I remembered, "Oh wait—I had his picture on my wall till like *six months ago*." It was spring and I bought a champagne-colored sleeveless silk dress and a pair of ballet flats with spangly silver webbing. I listened to his music all the time and made the songs about me and him, even the ones where he's a moderately remorseful cad trying to let the girl down easy. I loved those two weeks so much. If you ever want to feel pleausurably deranged for a prolonged period, my big recommendation is to get asked out on a date by one of your top three teenhood idols a full 14 days ahead of time.

And I hate getting to this part of the story too because, guess what, our spaghetti date never happened. We'd settled on the day and picked the restaurant, but we never discussed a time. That day came around and he was nowhere; I was too freaked out and shy to try to get in touch with him. When it got to be evening, I gave up and did what I often do when I'm at a loss: walked down to the halfway-decent Thai place in the strip mall by the Burger King, ordered an extravagant rice dish to go, drank a pint of Sapporo while waiting for my food, then walked back home listening to songs that make me feel gloriously sad.

In a week or two he resurfaced and we rescheduled, but that date never happened either. He explained himself and he was sweet about it, and I couldn't hold it against him. He left on tour a couple days later and then moved away from L.A. for good. Maybe I was supposed to feel dumb, but I didn't feel dumb. The situation seemed so unreal, self-judgment was beyond me. Mostly I just hated that our communication was confined to words typed on screens, that the most intimate interaction was a voicemail he left me the morning of our second canceled date. There's a hollowness to that and I still regret it.

"I don't think I could have handled it anyway" was the thing I kept telling everyone after that night, and it's probably true. You probably shouldn't try to date someone who once gave you his autograph when you were a teenager. It's probably impossible to overcome that level of awe, and I'm not even sure I'd ever want to.

All I really wanted, all I hoped to get out of meeting him, was to have some cool lazy hangout that went on till dawn. In my head I saw a little movie of us sitting on the floor of his probably-trashed apartment, listening to a musty old record, our legs lined up and our feet side-by-side, my shiny ballet flats and some checkered Vans for him. Probably he was smoking. Maybe I'd have a drag off his cigarette. Maybe we'd eat ice cream with a knife—something like strawberry Haagen-Dazs or mint chocolate chip, because he is nothing if not classic.

Once the spaghetti guy was out of the picture, I had a hard time listening to his band. "Vivid recollection of disappointment" isn't an emotional experience I seek out in music, so I had to put his songs away for a while. Instead I listened to music I'd discovered through him, like Alex Chilton, whose early solo albums I'd bought a few months earlier. Listening to Alex Chilton let me sustain a sense of connection to him while claiming something for myself, completely separate and insulated from my obsession.

(I also got high on knowing that Alex Chilton and I had the same birthday, and that Alex Chilton passionately believed in astrology—which ultimately meant Alex Chilton and I were cosmically aligned in a way that no other guy could measure up to.)

The album I listened to most was *Bach's Bottom*, which Alex Chilton recorded in 1975, a year after Big Star made *Third/Sister Lovers*. It is not a lovely album; it's got none of the dreamy jangle that bands like Spaghetti Guy's took for themselves. It's a mess and a trainwreck, a magnificent car crash. Of the 15 tracks on *Bach's Bottom*—which is possibly the worst album title of all time—there's a Beatles cover, a Rolling Stones cover, a Seeds cover, some lunatic version of "Summertime Blues." There's a song where Alex sings in a bad Spanish accent and rhymes "wait till mañana" with "Chiquita banana," and a remake of Big Star's "Jesus Christ" that totally obliterates the radiance of the original. There are three different renditions of the same song ("Take Me Home and Make Me Like It"), and each is more falling-apart than the one that came before it.

My favorite track on *Bach's Bottom* is "Take Me Home and Make Me Like It (Version 2)," the most rambling of the three versions. It's seven-minutes-long and it never really goes anywhere: it's Alex Chilton repeating the same ten lines ad infinitum and abusing his guitar, sometimes laughing maniacally or yelling at his band, generally being a beautiful sicko. At first listen, the showstopper lyric is "Call me a slut in front of your family," but my favorite line is the one that goes "Bite my veins, cigarettes and big eyes." I love that lyric because it sounds like something I would have read in a zine by some strange and far-away girl a very long time ago, like 2001. My younger self would have absorbed those words and spent the next few days or weeks being obsessed with that girl and trying to

write like her, wandering around Boston and feeling lit up by this new reality in which you can command someone to bite your veins, cigarettes, and big eyes, and maybe he'll actually do it. That's what I value most about girl poets like Alex Chilton: how something odd and fantastic that never occurred to you before suddenly feels like all you could ever need.

On the AllMusic page for *Bach's Bottom*, the listing of "album moods" includes words like *indulgent*, *reckless*, *druggo*, *sleazy*, *outrageous*, and *bleak*. The review calls it "one of his most willfully difficult and impenetrable records," although that seems imprecise. "Willfully difficult" implies an awareness of the audience, but *Bach's Bottom* feels like Alex Chilton doing whatever he wants at every moment, with zero awareness of anything but his own crazy head. In the case of some other artist you might call that honesty, but *honest* is such a useless word for describing Alex Chilton. It suggests the possibility of dishonesty, and Alex probably couldn't be bothered with the effort required in presenting a more palatable version of himself.

The word *bleak* rings false to me too. Because even though it's all in shambles, there's a joyfulness to *Bach's Bottom* that always saves it from feeling dreary. Some of the joy is in the little pieces of banter that pop between tracks or right in the middle of some songs—like on "Free Again (Version 1)," where Alex scolds his drummer for playing in a humdrum way and then laughs and says, "The shoulders, that's where it lies," drawling it out in his cool Tennessee accent. But for the most part it's in the spirit of the album, the kinetic and volatile energy of someone moving solely by instinct, even if that instinct is destructive. *Bach's Bottom* might be Alex Chilton purposely dismantling the perfectness of Big Star, but it always shakes me up in a way that no other record can.

For a long time *Bach's Bottom* was my world, and I felt proud of myself for falling in love with it. I liked that I'd taken something from a guy I'd gotten all moony over, then eclipsed any association with him and made that thing my own. I believed that I loved Alex Chilton more truly than anyone had loved Alex Chilton before, including every guy who'd started a band that got way more famous than Big Star in their time. It was a very snotty and juvenile way of thinking, and I mean that as a compliment to myself. "Kill Yr Idols" is a concept that leaves me cold, but I do believe in outshining your idols, if it happens naturally and is rooted in love.

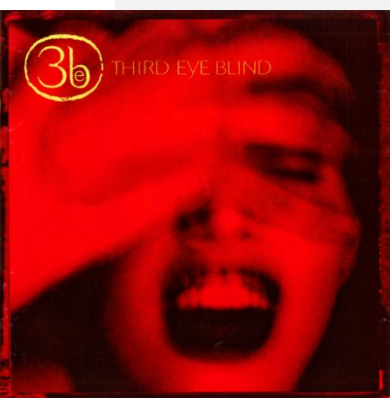
By the end of that spring I felt so deep in harmony with Alex Chilton, I made one of my favorite decisions I've ever made, and got his name tattooed on my left ankle. The tattoo is in black ink, his name spelled out in a swoopy cursive I copied from a free font catalog on the internet. I got it on a Friday afternoon, then went to a diner and bought a piece of olallieberry pie and took the pie with me to the movies. I forgot to get a fork so I ate the pie with my fingers, watching the movie, Alex Chilton's name written on my ankle forever. It was a perfect day, romantic as hell.

When people ask me why I have a tattoo of Alex Chilton's name I usually tell them, "Because Alex Chilton did whatever he felt like, and a lot of it was beautiful." It's an efficient explanation, but the greater truth goes something like: "Because Alex Chilton did whatever he felt like, and a lot of it was beautiful—and even when it was terrible, it was still more alive than almost anything in the world."

I don't know what's happening with my novel now, or what will become of it. But that main character still exists: her name is Sally, and I'll always write about her. Sally's inconveniently tall, she chews her hair when she's nervous, she's the type to ghost a boring party and spend the night listening to David Bowie on headphones in the back of her best friend's car. I used to think I'd give her an Alex Chilton-y boyfriend someday, but I trashed that idea a while back, and only partly because Alex Chilton isn't quite boyfriend material.

Instead I want Sally to move far from home, live with some girls in a disgusting apartment, adopt a hairstyle that she refers to as "new wave cavegirl." She can still sit on front stoops and back porches with pretty boys, sometimes, if she feels like it. But her main preoccupation will be making crazy trouble with her friends—stuff like: graffiti-ing boring old paintings with cheap lipstick, knifing up a fancy gown and spray-painting rude lyrics onto the silk, driving a 1968 Fuji Rabbit through the lobby of a posh hotel, with each moment captured on video or on Kodachrome.

At first that all might look like vandalism but it's not; there's no malice. It's more like messing things up to match the inside of your head, so that for a few seconds—or a few hours, or maybe a few days—everything rearranges itself into something weirder and wilder, for anyone who might want to see the world that way.



Third Eye Blind

Third Eye Blind

04/1997

Elektra

And I Can't Get Enough: Why My Love for Third Eye Blind's Self-Titled Debut Album Goes Deeper Than Bones

Lindsey Hileman

Semi-Charmed Life

Though I can't place the exact moment I heard Third Eye Blind's first single, *Semi-Charmed Life*, I know it entered my consciousness sometime during its early rotation on Bay Area radio stations in the spring of '97. I had been aware of it enough to know that I loved it and to be thrilled when it played as the last song of my eighth grade graduation dance at Miller Junior High. This would be the last song of my last middle school experience. I would exit the cafeteria that had been transformed into some kind of unexplained castle-themed dance floor, to the future, to high school, to some contrived idea of the best years of my life.

"Doot-Doot-Doot...Doot-doot-doo."

I watched Trisha sing along as we were dance-jumping around with our friends. I took in their smiles, their joy, their hope for what lay ahead of us. The most immediate of which was summer break and Trisha's parent's vacation which meant one hell of a party from what I'd been hearing.

"I'm smiling, she's living, she's golden"

The friends who surrounded me probably didn't appreciate the intense subject shrouded beneath the catchy hit song that the D.J. probably chose for this milestone because it ends with *"Gooooooooodbyyyyyyeee!!!"* But I understood.

I was living a semi-charmed kind of life. I was celebrating with people I didn't know all that well. I had only started at Miller Junior High a few weeks before. Facing expulsion from my middle school in an upper-middle-class suburb of Boise, Idaho, my parents withdrew me and sent me to live with my grandparents in San Jose to finish the school year. Trisha was the only person I had known more than a month because she had a half-sister 20 years her senior who was one of my mom's friends from high school. There are a million people in San Jose and I managed to find one I went trick-or-treating with in preschool. And I was thankful for this connection and the fast friendships that came with it.

The educational component of my time at Miller was a formality. With my subpar Idaho public school education, the teachers at Miller had no hope that I would catch up with Cupertino Union School District curriculum. I would be given "A"s as a sort of participation trophy for showing up and not getting kicked out in the last few weeks. But, I mean, who does that anyway?

Oh. Right.

Throughout most of the eighth grade in Idaho, I managed to stay pretty slippery—never exactly getting caught. But teachers and administrators were hearing about me drinking vodka mixed with Crystal Light in class, experimenting with drugs, and narrowly escaping a party that resulted in a barn burning to the ground. As soon as I did something they could make stick, even though it was so close to the end of the year, I was told to leave. I was taking my mulligan pretty early in life. California was my fresh start. I had new friends. I had hope. But I also had old friends, whom I missed and with whom I exchanged letters and poems and pictures, by mail--the 1997 version of the DM.

