





# Memoir Mixtapes

Vol. 10: Ballads & Breakups

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Special thanks as always to our reader, Benjamin Selesnick

# Letters from the Editors



To our beloved MM community,

This is such a huge moment for *Memoir Mixtapes*, and it's hard to believe we're really here. Back in 2017, when I put out our first call for submissions, I wasn't quite sure we'd be able to pull together even a single volume. And now, here we are, just two years later, sharing our 10<sup>th</sup>! It has been a wild ride, and so much has changed in these past two years, not just on our team, but also in our lives, and in the world at large. I am so grateful that this project has remained a constant source of literature, music, and, most importantly, friendship, fun, and community.

Over the course of the last two years, we've been fortunate to work with hundreds of amazing writers from across the globe. Each one of those writers has enriched our lives by sharing the important songs from their lives, along with the deeply personal stories those songs conjure.

That has always been the goal of this project: to tap into the universal power of music to help us connect with our fellow human beings, even when our life experiences couldn't be more radically different. I'd say we've been successful in that venture so far, but there are always more stories to tell, and always more voices and perspectives to hear from. Our plan is to keep providing the platform to share these incredible (and invaluable) stories for as long as we possibly can.

In this volume, we feature work from 13 talented writers. They bravely share their experiences with the blissful highs love can bring to our lives, as well as the devastating lows that heartbreak can drag us down into. We are thankful for the opportunity to share these moving pieces with this community of readers and listeners, and we are thankful to the community for providing the engaged audience this work deserves.

For my part, I am also extremely grateful to the team whose hard work and dedication makes this project possible: Kevin Woodall, Emery Ross, and Benjamin Selesnick—thank you for everything you do.

Until next time,

Samantha Lamph/Len  
CREATOR & CO-CURATOR



Hey everyone,

After much delay, we're back. *Memoir Mixtapes Vol.10: Ballads & Breakups* took a while to get out, and I won't bullshit you—that's on me.

My life has seen massive upheaval over the past seven months. After almost 10 years living in Canada, I'm back home in Southern California, trying to focus on being a better, healthier, happier version of myself. Coupled with the prompt this time ("irony" feels almost too weak a word for how coincidental the timing of the prompt was), I just didn't have the energy to focus on *Memoir Mixtapes* as much as I'd like. I'm sorry for that. I'm doing better now, kind of, but the wait for the next one shouldn't be nearly as horrific, promise.

So. Breakups. Breakups are fucking hard.

Doesn't matter who's involved. Doesn't matter how they happen—massive blowout fights, sudden ghostings by shitty friends, breakups that needed to happen for the health of one or both parties, or the deaths of loved ones—when you go through any kind of breakup it's just going to be fucking hard.

When someone has been a part of your life, and then they're suddenly gone, it leaves a gaping, raw void behind, and the temptation to get lost in it can be too much. It's easy to become overwhelmed, give into anger, bitterness, sadness, and to lose yourself in the process.

Fortunately, we have writing, and we have music. Breakups are easier to cope with when you can connect to someone else's words, to share in the experience, to join the company of the brokenhearted. Hopefully, if you find yourself staring into that void today, the call of the words within these pages will lure you back.

I have too many thanks to give, but I'd like to thank the MM team for keeping things moving, and for being patient with me while I get my feet back on the merry-go-round. You guys are the best. Also, for everyone else who has been waiting on me, thank you for your patience. It means more to me than you can know.

And now, without any further rambling, we're thrilled to present *Memoir Mixtapes Vol.10: Ballads & Breakups*. We hope you enjoy it.

Kevin D. Woodall  
EDITOR / CO-CURATOR

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Built to Spill

"Life's a Dream"

*There Is No Enemy*

10/2009

Warner Bros

# After "Life's a Dream"

Rhiannon Conley

*Everybody in this world is just like me*  
-Built to Spill

The moon in my throat makes me speak  
in cool, shallow whispers –  
regolith breath across your neck. Listen.

I listen. All these voices say the same thing:  
It's okay – and – No one cares – and  
there are other words I don't hear or understand.

Between all this I am breathing, actually,  
gulping air and trying to swallow  
around the moon, sipping an oral suspension  
meant to calm the little dovesoot marble.

I hear the moon's voice. It tells me  
there are miles till dawn. It tells me  
to fill it up with want. It tells me  
I don't have to say anything, if I don't want.