In the next few months, before I returned to my parents' home in Idaho to start high school, I would explore the neighborhoods in San Jose where my parents grew up, and I would see all my extended family on a regular basis just as I had before we'd moved to Idaho three years earlier. I reconnected with the friends I grew up with in the Santa Cruz mountains and made new friends with whom I bonded during sleepovers where we watched everything from *The Babysitter's Club Movie* to *Rocky Horror Picture Show* to scrambled Cinemax. I would lose my virginity to a 19-year-old junior sheriff and have a second sexual encounter that would take me nearly a year to identify it for what it was: rape. For the first time and only time in my life, I would see a look of disappointment and fear in the eyes of my grandparents when I was brought home in the back of a cop car after sneaking out of the house.

*"I'm scared but I'm not coming down
And I won't run for my life
She's got her jaws just locked now in smile
But nothing is all right "*

Semi-Charmed Life 2:53

Over the next year, Third Eye Blind's self-titled debut album would become the soundtrack for all of my highs and all of my lows. And some of the lows were so plummeting that I've surprised even myself with my abiding love for the album. Of all the feelings that rush through me when I hear the first notes of "Losing a Whole Year," sadness is never one. Nor regret. And, while *"the four right chords can make me cry,"* I've never been afraid of bad memories shaking loose from the melodies or lyrics of this album.

For twenty years I've listened to this record devotedly. I reference lyrics from all 14 tracks like bible verses. In efforts to put my homage into words, I fail to find my own and instead fall back to lyrics from *Self Titled* to describe 3EB's enduring presence and guidance in my life.

"Cause you haunt the nights when I don't know where my life should go."

Good For You 1:17

In 2017, I completed my pilgrimage to Berkeley to see the band perform their debut album in its entirety, as they returned home to San Francisco on the last night of their 20th anniversary Summer Gods Tour. Tears blurred my vision during my favorite song, "I Want You" because, despite my insistent Tweets to the band before the last two shows I'd attended, I'd never heard it live. And I rejoiced in this moment that 20 years of my life and love for this band came together in this religious experience.

If there is a God who doesn't want me to worship false idols, I'm so fucked.

I Want You

It would be impossible to talk about listening to this record and not talk about Patrick, who'd been my on-again-off-again boyfriend (was there any other kind?) since seventh grade. He inspired the Swiftian poetry I composed during my time in California after he told me he started going out with someone else, but we still talked on the phone most nights.

"An open invitation to the dance, happenstance set the vibe that we are in"

I loved this lyric as soon as I heard it because it felt as innocent as where our relationship began, though what brought us together was far from a coincidence. Patrick and I established we liked each other through the usual adolescent channel of my friends and his friends probing each other for information on who the other was into. He was shy and I was cute so when his best friend passed me a note in math asking me out, I said yes to him with my only intent being to get closer Patrick.

Eventually we stopped using other people to spend time together. We didn't hang out together much at school, because middle school. I would hurl insults at him in the hallway and then after school he'd ride his bike to my house or I'd rollerblade to his and we would spend all afternoon talking and holding hands and eventually making out. A lot. We'd sit together in the cold in front of my front door because I only broke the no-friends-in-the-house-when-parents-aren't-home rule when I knew I could get away with it and, by eighth grade, my parents were getting increasingly unpredictable with their arrivals home from work as my behavior resulted in an uptick of phone calls from vice principals and school resource officers. Sometimes we would break up and get back together in one afternoon. He would say something to offend my fragile hormone-fueled emotions and I'd storm inside and lock him out and stand at the window by the door to see if he'd leave. He'd fog the window with his breath and write a cute message and we'd get back together.

We talked about losing our virginity to each other, but I returned from California defiled and ruined. We picked up where we left off as much as we could, and I was able to return to school in Idaho after what still seemed to many a mysterious disappearance the previous year. As we started high school, all the girls figured out how hot Patrick was, and being his girlfriend again restored me from despair and returned some of the confidence that had been stripped away.

We made it through most of freshman year as a couple, until spring when I disappeared even more mysteriously than the year before.

*"I said to live this way is not for the meek
And like a jazz DJ you talk me into sleep
I said there will be no regrets when the worms come
And they will surely come"*
I Want You 3:02

Background

*"And they say where's that crazy girl?
You don't get drunk on red wine and fight no more
'Cause I don't see you anymore,*

Since the hospital"

Background 1:11

Thanks to Grandma and Grandpa, I had procured a one-way ticket to California. This time it was my idea to run away from my troubles which were once again mounting.

Sitting in first period English, probably stoned out of my mind, just a couple of days before my escape, an office aid dropped off a slip of paper requesting that my teacher send me down to the drug and alcohol preventionist counselor. When I entered Sandy's office she started by saying she knew I was leaving, but before I did, she just wanted me to take this little assessment because she worried about me. Thinking there couldn't possibly be any repercussions at my grandparents' house, I answered the questions honestly—disclosing my meth use, the frequency of my drinking, and my general state of mind.

In hindsight, I realize the calls had already been made. I wouldn't be returning to Eagle High School the next day, but not because I would be enrolled at my parents' alma mater, Lynbrook High, around the corner from my grandparents' house.

My mom arrived and checked me out of school for the day. My off-brand DiscMan sat in my lap and "Jumper," "Graduate," "How's It Going To Be," and "Thanks A Lot," blared in my ears while I seethed in the passenger seat of my mom's minivan as she drove me to a mental hospital where I was admitted for chemical dependency. During my intake, no one would give me any clue as to how long I would be there. But I definitely wasn't getting on my flight.

My stay would turn out to be only one week, but every single day, up until my last, my release date was a complete mystery to me. It took almost the entire week to get my call list approved. The first night I was able to, which ended up being my last, I called Patrick. His mom answered and seemed all too happy to tell me he was at the movies with another girl. I was stuck behind passcode protected, heavy metal doors with no one who understood how crushing this was. I felt completely lost and out of control. Patrick had clearly wasted no time moving on. Again.

I returned to school the following week and confronted the girl who stole my boyfriend. I stuffed my hands nervously into the opposite sleeves of my long-sleeved shirt so I could scratch myself until I bled (just as I'd learned from my self-mutilating rehab roommate) while she explained that no one knew where I was and everyone was saying I had moved back to California. Nineteen years later there is still a little strip of skin on my right wrist that is a slightly different texture than the skin around it and a spot on the back of my left hand that turns purple when I'm cold.

"I felt you long after we were through. When we were through."

Narcolepsy

In the weeks after my discharge from the hospital, I was still cut off from most of the world due to being super fucking grounded. No friends, no TV, I was only allowed to listen to music and be on the computer because, in 1998, we still didn't have internet at home, so a computer didn't mean unlimited access to everything on the planet. It meant playing solitaire and Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego and looking through Encyclopedia Britannica on CD-ROM while listening to Third Eye Blind on repeat. I guess if you really think about it, I actually did have the whole world at my fingertips.

*"And there's a demon in my head who starts to play
A nightmare tape loop of what went wrong yesterday
And I hold my breath 'til it's more than I can take
And I close my eyes and dream that I'm awake"*
Narcolepsy 1:39

If there had been a single lyric or a single note of a song on that album I hadn't memorized in the previous year, in those weeks after the hospital, every bit of that record became etched into my bones.

I selfishly assigned whatever meaning I needed to the words of Stephan Jenkins to get me through every hard time that followed. Starting with my code name for Patrick's new girlfriend: "London," referring track 10, which is jealousy and bitterness set to music.

As I moved onto other relationships, there was no suppressing how damaged I was. When my usual chaos levels spiraled into a near psychotic break:

*"Maybe you thought I'd call
Instead of crashing down your hall"*
Burning Man 0:25

For years to come, I would ask myself *"How's It Going to Be"* at the end of so many meaningful relationships, though I knew exactly how it was going to be from doing it so many times before.

God of Wine

By the middle of my sophomore year, my life had calmed enough to resemble a normal high school student's, but many people knew my story. It was hard to ignore in a small town, and to my knowledge, I was the only kid on the debate team who had been to rehab. This was made slightly less scandalous by the fact that my policy debate partner and BFF had her first baby at the end of freshman year. *"My people are the misfits"* (bonus *"Out of the Vein"* reference).

"You let me down, I said it, now I'm going down, and you're not even around"

In the first several weeks after the hospital, these lyrics spoke to the loneliness of losing friends and the abandonment I felt getting ditched by a boyfriend who, after two years, I needed more than ever. Such a good boy despite my bad behavior, he promised to remain my friend and help keep me out of trouble. But within weeks, he succumbed to the peer pressure of people he had never given a shit about before and started down his own destructive path.

Before long, I realized just how precisely *"God of Wine"* told my story.

The summer after sophomore year, while listening to *"God of Wine"* with one of my closest platonic guy friends who was as straight-edge as they come, he told me, *"This is your song."* The way I felt in that moment? I was proud. I was humbled. Whenever I share my love of Third Eye Blind with someone, I feel as though I'm scraping off a bit of my soul to leave with them, but I hadn't realized how meaningful it would be to be a part of someone else's Third Eye Blind experience. I would understand a short time later how much more this meant to him when he drove me home and seemed to want to linger when we reached my house. *"Why not us?"* he asked me. But he knew the answer. I kissed

him softly but quickly and with sadness. It would be a long time before I could fathom deserving someone so undamaged.

*"Searching for something
I could never give you
And there's someone who
understands you more than I do
A sadness I can't erase
All alone on your face"*

God Of Wine 4:22

Motorcycle Drive By

While there are some 3EB lyrics and songs attached to very specific memories, "Motorcycle Drive By" is the one that just consistently reminds me to live. It shows me new beginnings in every ending that I'm tempted to wallow in. I've turned to this song at the end of romances; I've mourned fizzled friendships and younger more carefree and promising versions of myself that have been lost to time. It is my constant reminder that life goes on.

*"And there's this burning
Like there's always been
I've never been so alone
And I've never been so alive"*

Motorcycle Drive By 0:43 and 1:50 and again at 3:10 like he goddamn means it.

My whole life, I've battled an obsession with how others will remember the moments I experience with them. I have sometimes felt that my most cherished moments don't matter if the people I experienced them with don't remember them or remember me.

In November 2017, I decided to splurge on a VIP ticket to a 3EB show and travel 5 hours to Salt Lake City, alone, to do a meet and greet with the band. In an effort to not be an annoying fangirl, I played it too cool and came off as totally unimpressed and underwhelmed when I met Stephan Jenkins and Brad Hargreaves. I spent the next six days obsessing about how I blew my chance to impress upon them who they are to me. The next weekend I went to their concert in Boise and got a chance to meet them again after the show. I quickly gushed my regrets to Stephan and told him that everything he did was so important to me, to which he replied that it was important to him too and wrapped me into a hug that healed me. Brad assured me that they were all totally awkward people and to think nothing of the past weekend's faux pas. I suspect they'd already forgotten me in the past six days and have probably forgotten me again. But I am trying to be zen about how alive I was in those moments. And that can be enough for me.

But still.

"I hope you take a piece of me with you."



Beyoncé

Lemonade

04/2016

Parkwood / Columbia

Lemonade

Mara A. Cohen

While Beyoncé was secretly recording what would become her sixth consecutive number-one album, *Lemonade*, I was making a secret recording of my own—nearly 10 minutes of my husband raging at me as he drove us home from couples counseling, the engine revving in the background, me repeating, “I’m sorry, so sorry,” and begging him to slow down.

Afterward, I locked my bathroom door and replayed my recording, becoming shell-shocked and sick to my stomach as I heard pieces of my spirit stolen with each word he screamed. That night wasn’t the first time I’d experienced my husband’s explosive anger—just the first time I’d caught it on tape. His rage blindsides me every time, leaving me hopeless, heartbroken, frustrated. Afraid. His rage numbs me. Leaves me dazed. Strangely, his rage never unleashes my own anger. But what if it had been my daughter begging “sorry” in a lover’s passenger seat? For her, my anger would come easily.

Was that how it was for Solange Knowles, Beyoncé’s little sister—that time in the elevator when she punched her philandering brother-in-law Shawn Carter/Jay Z in the face? Maybe that display of raw anger surged Beyoncé’s artistic juices to start flowing, yielding the top-selling album on the planet the year it was released.

Lemonade started streaming when I was thirsting for change, and it quickly shot to the top of my personal playlist. After two decades of my husband telling me he loves me but communicating the opposite, I’d finally demanded he get help to stop his verbal abuse, even threatening divorce if he failed to follow through.

I wanted evidence he was capable of a relationship based on mutual empathy and respect, not power and control. I understood change wouldn’t come all at once and might not come at all. While I was waiting and watching and quietly avoiding my husband, I couldn’t get enough *Lemonade*.

It poured from the speakers in my bathroom as I stepped out of the shower. It flowed as I dressed and left my wedding band to the side. A *Lemonade* tide pushed my mom-car through LA traffic—to the meeting with the divorce attorney, the real estate broker, the financial advisor. Even my rabbi for counsel and in case I’d need a trustworthy witness later on

My car windows sealed tight, I cranked up Beyoncé’s scream, “Who the fuck do you think I is? You ain’t married to no average bitch, boy!” then dialed it louder still for my favorite part when her voice frays Janis Joplin-style, “When you hurt me, you hurt yourself! Don’t hurt yourself!” I summoned my inner diva when she declares her resilience, “I am the dragon breathing fire, beautiful mane, I’m the lion.” I fed on her fury when she warns, “If you try this shit again, you gon’ lose your wife.” When the music stopped, the thought of tearing apart my family threatened to paralyze me. Then I’d press “play” so *Lemonade* could rain down on me again.

Her husband’s infidelity made Beyoncé regret the “night I put that ring on.” My husband wasn’t cheating, but it was a sentiment to which I could relate. I’d blindly assumed that as husband and wife we shared goodwill for one another. When the tone of his voice or his words I could now replay or the look on his face said he saw me as his rival and not his

beloved, it felt like betrayal. When accusation and denial rolled off his tongue while empathy was withheld, when he closed the door to understanding and intimacy by refusing to discuss a problem, it felt all like betrayal. Behaving with hostility instead of goodwill is “a wicked way to treat the girl that loves you.”

His weren't the lies or distortions of a stranger I could easily dismiss. I swallowed his shouted untruths about me, which led me to apologize constantly, reflexively—as I had that night in the passenger seat. So when Beyoncé proclaims herself so *not* sorry—“no, no, hell nah!”—I lapped it up, along with the refrain—“Middle fingers up, put them hands high. Wave it in his face. Tell him, boy, bye.” At night I laid awake worrying about custody hearings, but come daytime Beyoncé reassured me about what I couldn't fully believe, “Me and my baby, we gon' be alright, we gon' live a good life.”

I sipped *Lemonade* with intention, cultivating the mobilizing emotion of anger I'd lacked. While my husband read about verbal abuse, got therapy and practiced the art of respectful conversation, I refused to play cheerleader. I was in no mood to congratulate him for doing what he should have been doing all along. “All the loving I've been giving goes unnoticed. It's just floating in the air, lookie there.” It was his turn to be the giver.

My new tough-girl routine was part bluster, but *Lemonade* made me feel like that was okay. Instead of a facile storyline that begins with betrayal and ends with divorce, the album features “the baddest woman in the game” grappling with vulnerability, ambivalence and uncertainty—as when she snarls about a hardworking woman in 6-inch heels who doesn't need a man's financial support, and then lets her voice break, “Come back, come back, come back.” Or on “Sandcastles” when she dangles a double negative that leaves open the possibility of reconciliation: “I know I promised that I couldn't stay, baby. Every promise don't work out that way.”

My secret recording of my husband going berserk behind the wheel plays in the background of my memory while I listen to new words. I hear my own voice quietly insisting that a simple expression of concern from him—even just “I'm sorry”—would be everything. In the midst of his rage, I was trying to make him understand we could have a love that is intimate, fun, sexy and inspiring—a love that could “move mountains” as Beyoncé sings on “Love Drought.” But my husband couldn't hear me. He was too consumed with his need to dominate and control. For now, my husband seems intent to “put his best foot first” as James Blake sings on “Forward.” Time will tell.

By the time *Lemonade* comes around to “All Night,” Beyoncé resolves to “Give you some time to prove I can trust you again.” But the song ends with the future in doubt.

I listened to *Lemonade* the other day. It had been awhile since I'd played the album all the way through from start to finish. Now I have a new favorite moment. It comes between tracks when Beyoncé's daughter exclaims, “Good job, B!” and Beyoncé laughs that laugh that lets me know I'll be okay no matter how the story ends.



Elliott Smith

Roman Candle

07/1994

Cavity Search

A Head Full of Flames: Elliott Smith's *Roman Candle*

Melissa Brooks

"You don't know Elliott Smith? Damn! Give me your iPod," my high school crush demanded one afternoon in my parents' basement. I handed it over and he plugged it into the sleek Apple laptop he carried with him everywhere. He soon transferred Elliott's entire discography to my device. Much like Elliott, he was a musical prodigy, possessing an ability to pick up most any instrument and best other musicians who'd been playing for years. My musical naiveté would have appalled him if he didn't enjoy educating me so much.

"We'll start from the beginning," he said. "*Roman Candle*."

It was 2005, more than a decade after *Roman Candle*'s release. The album was and is unabashedly simple, recorded in then-girlfriend JJ Gonson's basement. Most of the songs feature only Elliott accompanying his own soft vocals on acoustic guitar. Elliott's biographer William Todd Schultz aptly portrays the album "as a guy jamming with himself" and "totally low-key and casual, almost ridiculously low-fi."¹

My crush and I laid on the floor, heads close but hands folded safely on our stomachs. Fevered, even anxious strumming reverberated against the concrete walls, soon followed by a voice more ethereal than any I'd ever heard.

*He could be cool and cruel to you and me
Knew we'd put up with anything
I want to hurt him
I want to give him pain
I'm a roman candle
My head is full of flames.*

I was struck by the pain Elliott's voice betrayed. These were not just hollow lyrics churned out by some slick producer to pawn off on any mediocre pop star in need of a new hit song; these were seemingly autobiographical, depicting real anger and frustration. Or if they weren't, he did a damn good job convincing me otherwise.

According to Schultz, Elliott didn't want to be known as the "lugubrious singer songwriter," but it's hard to think of him any other way, with lyrics spilling broken relationships, heroin addiction, daydreams of suicide.² His depression was the hallmark of both his life and music. At seventeen, I possessed a disposition mingling bitterness with skepticism, and so I believed I knew just how Elliott felt trying to contain a head full of flames. At times, it was all I could do to not be vicious to my family, my peers, my teachers, surliness being a primary symptom of my acute seventeen-year-old-ness.

As the guitar continued its fevered pulse, screeching with each chord transition as though racing to the song's finish line, my eyes grew watery. "God. It's so fucking sad."

¹ *Torment Saint*, p. 161, 151

² *Torment Saint*, p. 20

"I know! It's about his dad. He was abusive," my crush chirped like it was a fun fact.

I was impressed—both by his apparent knowledge of talented, gut-wrenching musicians, and of the hardship Elliott endured. It wasn't until later that I'd learn *Roman Candle's* title song is not about Elliott's father but more likely his stepfather, Charlie Welch, with whom he had a notoriously tense relationship.

As the somewhat cheerier-sounding (if not in lyrics, then melody) "Condor Avenue" began, my crush leaned over me, face hovering a foot above mine. He hovered a little too long and I grew uncomfortable, worried about the way my face looked up close. The basement was dim but still light enough to see any glaring imperfections—a newborn pimple, chickenpox scars, the bristly little hairs determined to make my eyebrows return to their formerly bushy state. This was why intimate interactions were supposed to take place in the dark.

"I like you," he finally said.

My face burned. I wondered if he could see the blood rushing to my cheeks, igniting my skin. "I like you, too," I said. Then he kissed me. In the background Elliott mumbled in that earnest, broken voice, as though portending the future of our relationship.

*You never said a word to me about what passed between us
So now I'm leaving you alone
You can do whatever the hell you want to.*

My crush pulled up concert footage of Elliott on his Mac. I'd never seen him before. Everything about him was long—nose, cheeks, chin, limbs, spirit. His dark hair was brushed across his forehead to obscure his face. He looked so timid, scrunching up his oversized body as though to make it smaller, to disappear right into the stool.

"You'll like this," my crush said. "He opens with 'No Name #4.' It's about his mom, you know. Hoping she'd leave his dad." Pure speculation posing as fact, as I'd come to learn was his *modus operandi*.

Like "Condor Avenue," another peppy acoustic intro collided with incongruous lyrics:

*For a change she got out before he hurt her bad
Took her records and clothes
And pictures of her boy
It really made her sad.*

Maybe it was the vulnerability that made Elliott seem so damn honest and even admirable, singing about his anxieties and fears despite being clearly afraid to do so—something I didn't know how to do. Underneath his skin I imagined a tumultuous sea he was trying his hardest to contain. Or better yet, lapping flames, like if you peeled back his skin, you really would expose a burning roman candle underneath.

"He's beautiful," I said.

"You're kidding, right? He has a horse face."

"He just seems so open up there, so candid. I believe every word he's singing."

"He killed himself, you know. With a butter knife." He said it so nonchalantly, almost with glee, not necessarily with the tragedies marring Elliott's short-lived life, but with himself for knowing about them.

We sat in a canoe, floating in the middle of the lake down the street from my crush's house. In his arms he cradled a guitar.

"What do you want to hear?" he said as he finished tuning. It was something he'd done before, paddling out to the middle of the lake with his acoustic guitar, banjo, or ukulele in tow, depending on what sound he was in the mood for that day. I'd never done anything like it.

"Last Call," I said eagerly. It was the second to last track on *Roman Candle*, one of the album's best numbers and most refined. As Schultz wrote, "'Last Call' is a grenade, by far the most musically sophisticated song on the record ... It shifts out of under-produced gear, pointing toward a sound more heterogeneous, one to be found on later records, the whispers of the other *Roman Candle* tunes replaced—gradually, as the song progresses—by barely suppressed shouting."³

And yet, my crush was not impressed. "Ugh, why?"

"I thought you liked that song."

He shrugged. "It's okay, I guess. He has better songs."

"Well, you can play whatever you want."

But he played it anyway.

*You can't ask for more ask for more
Knowing you'll never get that which you ask for
So you cast your shadow everywhere like the man in the moon
You start to drink and just want to continue.*

He fingerpicked it to perfection, just like Elliott. Unlike Elliott, his voice was an atonal warble, wailing to reach the high notes—much more akin to Bob Dylan. Still he transfixed me, his voice booming without a hint of self-consciousness. He didn't give a damn about the other people in row boats, paddle boats, anchored speed boats. He became my very own Elliott, minus the timidity.

But he wrapped up the song wrong. Elliott repeats the line, "I wanted her to tell me that she would never wake me," eight times. But my crush cut it off at four and I told him so.

He glared at me. "It doesn't matter," he said. "You know that right?"

We sat in uncomfortably oppressive silence. We never managed to find the soothing kind, like when you're completely at ease with someone.

"He tried to kill himself before he killed himself, you know," he finally said, filling the void once again with Elliott trivia.

"What did he do?"

³ *Torment Saint*, p. 163

"Ran off a cliff."

"How did he survive?"

"Landed in a tree."

"Huh. If I ever killed myself, I figured I'd lock myself in the garage and start the car. Or maybe drive to a hilltop and plug up the exhaust. That would be peaceful, I think, looking down at the glowing city one last time as I fade away."

"You're fucking weird," he said.

Toward the end, he criticized me for playing *Roman Candle* so much. "He has other albums you know. This isn't even his best one. You should listen to *XO*. Or *Basement on a Hill*. Even *Elliott Smith*. Pretty much any album is better than this one. *Roman Candle's* so fucking simple."