# One Wednesday Listening to “Con Los Años Que Me Quedan”

Anri Wheeler

When I hear Gloria Estefan singing in Spanish, I think about the day I lost my virginity. I was the first of my close friends to do so, the baddest of the good girls. I remember that afternoon, as part of my careful planning, pressing the buttons that controlled the dual tape deck at the bottom of my stereo, cueing up the mixed tape Luis had made for me to my favorite song: “Con Los Años Que Me Quedan,” the song I listened to over and over on the sleek (by today’s standards, enormous) stereo I had saved up to buy. The stereo sat on the bookshelf at the foot of my bed, and I sat next to it every night for hours as I talked with Luis on the phone. The only serious boyfriend I had in high school, he was a year older than me, a senior and the publicity secretary of the student government. This meant that every morning during homeroom, Luis’s big, smooth voice would come through the dusty speaker mounted in the corner of each classroom, regaling us with the days’ announcements.

His parents were Puerto Rican, and his father worked at the Domino Sugar Refinery in Williamsburg. At the time, I romanticized what this meant, imagining a Willy Wonka like wonderland and wondering if he came home smelling sweet. The reality was that his father was a janitor there, and when they shut down the refinery in 2004, he struggled to find another job. They were Jehovah’s Witnesses, the only ones I’ve ever known in person. They did not fit my perceived stereotype of young, white men knocking on suburban doors, bibles in hand. Knowing little more today about the religion than I knew then, what I remember is that Luis didn’t celebrate his birthday or other holidays.

As part of my preparation, I consulted the experts. For this I had to venture outside my immediate clique of school newspaper editors and stars of the yearly musical. One of the most vivid memories I have of high school is the moment my friend Elana threw her maroon backpack down on white tiled floor of the girls’ bathroom and used it as a prop to demonstrate how to be on top. We still laugh about this moment, tipsy at a mutual friend’s wedding or at one of our high school reunions. But that lesson came later, weeks after the Wednesday—one of the teacher professional development days when school let out at noon—when I crossed an invisible line at once momentous and yet wholly ordinary. I had stayed home that day, recovering from a head cold. When Luis called me from the school payphone to check in, I remember telling him to come over, that my parents were both at work until 6:00. Even though neither of us explicitly said the words, we both knew what this invitation meant.

My close friends were surprised when I told them the following day. I had ridden into school that morning on the subway feeling different, looking around at the rush hour commuters huddled around me wondering if they could tell, knowing that they couldn’t. My friends worried that it was too soon, asked if I had felt pressured into it. It wasn’t, I didn’t. Two years later, all of us first year college students spread across the country, one by one these women called my dorm room phone. They asked for advice for their own impending first times, or shared their stories of fumbling through. Back in the halls of my high school the week after I changed in a way that no one could see, we were busy studying for an AP biology exam, or the impending SATs, and everyone had moved on to the next intragroup drama.



Gloria Estefan

“Con Los Años Que Me Quedan”

Mi Tierra

06/1993

Epic

Two months later, Luis would break his ankle playing basketball in boat shoes on the concrete courtyard where we all congregated during free periods and after school. I had told him not to, but, just like he continued to smoke cigarettes when I wasn't looking, my words did little to change his behavior. It was two weeks before prom. We would attend together, I in a black dress with a dramatic floral embroidery, Luis in his rental tux, on crutches. I remember being embarrassed when he began using them as a prop on the dance floor, swinging them out wide like wings. But his joy was contagious, and the entire dance floor quickly gathered around his 6-foot 2-inch frame, Luis dancing and laughing through the pain.

We would ride in a limo together with all his best friends, the senior girls tolerating me, barely acknowledging my presence. I had infiltrated their space, dared to date one of their own in a high school social scene where grade-level hierarchy was paramount, and senior girls reigned supreme. The tradition for prom was that you stayed out all night and returned to school the following morning still in your finery, going around to visit your favorite teachers, showing off for the younger students before heading home to crash or out to a diner with friends. With this free pass to be away from home and school, Luis and I snuck back to his house that morning after we made our rounds. I remember carefully removing my corsage—the flowers already crushed, but together enough that, after I dried them, they would remain pinned to the corkboard in the corner of my room for months—before sliding off the dress my mother and I had picked out together. This time, however, before we could finish, we heard the metal gate outside his house clanging shut and I have never dressed faster.