"I like how simple it is."

"You don't know what you're talking about," he said. "*Roman Candle* doesn't do his musical genius justice. He didn't even mean to release it. Do you know that on all his other records, he played pretty much every instrument?"

"The raw beauty of his voice gets buried under all those other sounds. On *Roman Candle*, you can hear each guitar string echo and amplify his voice. His voice is so beautiful, it reminds me of heaven."

He snorted. "Heaven?"

"Well ... yeah." The blood rushed to my cheeks again, and not in the pleasant, tingling way like when he first kissed me. In the way that made me feel so hot I thought I would vomit. "It's just ethereal. When I listen to him, I feel like he lifts me out of this shithole into some other world. And maybe it's just another dark, sad world, but it's more beautiful and comforting than this one, because he's there."

"What the fuck does ethereal mean?"

I sighed. "Never mind."

He told me there used to be a "spark." He threw up his fingers to mime an explosion. It seemed the spark had run away somewhere. I wondered where it went and wished it had thought to bring me along.

After he left I played the album's last track, "Kiwi Maddog 20/20." An entirely instrumental number that, unlike the rest of the album, features percussion. It has an upbeat, almost poppy lilt to it that comforted me.

I lay on the floor with my hands crossed on my belly. I imagined what it would be like if Elliott materialized in my parents' basement. He'd understand better than anyone the feelings of loneliness and bitterness over someone who could give and take love so callously. He'd take that pain and turn it into something beautiful with the sheer force of his vocal folds.

Perhaps better than anyone, Elliott vocalized the flames I felt lapping beneath my skin in a way I never could, too afraid of what might happen should I unpeel my skin to reveal my own anxieties. Listening to Elliott allowed me to unleash those flames so that they might not burn me from the inside out, like they did him. While his music often calls to mind teenage angst, his talent is potent, undeniable, and it resonates with me to this day. Even in his death, he provides comfort when everything becomes too much, helping me remember, even appreciate, the beauty that vulnerability can contain.



The Mars Volta

De-Loused in the Comatorium

06/2003

Universal

De-Loused in the Pizzeria

Kevin D. Woodall

hurry the call comes
the craft does not multiply
lone pilot the mission demands
to a decrepit shell of a once-home

slip through to the manupod
a delivery of cruel importance
loaded weapon of greased indulgence
the caveat spoke a debt must be paid

pink eye glaring on the scorched road
the manupod clips through that blackened vein
dives through the veil
breaks through the countdown *tickticktick*

ascend the dirt tower
green twitches yellow twitches red
respiration of dead movement
infra recon regrets its regrets

felled down the crawl slogs
railroad junction burps exoskeletal husks
delayed nervous patter the pilot drums
yearning burning waiting decaying

cryostasis hibernates the pilot
junction tremulant echoes prayers gone
talking in his sleep (again)
he's been waiting for so long

pilot pushes penance propulsion
cutting a gallant swath
ripe air pungent meat scent gasps
if you only knew the plans they had for us

incise the speed of sight
urgent driving cry for release
the debt to be collected
time drug through the ashen lake

dead field twists in sickly searing wind
once-home the temple hollow hole
ectopic revenant rasps pleading
can you cure us of our fate?

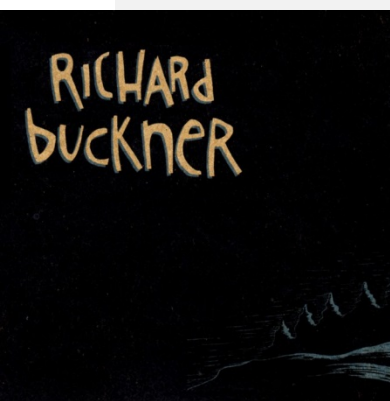
how came he here
corset-clad paleskin stretched
hunger marks memories graven
revenant reaches grasps pleads

triple pineapple croaks leathervoice
destiny brings pilot in his crescent manupod
this prison chains me they watch
pilot counts the agreed sum unhearing

manupod takes flight
a wormhole unseen to unseeing eyes
he finds the fringe
the televator awaits his hobbled heart

inbound transmission bleats where are you now
pilot switches apparatus inert
sound bath de-lousing a reverie long-revered
now he is lost

In the late summer/early fall of 2003 I was starting my freshman year at college. Over the next year I spent most of my evenings and nights driving at reckless speeds while delivering pizzas throughout Riverside, California to help pay for school. My relentless, unyielding soundtrack for most of that time was The Mars Volta's *De-Loused in the Comatorium*, an appropriately surreal accompaniment for what would turn out to be an incredibly surreal period of my life.



Richard Buckner

The Hill

2000

Overcoat Recordings

Excavations: On Richard Buckner's *The Hill*

Matthew Woodman

"My boy, wherever you are,
Work for your soul's sake,
That all the clay of you, all the dross of you,
May yield to the fire of you"

--"Emily Sparks" from Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*

On January 18, 1870, Matthew Woodman, under contract for the burning of ironstone, died when the rope connecting the wagon train snapped, leaving cars to careen down the quarry before toppling near the kiln bank and burying him beneath the grey fleshly cleaved rubble. Such a cloud of dust. Such fractured veins. Such banded ferruginous sediment.

In 1996, Richard Buckner was traveling to Tucson to record *Devotion & Doubt*.

"down this stretch of 99
that takes so many lives
one of them was mine
hand me that lil wallet picture
in 1985 one more time"

Is this the same Highway 99 that stretches from Bakersfield to Chico? That stitches Mettler to McFarland? Tulare to Turlock? The garage in which Buckner stopped had been converted to The Ranch Olancha Motel, near the entrance to Death Valley, between Lone Pine and Dunmovin. The motel room had no phone, no television. With his guitar, a four-track recorder, and a copy of Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, Buckner spent a week giving voice to and recording the poems on a cassette that he then interred in his truck for four years until, fortuitously, an exhumation. How does one come to be haunted? What stirs the murk that churns between our ears, behind our eyes, beneath our feet? How to inhabit, aspirate the page, the mind that preceded the line, the life before that?

In 1683, Matthew Woodman, a former rector at Slinfold who was ejected in 1557 for religious nonconformity—the Corporation Act having driven him out—but who had continued preaching *gratis*, took his final breath, leaving behind over 400 books, a miraculous accumulation of verbs and nouns. Woodman was considered a fragrant presence even in absentia.

In 1914-1915, Edgar Lee Masters—under the pseudonym Webster Ford—published in the literary magazine *Reedy's Mirror* what later would appear as *Spoon River Anthology*. Each entry appears in the form of an epitaph of a former citizen of the fictional Spoon River, a lightly fictionalized version of two actual Illinois towns: Petersburg and Lewistown. In Masters's telling, each denizen has become defined, condensed, distilled by unresolved trauma, by psychic scars of what others did or did not do. What he, she, or they allowed or precluded. Tom Merrit's murder at the hands of the adulterous Elmer Karr. Julia

Miller's suicide after having entered a marriage of convenience meant to legitimize her pregnancy. Death an eternity of entangled resentments. One can take a self-guided walking tour of The Oak Hill Cemetery in Lewistown to witness the graves that inspired Masters, to circuit the grey stations of declaration, the headstones still above the shorn lawn.

On February 22, 2013, Matthew Woodman, a longtime resident of Sanford who worked in the family motorcycle business, died in Burlington following a short illness. Woodman seemed to be born with an encyclopedic mechanical understanding he manifested working on a wide variety of motorcycles and other iron-alloyed transportation vehicles. When it came to the inexplicable and random, Woodman would find the solution, and if one couldn't be found, he would create one.

In 2000, Richard Buckner gathered the musicians Joey Burns on cello and Arco bass and John Convertino on percussion to help him summon 18 voices from *Spoon River Anthology* to create *The Hill* (released on Overcoat/Convent Records). Though Buckner sequenced the cd as one 34-minute track, *The Hill* alternates nine instrumental performances with nine vocals, the near a cappella "Ollie McGee" as a particularly haunting track, Buckner's voice trembling: "In death, therefore, I am avenged." Sonically, so many of the songs seem soaked in venomous, serpentine snares, the trance drone of locusts, and guttural squeals of small creatures suffocating in coils. These oppressive cycles and repetitions of dissonance and chord progressions shatter or open or clear when Buckner's voice releases "Ruben Pantier"—"The eternal silence of you spoke instead"—and "William and Emily": "There is something about Death / like love itself!" Whatever we read has already happened. The voice emanating from our speakers is a sequence of ones and zeros, a grooved spiral etched in vinyl, freed by needle. We experience the past. We cannot know the present.

On November 5, 1999, Bonfire Night, fourteen-year-old Matthew Woodman was playing with friends on the gates at the Stokes and Parry sheet metal factory in Kelsey Close, Attleborough, suspending himself with one hand and then the other to feel the pull of gravity, when one of the gate arms sheared in half—for given time, oxygen, and moisture, any iron body will eventually corrode to rust and disintegrate—and a metal spike pierced his skull. Woodman died at the George Eliot Hospital, his organs donated, distributed, released, bequeathed for transplants, for bodies needing to breathe, to filter toxins, to see.

On February 18, 2017 Richard Buckner, traveling a West Coast Living Room Tour, stopped at the home of Matthew Woodman, signing *The Hill* in silver ink against matte black.



Madonna

Like a Prayer

03/1989

Sire / Warner Bros.

Now I'm Dancing...

Ingrid Calderon

It was 1989.

I was 10 years old.

The year a fated motorcycle accident left me fastened to a Queen bed inside my faux-grandfather's house. We'd ended up there, after a long search for sanctuary. He'd take me on long drives to record-stores, where he'd put 10 dollars in my hand and set me loose.

He was a memento of cleanliness and purity.

An Angel from New Mexico.

Godsend.

It was the tail end of a decade, and religion played its choir in my ears every Sunday.

Church was a clinic.

Full of the broken and the sick.

Of paralyzed integrity.

Of self-awareness gone aslant.

There were long hallways, and forced white baptisms. Holy garments and the revelation of impermanence.

Rooms imbedded with paintings of a domineering robed man with kind eyes. A looker.

A podium of bathed, plucked and well-dressed humans probing you with gentle reminders of God's boundless love.

Back home, funeral plots were bought.

I had a secure place to rest my rotting flesh, but no security for college.

You must remember, the future is unstable in Civil Wars. Even after you arrive at the refugee camp of safety, you must remain wary. You must plan for death, not life.

That is the word of God. The God we'd been introduced to.

The word of sacred buildings and hymns.

Of white Wonder bread offerings of Holy flesh, and small plastic Sacrament cups holding faucet water mirroring blood.

Of young beautiful missionaries with young erections in their slacks.

There was an alcoholic father and a submissive mother.

There were uncomfortable Christmas dinners where I was coerced to give blessings to the food.

There were birthday parties I'd spend inside my room, while the rest of the house waxed into an impregnated array of family and supposed friends.

There were unnecessary beatings and a screaming that echoed long after the fireplace went out.

There were nightly masturbatory sessions under clean sheets to mimic long-ago desecration.

Midnight park traumas and a plethora of shit that made no sense.

My mind felt fucked.

Dark.

Rebellious.

At church, which was a part-time job for everyone involved, I partook in what, looking back now, looks and feels like

a crude science experiment of clumsy hands. Two young tattered girls, crammed into white walls and secret closets. We repeated these clumsy hand experiments on each other based on what we'd learned. I forget her name now, but she was my only friend in church.

We were learning to work in harmony and to strengthen our faith in Jesus Christ. To prepare to stand for truth and righteousness. To "arise and shine forth". To abide. To not question. To repent.

Back in congregation, we'd stare at each other as we sang in harmony with the organ. Held hands.

In private, we'd kiss and exchange bacteria till we were immune. We healed the only way we knew how. Through repetition.

Back home, in moments of calm, I'd take out my Walkman and listen to "Like a Prayer" by Madonna, a purchase supplied by grandpa on those record-store outings.

I had been captivated by her essence since 5 years-old, when I had heard her in the bosom of artillery. In faraway beds. In a place where the only language I knew was Spanish.

Now, I understood her. Now I could sing along without being teased. Now I understood.

I enjoyed her face, her teeth, her hair, her voice, her sex. This album had all the markings of my soul.

Her bare tummy, the crucifixes, her unbuttoned jeans, her crotch, her regalia.

Like a Prayer.

Yes.

Like a FUCKING PRAYER!

I had been praying for so long, unanswered.

Praying for so so long, unanswered.

I had so many questions.

They had promised at those Sunday concerts that Jesus Christ would answer. That all you had to do was listen.

So I listened, and listened, and listened, and listened, and listened.

Nothing.

It was always nothing.

His silence hummed and mocked.

A silence that eventually would turn to static.

When the opening track pumped in my ears, she answered.

She indulged me and listened to my prayers.

She answered questions I'd never asked.

She began a healing that continues.

A healing that comes of innocence restored.

Like a Prayer

"Life is a mystery, everyone must stand alone..." she purred.

"In the midnight hour I can feel your power..." she groaned.

Express Yourself

"Come on girls

Do you believe in love?

'Cause I've got something to sing about it,

And it goes something like this..." she proclaimed.

Oh Father

"It's funny that way, you can get used

To the tears and the pain

What a child will believe

You never loved me..." she wept.

By the end of the album, in "Act of Contrition", her voice is that of mockery. She was mocking back. The distorted guitars trailed her like ghosts. She was now, off of the cross, bloodied, laughing and demanding answers.

"Oh my God,

I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee

*And I detest all my sins because of Thy just punishment
But most of all,
because my God,
I have offended Thee
Who art all good
Like I knew you would
And deserving of all my love
I reserve, I reserve, I reserve
I reserve, I resolve
I have a reservation
I have a reservation!
What do you mean it's not in the computer..."*

I never went back to church after listening to this album repeatedly. I never saw my friend again. I just made sure I kept my Walkman at arm's length, in case the silence and empty came back to plague me. Not much has changed in that regard. I keep my iPhone close and subscribe to Spotify. Now the healing is a playlist I've conjured up at 3 a.m. & of course Madonna almost always snakes her way in.

DONNY HATHAWAY
EXTENSION OF A MAN



Donny Hathaway

Extension of a Man

06/1973

Atco

Extensions of a Man (for Donny Hathaway)

Cory W. Lovell

Like a boy on a farm staring at a single prop flyer in the sky, "I want to be up there, I want to do those things."

I've already fucked up enough that was good, like any young fella would, in his reckless rake days.

I hauled my old life out to the curb, on a foggy night, air rich with salt, and hopped the surfliner to sunset, click clacking through nowhere as the good Lord pelted the lounge car with buckshot, lightning frightening wide eyed cattle, knowing I wasn't wrong, just grossly unprepared.

After eight years in California my first thought upon departing was The Beach Boys are full of shit.

My island nation is not a power in decline, reckless and inflammatory, but on a straight path towards its prime, collected and seeking.

Sometimes repeat spins of Maggot Brain and apple cider vinegar shots are the only way to get out of bed in the morning, cayenne pepper and lemon juice burning my throat as Eddie Hazel shrieks solos like his momma just died.

I haven't felt knife sharp on a Saturday night since I screwed the cap on and walked away, it leaves me looking for a joke to crack or a bottle rocket to spark, but if these never present themselves, look past the boredom, babe, please, and know I'm just trying to be a man you might understand.

Teeth chattering inside my own insecurities, panic attacks instigating the endless permutations of abandonment, somehow, someday, you might not want me anymore.

There are bad people out there and sometimes you think maybe you can trust them.

Any student of history will agree, for how far our society has progressed, the idea of an individualistic American life has actually become more strangling, myopic, and sad.

I feel old fashioned in my expectations of my fellow men, who keep themselves busy with selfies and copped attitudes, while never bothering to learn self-sufficiency, or, at least, to shut the fuck up every once in a while.

Subtlety and stamina make up the metamorphic stone, hard pressed by circumstance and strife into a smooth, sparkling strata of survival called swagger.

Understanding the anguish, if not the indulgence, in my father's repeated words; "I can't keep up, keep chasing after it, doing a job I can sign my name to, sacrificing for security while the rest of America is at the mall."

Wondering whether we'll weather the peaks and troughs of my paternal middle initial, the way we Wells tend to wither into old dogs, wild and worn.

That's my end game, to just be a man, in my minor American life, a little closer to the moon each night, a little more awake come morning.

Choosing to keep living, choosing to keep trying, choosing to keep making art, choosing to keep living here, choosing to keep waking up, choosing to keep feeding myself, choosing to keep trying to not be my father, choosing to keep trusting people.

It's a collection of constant little disciplines that accumulate to make up a man; a consistent effort to be good, to grow better at love, at patience, at commitment and recommitment to ideals and reformations.

The sun rises, I get up, I repeat, like instructions on the side of a sad shampoo bottle.

After ditching the sauce, after breaking down my patterns, after forgiving the grudges, after losing the weight, after writing the books, after reading the books, after isolating myself, after opening myself back up again, after doing the work.

I'll try and keep my nose clean.

I sing at the kitchen sink, behind the lawn mower, on hands and knees scrubbing hardwood floor and tile, each and every day, shirt off, hair scuffed, doing my own work, to make my scales squeaky clean in the eyes of a God, who if indeed does bear an image akin to me and mine, must love rock n roll as much as I do.

How many times do I lather, rinse, repeat in this endless cycle of unnecessary cleansing?

There is no vacation from growing up, though I've seen a good many people try, medicating the frustration of slow progress with sex and booze and irrelevancy, I even tried it myself and it felt like heart rot, the condition that can kill a sequoia, whose rings pile on year after year until they live 200 of our paltry human lives, as long as they keep trying.

Like a gutter punk Capra, realizing my era of cynical idealism has long since passed, retreating from the public eye to find a new method for my madness.

Don't hold on to this Werther's Original tin full of stickers, patches, and pins that have never found their proper place, it's finally time to piece this slapdash accumulation into an existence.

I understand what Alex meant when he said, "Nothing can hurt me", and drove off in his big black car, the solemn liberation of stoicism and remove when you give up on everything you have nothing to lose.

Psychospiritual Ascension is painful and confusing and complicated.

My greatest friend and most treacherous adversary is time, how much of it I have, what I do with it, what state it sees me in when I begin to share it with another.

They sat there, opposing one another, competing for the lunar light, hiding and spilling out over long stretched moments of massive distance, polarizing spirits hitting a little too close to home.

I'll get right with the Lord before I go, a viatic settlement of the soul, to ensure that some part of me becomes something else, if even just a memory or a mushroom or collection of musty, yellowed pages in the discount bin of Green Apple books.

My messiah's named James, a Jesus of cool, elements of Baldwin, Booker, Dean, and Stewart, smoking and preaching on a corner barstool.

I used to dwell on the past, rewrite it in my mind, tormenting myself with the red pen edits that stood in opposition to temporal physics, then the future became my source of strife, what will be, what must change, Petty's simple admission 'Most things I worry about never happen anyways,' and so I'm left with the constant effort of drawing back to Now, to all that Is, to who I Am.

The part of death I find myself preparing for most of all is the dissolution of the concept of time as we know it here on modern Earth, every millisecond accounted for and named, when I'm fairly certain the moment the inertia of my soul proceeds past this body, time, much like space, will become far less linear and structured.

Yet another way to perceive, the phases of the moon,
the surging and receding tides, the fertility of her,
the maturation of him,
and still the knowing behind dark clouds.

I hope when all is finally writ, large and small, fine hand and chicken scrawl, that my life will end like a good old Gershwin song; glittering crescendos, a comforting coda, meandering, rich, and long.

Like a summer stock Ophelia finally given her big break, chewing through scenery and ad-libbed pearls.

I watched her glide into the saloon, carrying a vintage Louis Vuitton purse, wearing Friday night's dress on a Tuesday afternoon.

How am I to ignore a woman that rides her horse down the highway, all grown up on guns and bee stings, masking her emotions like a luchador behind a blue lace bra.

I know she's trying to shake me, trying to break me, but I'm gunning for her like a full throttle motorcycle, rolling a million miles past all her concepts of the homeboy who cried wolf.

She speaks and smokes, speech spills out like a warm, popping record, spreads waves of sound out into my tiny home.

I parked discretely around the corner from her house, on the opposite side of a vacant lot, her bedroom window visible but I was safe from view, stewed in a vicious, masochistic anticipation, desperately wanting to prove myself right so all my longing for her could transform into hate, waiting there for hours, slowly draining all my mental energy, my eyes becoming heavy and dry, on the verge of sleep when a dumpster cat jumped onto the back of my Ford, disrupting ever so slightly the weight distribution, and slinked along the length of the bed until she caught my eyes watching her in the driver's side mirror, realizing she'd been realized and quickly disappeared.

In my observation of contemporary gender dynamics, in the general sex obsessed attitude of American society, in each and every one of my personal relationships, the barrier I find, the fear I know I need to face, is the persistent and nauseating worry over fidelity, the idea that I can love with all my heart, try to understand with all my patience, be kind and devoted, and someone will still want to fuck other people.

My companion today is a mid-century short story collection, tuberculosis patients, newspapermen, busted down American dreamers and sore losers of love.

When we first started sleeping together she had a lot of nightmares. They'd wake me up in the middle of the night, her muffled, pained moaning, until they went away, or I just started sleeping through them.

Her companion today is an outstretched soul, testing the limits of her psychic extension while also calming the antennae that have so sensitively begun to sprout.

My nose buried in a book, hers buried in a pillow.

A door is left open and a breeze brings with it a nightmare through the screen.

She had peaceful, restful sleep now, pawned her nightmares off on me, transmitted her horrific visions into my consciousness and savored the respite, sprawled across the bed, snored loudly as I shivered, a sheen of sweat about me, my rapid moving eyes a cinema of catastrophe; Nazis hunted tuberculosis gypsy children, poachers tortured young orcas and orphaned baby gorillas, loved ones became Lucifer, betrayal after betrayal.

She reassured me, "Don't worry. You'll see me again tomorrow night."

The clouds were lovers, took one another's body through the projection of the moon; he above her, plunged into her, licked at her, her wrapped thighs up around the torso he so carefully controlled, pushed in waves of the moon.

I can't shake this inherent lust, like a cactus thorn in my heel, a full, deep balled hunger, that keeps me peeking up from these waterlogged pages to sneak a glance at everything she has that I always want to be mine.

A dark cloud cruised in front of the crescent moon and pushed its light down towards a gentle mountain below it.

She points insistently to her small brown pussy, glistening with sweat, coconut oil, and the beginnings of arousal, saying "Put your mouth here. Now."

Nothing is something to do on a slow hot afternoon lying silently next to you.

She slaps her palms down flat on the cold stone, pushes her ass out to me, legs planted shoulder width apart, and gulps a bit of air as I slip in.

Like a micro budget telenovela, screaming repetitious passions from department store balconies and hotel stairwells.

She stifles a scream and slows her pace, giggles a bit and lightly slaps my face, a sure sign she's reached her desired destination.

I was scared of the whole thing now that I loved her, she knew that, would stop loving me, never want me, now I fucked her too hard but never made her cum, now I was immature and overweight, now I was a boy to be made a fool of, now I was much, much safer if I remained aloof, detached, superior, even in its utter falseness.

Fact: The chances of making it in your marriage long term are exponentially better if you survive the first five years, but I might actually be thinking about restaurants.