That afternoon was the second and final time I ever saw Luis's father. I smiled and did my best to act casual, like I was just there hanging out post-prom. It's laughable now to think he didn't know exactly what was up. I had been to their house once before to meet Luis's parents. It was the first time I'd ever taken the J train, a route unfamiliar to me then, on which I had to ride longer and farther than most of my visits to friends. I remember feeling nervous about meeting his parents as the train went outside and across the Williamsburg bridge, a contrast to the purely subterranean routes of my largely mid- and uptown Manhattan-based existence. I brought his parents a box of strawberries and we sat formally at the dining room table eating them as Luis translated what his mother was saying. She spoke little, listening instead to the Spanish radio station that was on in the background. I knew that she didn't approve of his dating me. I came from outside their neighborhood, their religion, their race.

I thought back to Luis's mother's stoic face as I rode the J train back into Manhattan after we got caught by his father. This is the same expression I imagined she would have when his father told her about coming home to find us there, barely put together. I shifted on the hard, grey bench, which grew increasingly uncomfortable in my jeans, no underwear. There hadn't been time for such details, and I regretted not taking the extra minute. Though I had changed out of my dress, I was still wearing the pearl earrings my mother lent me before Luis arrived to pick me up and my father insisted on taking too many pictures. I still have the photos in a small album: us on the couch, us on my parents' small balcony, us outside the building getting into a taxi. Luis's crutches perch at the edge of most of the images. I fingered the earrings, thinking back on the best parts of prom, wondering what my own parents imagined I was doing right now. I started to drift off. When I awoke, the train was back in Manhattan.

-----

A few months shy of my middle daughter's second birthday, Marvin, a high school friend I had not seen in many years, came over to our house on his way to visiting his sister. As he captured beautiful photos of my daughters with the camera he had brought along for fun, he confirmed for me what I'd already heard whispers of: Luis was intermittently homeless, diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia for which he was refusing to take medication. Marvin asked if I'd been in touch with Luis at all, and I said no, not for many years. I'd seen his posts online, checking in from various public libraries, sometimes coherent, sometimes long strings of words that didn't combine to make meaning. They reminded me of the composition notebooks Luis used to fill with his poems and rhymes. He was always writing something down in his sharp, angular handwriting: a rap, an ode, a thought. I remembered how moved 17-year-old me was when he read bits of his writing to me, when I could pinpoint the moments we'd spent together that had sparked one of the energetic creations. They made me feel like I was a part of something more meaningful than his tongue in my mouth on the cracked leather sofa of the student council lounge.

The visceral love that coursed through me, so new to me then that I thought it would never fade, remains pure in my memory. But fade it did, when Luis went away to college and I started my senior year. I was easily sucked back into the emotional ebb and flow of the string of lasts at the school where I had matriculated for fourteen years, of college acceptances, of being another boy's first. The last time I saw Luis I had just moved back to New York after a year abroad, and was staying in my childhood bedroom, reconnecting with old friends, and a few months from starting to date the man who would become my husband. Luis had come over and my mother had made us all lunch. She was friendly and curious with him, liking him more now that the word ex- was in his title.

That day, I was lifeguarding at the pool in my parents' building (income as I looked for a full-time job), and Luis came down to the basement with me, bobbing around in the overheated water while I sat out my shift. On the elevator ride back up to the apartment where we'd taken each other's virginity six years prior, he turned to me and smiled.

"Do you think this could work again...you and me?" I looked up, caught off guard, and all he needed to do was look at my face to know that this afternoon was, for me, just a nice time with an old friend. How could I so misread his intentions, and yet share this moment where we were so purely back in our teenage selves, wordlessly knowing what the other was thinking? The last thing Luis said to me that day, after we'd hugged goodbye before he set off for the F train stop down the street, was the most unexpected.

"My mom still talks about you. She asks me sometimes, 'whatever happened to that nice girl who brought over the strawberries?'"