Hunched over a splinter wood cinder block bench, humbled by the impossible sweetness, heavy with the weight of the want along the harrowing journey from solitude to union.

I feel loved when I get to take care of her, tenderness and deliberate action, not rushed or slapdash, a validation I wish would manifest more so in moments of mutual contentment.

It won't be the happiest day of my life, nor will any one day, as long as it's a continued push of growth, clad in turquoise and linen, leather and oil, as long as the spirit is advancing toward release in the safety of our interlocked fingers.

I began to wonder if even the truest and highest of loves required this constant vigilance and insistent confidence in order to sustain and survive, the little stray threads of jealousy, fear, and doubt that dangle from even the finest tailored cloth of affection never pulled, lest it all unravel.

The self-sabotaging pin prick on your fingertip draws my blood as well, my stubborn prideful misstep trips you up too, we're in it together now, wed to the brushfire as much as the lightning strike.

I'm still consistently surprised that you want to spend time with me.

Butting my own day to day concept of normality against another's, hoping for complimentary set of values, seems such an enormous gamble, a game of emotional power ball, the winning numbers of which shift with each passing night as the jackpot grows and the algorithms ensure one less victor among the millions.

No matter how it started, no matter how it ends, your skin was my skin, my blood was your blood, and our secrets were welded into a seamless steel wall, by choice and will.

Say we start a family, knowing all we do from our own tumultuous upbringings about the effect parents have on their children, how the hell are we, despite our best efforts, to keep from mucking up the emotional patterns of an innocent young human?

Sometimes I just don't have it in me to swallow my pride and say I'm sorry.

For all the grief she has and will cause me, for all the times I'll hurt her feelings and disappoint, there is an understanding that this is a love that engenders a certain amount of pride at its undertaking, despite the fact that the very definition of the term, the root concept of the effort, was not fully understood upon it's commencement.

I'll take her tired feet in my hands, I'll take her salty sweat in my mouth, I'll take her frustrated tears upon my shoulder, I'll take it all and keep the kitchen sink clear of filthy dishes too.

Home is the quiet castle you built in my cacophonous mind.

Like a schizophrenic soul star on a seventies stage, showing up songwriters with dynamite delivery.

A wise person once said, "A white boy jams, a black man grooves, you tell me which sounds sweeter?"

My heroes never made it, not all the way, maybe not until they died, and even then worshipped selectively, by punks like me, who secretly strive to be underrated.

Homegrown huddled masses, raised on Mad Max and cocaine, public schools and Cobain, with a B.A. that already bounced out of business before the shake and take commenced.

It's so much easier to fail when I convince myself I never really tried, feigning fearlessness in place of insecurity, eye rolling punchlines in place of pop song poetics, saccharine sentiment and vitriolic vinegar out together for a drive.

My all-time favorites are my all-time favorites for a reason, they've got my back like a far away friend I've never met who still knows absolutely everything about me.

All the things I thought I'd do by the age of 33, instead are reevaluations of my basic capability, and a prayer that I might overcome the rest of these frailties.

It's a selfish, ragged vanity, an intentional disregard, as insecurity, classism, rebellion, and creativity blend together and find form as style.

That vagabond actor, so hard to pin down, always on the fringe, also struggled with how to be a man, artist, and lover, and chose narcissistic wives out of an insecurity that he wasn't good enough or smart enough to be with a "real" woman, so called, or at least that's what I was told by a former keeper of his flame.

This pen and paper might be a cop out, a sham, a close shave over the hairline fracture of truth.

I woke up one morning, my muscles ached from exertion, and realized that I'm never aware of my fantasy coming to fruition until well after the fact, being that reality exists on an unpredictable continuum while dreams have finite narrative structure.

It never fails, in the aftermath of any success my immediate reaction is frustration, a sense that I can do better and I didn't earn it enough.

If we try at all, we end up too close to ourselves to see the beauty through the bullshit or the misspellings in the eloquence, eventually we'll need an editor, someone to help us ditch the chaff and keep it simple, stupid.

I sit across from other men, other women, who have chosen fates such as mine, and find the same set of stark circumstances, a poet's never famous till their dead, and only then to the other's dying, but they live with the glint of excitement in their eye, sharing the same streak of simple amusement as me, we've struck fool's gold, shine it up and stockpile it among the many other stories told.

It's curated intimacy, refined over years so the loose, sloppy, half-baked bits don't slip out too much and reveal that I'm often angry, lazy, dumb, horny, judgmental, self-absorbed, stubborn, classist, melancholic, self-destructive, unattractive, gross, cruel, and needy.

Poems and marriages aren't much different after all, carefully chosen words, lips in rhythm, fractured facsimiles of actual emotion, and in the end each book better than the one before.

For a decade yellow legal pads full of mismatched silverware and patchwork pajamas, words like a middle school jazz band striving for Coltrane, and I've only gotten so far, so, yes, my love, I'll make an appointment with a therapist.

Like a quasar in its youth, densely packed and luminous.



The National

Boxer

05/2007

Beggars Banquet

A Decade in the Ring with *Boxer*

J.S. Robson

Things fall apart, inevitably. The only remaining uncertainty is what you do when such a time arrives. Collapse is a constant companion on The National's 2007 album *Boxer*, a collection of twelve elegant songs strung together with nocturnal unease. The collapse may take many things: your friendships and relationships, your health, or your joyful adolescence, consigning you to a grey and unremarkable adulthood. All things, as they say, are on the table.

With a world-weary baritone, Matt Berninger traces this collapse through an opaque and surreal lyricism. He is joined by twin guitarists Aaron and Bryce Dessner, alternating reverberant swells and hocket-patterned hooks, and a propulsive, urgent rhythm section driven by brothers Bryan and Scott Devendorf. On *Boxer*, the band continues to explore a motif developed across its three prior albums. Each carefully crafted song a *cri-de-coeur* aimed squarely at middle-class neurotics discomfited from a dyad of small stakes and mounting pressures unexpectedly brought by a staid, white-collared life. *Boxer* is a platonic ideal of the form.

In *Boxer*, we find our protagonist—should you think him that—riven with doubt and a slave to his impulses. He is an empty suit at an open bar, a despairingly full mind on a deserted city street. He is trying to keep it together; he is, though only barely. And it is most certainly a *he*. While pop music has taken tentative steps towards a representative democracy of *Lemonades*, *Masseductions*, and *M.a.a.d. Cities*, the genre remains the home of mawkish young men speaking in three chords. While The National are not that, they are not so far removed.

The masculinity of *Boxer* enjoys neither the cocksure posturing found in more straightforward pop songs, nor the tender sentimentality of more emotive peers. It is something more tenuous, unreliable, and ultimately, darker. It grieves from a loss of potential and of self, retreats into isolation from friends and allies, and exists in uneasy cohabitation best characterized by cold war. It smooths out these rough edges with a dependence on wine, cigarettes, and bad sex. It shows up every day, and it gets things done, but isn't particularly sure why. A blind push towards middle-class respectability is no tonic to the impending collapse, but absent anything better, it will have to do.

This way of being is an odd and contradictory feeling to capture, much less identify with. Nothing is wrong. You belong to a world-historical comfortable class untroubled by need or want. The world smiles upon you, for it has been designed by those who look like you. Nothing is wrong. And yet, a barely audible hum haunts you in the quiet moments. Soon, it will grow to the din of a klaxon. What is wrong?

This discontent is driven by a fundamental tension that exists between emblems of youth and maturity: an untethered, solitary liberty and a dependable, if predictable, domesticity. On *Boxer*, our protagonist is weighted by these contradictory impulses. He travels the tracklist yearning for comfort and connection, only to be left wanting upon finding it. "Slow Show" retreats from the social expectations and disappointing realities of the *n*th apartment party to spend some time with a love it took years to find, and more

still to understand. By "Guest Room," the domestic promise is imperiled. The stability implied by a consistent partner and a dependable place has only led to an impulsive exit. This fundamental tension does not resolve; you've reached the end, the album begins anew, and you're left once more to try to figure everything out.

In the ten years since its release, the baroque, bourbon-soaked *Boxer* has become a part of my interior life. As with anything that arrives when you're too young and too impressionable, and remains long after you've become neither, it has become saturated with meaning and memory.

In 2007, I wondered if I would ever make anything of myself. Were that there was something I could wear on my sleeve-of-sleeves. In 2009, a new city welcomed me and so with it, the confidence that yes, I was surely moving forward. In 2010, a sharp rebuke as sickness and grief descended on me and mine like a cage. In 2012, in a freshly pressed suit, displaced, alone and at work in the most bureaucratic, unmagnificent world of adults. And now, as I write this, doing anything to feel alright, to stay out in front of a very dark year. *Boxer* has carried me from early ambition to overlong crisis, from a pocket square and a fitted shirt to a hollow-eyed burnout, from persistent stupor to an overdue resistance.

On its surface, *Boxer* is an instruction manual for people captured by a seedy romanticism. Go out. Look composed. Act removed. Get drunk. Wear your big, dumb heart on your well-tailored sleeve. Get entangled. Retreat. Repeat. Miss all implications of your behaviour. Understand, regrettably, too late.

Without the benefit of age or experience, my earlier self could be excused for drawing too much inspiration from the album's calculated detachment. I think I may know better now. As I navigate ageing, outrun poor decisions and poorer role models, and try to stay decent and kind in a time that rewards neither, previously unheralded phrases are brought into sharper relief. From the glowing young ruffian (though who am I kidding) of "Racing Like A Pro," I've become more the unsure narrator of "Apartment Story," leaning against the wall of all parties, striving for a meaningful connection, or in the least, keeping it together.

At a time of environmental disintegration, creeping repression, and too many wars on distant shores, it feels luxurious to mope around in the small-stakes sadness of *Boxer*. It is a sadness visited upon people who have run out of things to be sad about. This sadness is not the product of any of the countless tragedies visited upon people by an act of god or hand of man. It is benign and quotidian; the realm of largely white, middle-class men who drink too much and talk too little. It is a feeling I previously struggled to give form to and contend with. Why do you feel bad, when you can't find a reason to? It is a feeling that this album has helped me to understand, and ultimately accept.

Boxer makes a fin-du-siècle collapse bearable. It gives you and your big, dumb heart the empathetic space and grace needed to make sense of things and move on. It is a necessary antidote to a culture that hustles hard, keeps it 100, and stays on lest the underlying cracks begin to show. You may be a strange and nervous mess, but my god, you're not the only one of us and have you looked outside? There are wolves at the door. How else should you feel but strange, nervous? Go home. Get some rest. We'll see you tomorrow.

There is a body of work that says The National is embarrassing, their cerebral and barely contained songs indulgent. I think there rests the point. They are a salve for my big, awkward, and (often) dumb heart that feels too much. Yes, *Boxer* speaks of collapse, of a

heart unmatched to the demands placed on it, so often a victim to its own desperate behaviour. And yet, amidst all the cynical pretending and glassy-eyed coping, there is a core message that demands you *be better* on your own terms. The masculinity of *Boxer* is weird and graceless, but so am I. It asks you to get up each day and try to be decent almost in spite of yourself. To fail, regroup, and go forward once more. To tie your tie all by yourself, and to find yourself through the unmagnificent life of adults. And so I will.

I half-expected this album to fall away, as the other stalwarts of the last decade have. It hasn't, and I no longer expect it will. *Boxer* tracked the decade. A painful, vibrant, weird, and complicated decade animated by an over-sentimental heart and an overwrought mind. It has become part of the furniture: a safe, warm chair and late night drink by the fire. A place to reflect and regroup. The album—calculated, expansive, indulgent, and brainy—will continue to help me forward through the nonsense and joy, and will surely take on new meaning to match. *So worry not. All things are well. We'll be alright.*



A Moon Shaped Pool

Frank Houston

It ended just like that. One day I was married, the next day I was taking down all the pictures of myself and my ex-wife to-be. The wedding photos, the beach getaway scenes, even the family portraits. The ending was like an ice shelf plunging into the Arctic: invisible but known forces roiling in the background until the day when something broke.

She had moved out; I was there, picking up the pieces, stowing things in boxes I'd probably never open, making a small mountain of furniture and old electronics in my living room, items to be retrieved by men in a truck from the thrift store.

I put the framed photographs in a box along with the wedding album and paraphernalia that we'd preserved: the program from the ceremony, with its poetry and literary passages praising love; the wedding invitation on midnight blue paper with gold stars and speckles; the invoices for the honeymoon suite and the reception DJ who, less than a year later, would be killed at his day job at Cantor Fitzgerald on 9/11.

We had met in the fall of 1996 at a Web startup in Chelsea, and a few months later we fell hard for one another. One of many magnetic forces between us was music. Our tastes overlapped almost entirely—Beatles and Stones, The Who and Hendrix, Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye—but we also each brought something new to the other. I introduced her to Bowie. She introduced me to Radiohead.

One night we were gallivanting in SoHo—everywhere we went, we gallivanted—and we passed Thom Yorke sitting alone at a sidewalk table in front of a restaurant on Spring Street. With his baleful bad eye Yorke stared back at us, seemingly wondering if he'd been recognized.

That summer we went together to Tower Records to buy *OK Computer*. Some albums grow on you; others blow your mind on first listen. *OK Computer* blew our minds. We were living in New York City, right in the middle of the dawning digital age, *The Great Acceleration*, and here was our favorite band, laying down the soundtrack to our lives.

Album after album, this soundtrack seemed to play in the background throughout our marriage, right up until the end of it. We got engaged and *Kid A* came out. The opening arpeggio of "Everything in its Right Place" seemed to strike notes I already had in me, maybe because it seemed as though everything was. After the dot-com bust, we decided to move to South Florida, and as the boxes piled up around us, we listened to *Amnesiac*. "Pyramid Song" spoke to a wistfulness and regret that somehow connected to those boxes. We were distracted with work and worry, but it was as if, deep inside, I knew I would be looking back at this time and mourning something lost. "All the things I used to see ... All my past and futures." We left the city less than two months before 9/11.

Years and albums went by. Our world had gotten smaller around us. Finding the time to connect with one another was work. We were exhausted and we became roommates, doing chores and fretting about bills. *In Rainbows* dropped in 2007, and though our marriage would limp along for several more years, the cadences of longing in "Nude" struck close to the bone: "There'll be something missing / Now that you've found it, it's gone / Now that you feel it, you don't / You've gone off the rails."

Radiohead

A Moon Shaped Pool

05/2016

XL

My wife and I had veered badly off course. In 2015, it all fell apart. Six months after our separation, a new Radiohead album was released. And so *A Moon Shaped Pool* became the record of my divorce.

With the exception of the overtly political “Burn the Witch,” it seemed as if every song connected somehow to it. Of all the ways the band had been playing in the background of my life, this was the strangest. Many of the album’s tracks were reportedly inspired by Yorke’s breakup with his longtime partner, Rachel Owen, after a two-decade relationship. *A Moon Shaped Pool* opened a vista on the past twenty years of my life, too, coinciding with, and heightening, a period of deep rumination. Who I was then versus who I was now. How it had come to this. How I would move forward.

The “Daydreamers” who “never learn”—they had been us, fighting reality by trying to hold a broken marriage together, “beyond the point of no return” as we’d spiraled literally out of control. “Then it’s too late / The damage is done.” The piano arpeggios circle the melody, cautiously at first, then swirling with dizzying urgency, evoking a sense of bewilderment at the passage of time that I had just begun to reflect on; almost two decades of my life had blurred by without my noticing it.

As it surfaces in the mix, the outro of “Daydreamers” sounds like snoring—fittingly, as though the singer was awakening to find his life transformed. But then it becomes something more disturbing—a guttural moan, drawn out and, to my ear, disbelieving: “efil ym fo flaH.” The words are spun backwards: Half of my life. Half of my life. It has been noted that, in the song’s music video, Yorke passes through twenty-three doors: the number of years he’d spent with Owen.

“Desert Island Disk” evoked something else: the sense of freedom and independence, of beginning anew, that I hadn’t felt in years, not since I had moved to New York at age twenty-five, a few years before I met my wife there. “Now as I go upon my way / So let me go upon my way . . . Switching on a light, one I didn’t know / Totally alive, totally released.” The plucked acoustic guitar and up tempo beat echo the feeling of embarkation.

Even the songs that were not about love at all resonated in tone with my mood, and often included a line or two that somehow touched on it. “Decks Dark” opens with this announcement: “Then into your life there comes a darkness.” From “The Numbers”—an older tune formerly known, more straightforwardly, as “Silent Spring”—“The future is inside us / It’s not somewhere else.” And, pointedly, from “Ful Stop”: “Truth will mess you up.”

For the second half of my fifteen-year marriage, there was a truth, a reality, that we dared not face: We were, in fact, not meant for one another. Opposites, yes. But our belief that opposites attract was rooted in youthful naivety and fairy tale. Our personalities were on the far extremes of an emotional continuum, and for years we had struggled to find a meeting ground somewhere near the middle. We’d made ourselves miserable and crazy in the process.

More than any song on *A Moon Shaped Pool*, it was “True Love Waits” that absolutely devastated me. It still devastates me. It’s the last song on the album, and I find that when it comes around in the cue, I often turn off the music, unable to bear it. If, as is likely, I’ve heard *A Moon Shaped Pool* a hundred times since it was released, it’s possible that I have listened to “True Love Waits” fewer than a dozen.

Not long after the album came out, someone had the idea to use an algorithm (a “data-driven determination”) to analyze the chordal structure and lyrical content of Radiohead’s entire catalog to determine the band’s saddest song. (You can find the analysis here: <http://www.rcharlie.com/post/fitter-happier>.) This was a tall order. As fans (and detractors) will tell you, many, if not most, Radiohead songs are sad or desolate or morose in some way.

But I knew the answer before I even read the result. It may have had everything to do with timing, but “True Love Waits” was the most heartbreaking love song I’d ever heard.

The song dates back at least as far as 1997 (it was considered for *OK Computer*). But it took almost twenty years before it was finally recorded on *A Moon Shaped Pool*. I wondered if the decision to finally commit the song to an album might have had something to do with Yorke’s breakup with Owen. Regardless, it connected powerfully to mine.

The piano ballad is suffused with ache and regret. Yorke’s melody leaps, in one note, into a plaintive falsetto, the raw cry of a child. Love—*true love*—strips away our adult armature, leaving us as vulnerable as children, innocent and defenseless.

*Just don’t leave
Don’t leave*

The singer is bargaining and begging to hold onto something he knows is already gone.

*Just don’t leave
Don’t leave*

I experience Yorke’s plea as being directed to a time and place. When I think back to the beginning of my relationship, the giddy whirlwind of infatuation and courtship, I become enthralled and disoriented by my memories. I yearn to reconcile the two people I see then with the people they became.

Stay there, I think. *Don’t leave.*

The song ends on the dissonant major seventh note, hanging suspended in the silence that follows. Was this absence of resolution intentional? Was it meant to be open-ended, to suggest some possibility other than a conclusion? If so, it was not to be. Yorke and Owen’s relationship ended permanently when Owen died of cancer at the end of 2016, seven months after *A Moon Shaped Pool* was released.

Over the course of many listenings, I have grappled with the end of the most significant relationship of my life, too. I want to say I’ve made sense of it, but I haven’t. We are supposed to grow through these kinds of experiences, but I don’t feel like I have grown. The mystery of time only seems to deepen with age. I imagine an alternate universe in which my marriage survived, in which those two twenty-somethings held on, didn’t become unrecognizable to each other. These are the fantasies of a child, but they’re all I am left with.



Pink Floyd

The Dark Side of the Moon

03/1973

Harvest

On *The Dark Side of the Moon* or: Around and Through Beyond

Sam Rasnake

"There's someone in my head, but it's not me."
– "Brain Damage"

Music dates us. Yes. That's something we can't escape. There is a music – a part of its time – that's in us all. Like the famous paradox: does life imitate art, or is it the opposite? – music does define us, but the belief that "we define the music" carries its own truth as well. That truth has its own season. We live our lives anchored in a time, and that time sings its own songs, plays its music, dances its dance. Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon* is of my world, my time, my breathing – and I do listen. I don't stop.

Some bursts of light are so extraordinary they blind us for a while. We can't see it all. This is equally true for the music that fills us. There's more each time we take it all in. If Heraclitus had lived in London, March of '73, he would have said – with his headphones on, no doubt – "You can't listen to same *Dark Side* twice." Every time, the first time. Something new. Some swirling note from a synth, some bend of the string, some voice underneath. And isn't that at least part of the greatness of any recording?

Although I'd heard a few bits of Pink Floyd's early work, nothing prepared me for listening to *Dark Side* the first time – and that was through headphones. Surrounding, immediate. Everything closed off but the music. An incredible moment. David Gilmour wishes he could have heard / experienced *Dark Side* first through headphones. "That would have been something." An impossibility though. Hearing it *first* isn't the same as creating it – from nothing to everything.

This was my first full taste of their music.

The lyrics by Roger Waters? ...Simple; complex. Easy to know; impossible to define. Clichéd; alive. This clashing, a vital part of the greatness. I don't know if the music changed me, but I do know this recording opened my head completely. And I listened more.

In the layers of music, something began to emerge. A shadow moving? Someone lost maybe? Something missing? I listened deep, trying to understand, determine, know – and this continued for years. Then, *boom*. It was Syd Barret. His eyes lurking in the dark, burning toward some fracture, some greedy maw, toward some peace, some silence. The former front man, guitarist, vocalist, writer. Now I hear him in all the music, and not just the *Dark Side* sessions.

A relentless specter, Barret ghosts their world while the Floyd tries for years & songs & separate lives to carve a world around him/through him/beyond him – but they can't do it. Song after song, the recordings, the tours – he remains:

"You lock the door and throw away the key"
– "Brain Damage," *The Dark Side of the Moon*

"Come on you painter, you piper, you prisoner, and shine"
– "Shine on You Crazy Diamond," *Wish You Were Here*

"So have a good drown, as you go down all alone
Dragged down by the stone"
– "Dogs," *Animals*

"I've got wild staring eyes and I've got a strong urge to fly"
– "Nobody Home," *The Wall*

"And in my dreams I meet the ghosts"
– "High Hopes," *The Division Bell*

So Pink Floyd embraced that loss – their loss. But for me it's not just Syd. He's not the loss to me. It's something more. Maybe a symbol for something gone in me, something missing, and that's why I hold the music like a thread to follow ... why others find connection ... and keep finding. 932 weeks on the billboard charts. 45 million units sold – so far. Phenomenal.

Fragments of a Listen

From the heartbeat – actually, Nick Mason on kick – that opens and returns at the end, after "Eclipse" and all points in between, the music is such a flip book of imagery, such a phantasmagoria of dream, life and death in a melody – I can't just hear it. I must be the music.

"Dig that hole, forget the sun"

The song "Breathe" comes to me like Dōgen Zenji's words, "One must be deeply aware of the impermanence of the world." All things slipping away. Gilmour sings, "And all you touch, and all you see is all your life will ever be." Nothing lasts. This is true. And we all race like outlaws toward the grave. And this is the opening. Your life is what you make, and then it's gone. I hear this even when it's not playing. A constant truth.

"And I'm not frightened of dying
Any time will do, I don't mind"

Late into the night – dim lights from my player system the only glow – "The Great Gig in the Sky" unfolds its wonder. Clare Tory's voice, primal and beautiful, as magnificent as any instrument could be, fits perfectly when Richard Wright's piano gives way to Hammond, and the song builds. Her presence on this track somehow becomes a pivot for the entire album. Tory, who sings without singing, lets me know full well how much can be said without saying anything. The unsaid. There's no real way to describe it; it must be heard.

I remember thinking: *we are afraid*. That hasn't changed, at least not for me.

I want this voice in my body, this howling, so I can close my eyes against the unnamable empty – and know it.

I define myself by those things I hold close – things both sacred and impossible to live without. All the *must haves* I would save from the dreaded fires... My love, my children, my Dad's books, my Mother's voice, two photographs, the words of Bishop & Gilbert & Stafford, *Kind of Blue*, Bergman's *Persona*, my walking stick ... This song is one of them.

"only ordinary"

And here's the contradiction – I don't know myself anymore, or maybe it's the ground I walk that I don't know. Television and news apps that yell. The endless threat. The faces. Words on a page. Bird on the sill. It's all "which is which and who is who". All moments, ordinary in their making – moments that connect the ordinary days folded into years, and the motion that defines, then suddenly – though it's never sudden – puts on its suit of aching, and the pains blur to hush.

"The time is gone, the song is over
Thought I'd something more to say"

1. My life was nothing but edges then. Edges everywhere. Everything I did. I was an immortal – so it seemed.
2. I was never *all*.
3. The world inside my head was a nesting gift – and I'm certain it was the keyboard.
4. Desperation became mantra to whisper into the wind.
5. Like the man in overalls – he never wore a shirt in winter – on the bench outside the college library – the body of a guitar resting on his thigh, its neck pointing deep into clouds – me asking if I could play – his eyes burning through my skull. That was a no.
6. A hole is a hole is a hole – my description. Music as Möbius – if melody were rectangle, or words were thread.
7. There's no one to explain the why. Mad is mad.
8. I listen for the word *choose* – then remember I'm no believer.
9. Nothing like it – before or since. I'm stealing Bradbury now – and turtles, surely, all the way down: When I die, *The Dark Side* is dead.

Contributors

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Eric Bryan is a heavy metal writer, bass player, and garbage man. His writing has been featured in *Bulldozer Magazine*, the *Long Beach Union Weekly*, and *Metalreviews.com*, and writes and plays for Southern California thrash band *Anger As Art*. Though he remains lost in the 1980's thrash scene, his tastes have also become somehow both eclectic and boring (ask anyone). He is tolerated by his loving, patient wife, his two half decent cats, one pretty good dog, and one great dog.

Peter Piatkowski is a writer based in London who is a graduate of the MFA program at Roosevelt University and has an MA in English literature from DePaul University. His essays have appeared in *Transitions Abroad*, *Bright Wall/Dark Room*, *Off the Rocks*, and *The View From Here: Stories About Chicago Neighborhoods*. He's also presented at literature and humanities conferences. He loves art, music, film, literature, and comedy. Given his background, he's especially interested in diaspora, immigration, the EU, and national identity, as well as queer studies/politics, race, feminism, and progressive politics. He also has a blog, *An American in London*, <https://anamericanexpatinlondon.wordpress.com/>.

Yoshio Drescher sent us a really good essay without a bio or even a cover letter, and we never heard back in spite of several emails. So very mysterious!

Prewitt Scott-Jackson writes Dad poetry & short fiction. Find words from this irl-dad at *Ghost City Press*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Vanilla Sex Magazine*, *Five 2 One Magazine*, *Queen Mob's Teahouse* and *The Squawk Back*.

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Laura Gill is a writer and photographer living in Washington, D.C. She recently finished her MFA at Bennington College, and her thesis was a collection of personal essays, titled "A Type of Legacy." Her essays are forthcoming in *Agni* and *Swamp Ape Review* and have been published in *Solidago*, *Electric Literature*, *Entropy*, *Windmill*, and *The Blue Mesa Review*.

Gavin Lakin is a writer of literary fiction and creative non-fiction, most prominently in the areas of historical fiction, YA, pop culture, music, and the mercurial 1970s. His writings, musings and hazy remembrances are featured on his blog spot *seventiesology.com*. In the capacity of contributing writer, his works have been published and featured at *Medium.com* / *Memoir Mixtapes Vol. I*, *entropymag.org*, *Beautiful Losers Magazine*, and *BoomerCafe.com*—a site dedicated to archiving the Baby Boom generation. Gavin has authored a series of YA novels and is seeking acquisition and representation. Gavin is affiliated with the Historical Novel Society (HNS), the American Writers & Artists, Inc. (AWAI), *Medium.com*, and with a songwriting background he is a twenty-five-year published member of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP). Gavin originated, designed and currently manages his online collectibles business *Late Blue Highway* with a tagline "We make it our business to remember." A native Californian, Gavin lives in the San Francisco Bay Area without a dog, which makes him somewhat of an anomaly.

Christie Wilson lives in Illinois. She is currently writing a collection of short works and a novel. Her previous work has been featured in *Atticus Review*, *apt*, *Driftwood Press*, and *New World Writing* among other publications. Visit her at www.christiewilson.net or follow her at @5cdwilson.

Alan Gann is a teaching artist working with under-served teens in Dallas, Texas. A multiple Best of the Net and Pushcart nominee, he is the author of *DaVerse Works*, a spoken word curriculum published by Big Thought, and *Adventures of the Clumsy Juggler*, a book of poetry from Ink Brush Press. His second book of poetry, *That's Entertainment: Field Notes on Love, Politics, and Movie Musicals*, is due from Lamar University Press in February 2018.

Steven W. McCarty writes and makes music in Middleburg, Virginia.

Born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, raised in Essex County, New Jersey, and author of *Memories of an Old World*, Julio Cesar Villegas is the writer that your abuelos warned you about.

Joey Sheehan is a poet from Baltimore, Maryland. He has an MFA in creative writing from University of Baltimore. His first book, *New Queer Cinema and Other Poems* was published independently in 2015. His poems have been published in *The Cuerero*, *Skelter*, *Five:2:One Magazine*, and a few other places.

Ellen Austin-Li is a poet and freelance writer who lives in Cincinnati, Ohio. After dedicating 18 years to the nursing profession, she is now committed to writing poetry and prose. Ellen's life of service, combined with her colorful experiences, informs her art. An award-winning poet, Ellen Austin-Li has been published in the *LA Writers Tribe Review*, *The Maine Review*, *Mothers Always Write*, the Poet Laureate of Cincinnati's webpage, *The Poets' Craft*, and in the annual Art Academy of Cincinnati's poetry anthology, *For a Better World* (2012-2016). Ellen is an active participant at Women Writing for a Change in Cincinnati.

Gabrielle Gilbert has left Pratt Institute with a Bachelor's degree in writing as proof, as well as many ghosts and student loans. Her weird words have been published in multiple issues of *Selfish* magazine and multiple issues of *Alien Mouth*, as well as *Dum Dum Zine*, *Vanilla Sex Magazine*, *Crab Fat Magazine*, *Witch Craft Magazine* and *Literary Orphans*. She also has a book! A chapbook. Which can be found through Dancing Girl Press under the title *Change of Engagement*. Her Instagram is sometimes @gabbigilbert and she is sometimes living in Portland, ME.

Steve Goldberg is a video editor and videographer in Oakland, CA. He eats, sleeps, and dreams music, and wishes one day to be able to control the mental DJ, who seems to have a fetish for Yacht Rock. He writes about the songs that spin in his head on his blog, <https://fuzzyswarbles.wordpress.com/>.

John Huey's student work of the 60's-70's was influenced by teachers in Vermont such as John Irving at Windham College and William Meredith at Bread Loaf. After many years he returned to writing poetry in 2011. He has had poems presented in 'Poetry Quarterly' and in the 'Temptation' anthology published in London by Lost Tower Publications. Work has also appeared in 'Leannan Magazine', 'Sein und Werden', at 'In Between Hangovers', 'Bourgeon', 'The Lost River Review', 'Red Wolf Journal' and 'Perfume River Poetry Review'. His full-length book, 'The Moscow Poetry File', will be out on Finishing Line Press in November 2017. Read more from John at his website: www.john-huey.com.

Elizabeth Barker lives in Los Angeles and co-edits the music blog Strawberry Fields Whatever. Her fiction has appeared in Whiskey Paper, Storychord, Ohio Edit, and Venus Zine. You can find her on Twitter and TinyLetter at @elizafishbarker.

Lindsey Hileman is a writer who sold out to marketing to make a living and support her Third Eye Blind concert habit (five shows in 2017!). She occasionally finds time to tell stories about coming of age in the magical decade that was the 1990s at peanutblue.com.

Mara A. Cohen is a writer and public speaker working on a memoir. Her personal essays have been published in *Alimentum*, *BioStories*, *Embodied Effigies*, *Entropy*, *The Hairpin*, *The Nervous Breakdown*, *Jewrotica*, *Mothers Always Write* and *Pentimento* and are posted on her website, <http://maracohen.com/>.

She holds a doctorate in political science and served on the faculty of Loyola Marymount University's Urban Studies Program. A senior fellow at the Leavey Center for the Study of Los Angeles and active in several local civic and community organizations, Cohen's scholarship has appeared in peer-reviewed publications including *Urban Affairs Review*, *Political Research Quarterly*, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *Sociological Forum*. Outlets including *The Los Angeles Daily News*, *La Opinion*, *New American Media*, *Los Angeles Business Journal* and *National Civic Review* have featured her commentaries and op-eds.

Melissa Brooks has an MFA in Fiction from the University of San Francisco. She's the assistant editor of the sexual culture journal *The Thought Erotic*. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Arcturus*, *Chicago Literati*, *The Molotov Cocktail*, *Gravel*, and elsewhere.

Kevin D. Woodall grew up in Riverside, California, and now lives in Calgary, Alberta with his cool lawyer wife and dopey goblin pug. Chances are you haven't read anything else by him because he's a hermit who amounts to little. He's the co-curator/editor for

[Memoir Mixtapes](#), which he sincerely hopes you've heard of if you're reading this now. You can find photos of his goofy dog on Instagram at @KDWoodall and a few dumb tweets from him on Twitter at @Kevin_D_Woodall. He's trying to do better these days.

Matthew Woodman teaches writing at California State University, Bakersfield and is the founding editor of Rabid Oak. His poems and stories appear in recent issues of Drunk Monkeys, Oxidant/Engine, Trailer Park Quarterly, and Succor, and more of his work can be found at www.matthewwoodman.com.

Ingrid Calderon is a Salvadoran refugee that scribbles nonsense and makes it into verse. She hopes it resonates. Her goal is to be an anonymous voice that cuddles the masses. You can find her on Twitter @BrujaLamatepec.

Cory W. Lovell is a writer, photographer, and filmmaker who has made his home in San Francisco, CA and Marfa, TX and St. Louis, MO. By his side are his dogs Josephine, Cabrito, y Eloisa, and his trusted truck, The Mighty Quinn. Follow him on Instagram [@coryw.lovell](https://www.instagram.com/coryw.lovell).

J.S. Robson is a designer living in Calgary, Alberta. He spends far too much time thinking about cities, layout grids, and his next meal. You can find him on Instagram, showing off skyline shots and incomplete thoughts @jsrobson.

Frank Houston is a fiction and nonfiction writer whose work has appeared in *Vox*, *Salon*, *The New York Times*, *Narratively*, and *Columbia Journalism Review*, among other publications. He lives in Miami with his children and two dogs.

Sam Rasnake is the author of *Cinéma Vérité* (A-Minor Press, 2013). His poetry, fiction, and non-fiction have appeared in *Spillway*, *Wigleaf*, *The Drunken Boat*, *Poets/Artists*, *FRiGG*, *Necessary Fiction*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Connotation Press*, *The Southern Poetry Anthology*, *Best of the Web*, and *MiPOesias Companion 2012*. He has served as a judge for the Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Poetry Prize, University of California, Berkeley, and presently edits *Blue Fifth Review*, an online journal of poetry, flash, reviews, essay, and art.

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