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Eight months after Marvin's visit, I got a call from one of my high school best friends who lives in San Francisco now. She had, the night before, hosted a fundraiser for a school she was helping build in Nepal. Luis, having seen the event page online, had shown up. His behavior was disjointed, she told me, and she was concerned; inhabiting a place I related to, at the intersection of the desire to help and admitting the relief she felt when he left the event. But she and I are no longer unaware, as I was as a teenager, of the systemic oppressions that layer onto each other creating an insurmountable mountain out of many molehills. I emailed Marvin who connected me to Brian who was in closer contact with Luis (and had also been in our limo for prom). I'd had a crush on Brian in 7<sup>th</sup> grade when he was in my English class, reading *The Great Gatsby* and *Of Mice and Men*.



Brian's message detailed the ways in which he and some others had been helping Luis—with financial support, with meals, acting as a conduit between him and his parents with whom he was refusing to live. They had been in touch with a counselor at the National Alliance on Mental Illness who had advised them that it was Luis's right to refuse treatment, and that it was potentially unsafe to have him stay in their homes. While I do not fault any of Luis' friends—I am grateful for all they did before he faded from their lives too—I also question the emptiness of words like "choice" and "agency" under such circumstances. What roots of his illness did I not pick up on as we sat together in the back of the Lexington Avenue bus passing a pint of Ben & Jerry's back and forth, trying not to break the plastic spoons we used to scoop large bites into each other's mouths? How did he make his journey across the country and where is he now?

After responding to Brian, I pulled my junior year yearbook off the shelf in the basement and brought it upstairs. I flipped through the pages looking for the handwriting that, much like the phone numbers of my high school friend's landlines, is etched in my brain. It took me a while to find the page, and the memories came back in shards as my eyes passed over black and white photos of faces long forgotten. I skimmed over the gushing messages of women I now have brunch with twice a year, laughing with the primal ease that comes of not having to explain anything. And then I found it: the message he wrote me that last week of his senior year. It is long and winding, like Luis's much thinner frame has become in the few recent selfies he's posted online. In closing, before a long Smashing Pumpkins quote he transcribed, he wrote:

*My name is Luis G-----. And I love you still. Whenever you end up reading this again, 25 years from now before you go out to work, 60 years from now just because, 90 from now before you leave us, I will love you. Anri, I love you.*

-----

I don't speak Spanish, thus never knew what the lyrics to "Con Los Años Que Me Quedan" translated to in English. I never needed to. I could feel what they meant. That Wednesday in the late 90s when I sat on the windowsill and watched Luis walk from the subway station towards my building, my nervous anticipation made my throat dry. The mixtape he made me had played well past the song I so painstakingly cued up by the time we were finished, the pain sharper than I had anticipated. Through it all Luis had been tender, constantly asking if I was okay. I think about this as I paste the first few lines of the song into Google Translate. I know, from my own experiences using the free service to translate between languages I do speak, how flawed it is and yet I can't bring myself to ask a friend for help. I don't want to have to answer their "why?" Or perhaps I don't know my why. I want the song to somehow remain between the two of us.

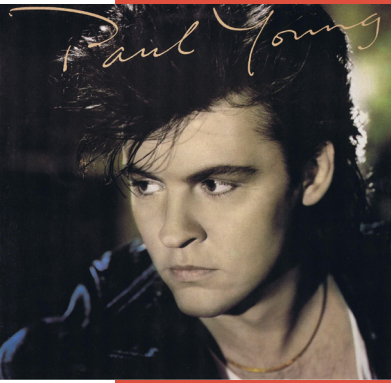
*Sé que aún me queda una oportunidad.  
Sé que aún no es tarde para recapacitar.  
Sé que nuestro amor es verdadero  
con los años que me quedan por vivir  
demostraré cuánto te quiero.*

*I know I still have an opportunity.  
I know it's not late to reconsider.  
I know that our love is true  
with the years that I have left to live  
I will show how much I love you.*

# Cusp

Jennifer Smith Gray

We were trying to catch lightning in a snapshot. It was the kind of summer night where a new layer of stars revealed itself every time you looked up, and the moon lit the beach, and the leaves on the birch trees were still. Some voices bounced off the water from either side of the bay, and loons called out to each other. But it was mostly just us. Tanned limbs greased with Skin So Soft to repel ravenous mosquitos, futile against the sweet-tangy lure of Aussie Sprunch Spray, Obsession, Sun In. Our clan of girls, classmates since kindergarten, grade eight grads now, celebrating. The end and the beginning. And there was lightning. It was far off in the middle of the lake, and it was wild and bright and forked and forceful and neat. And we tried to capture it on film. To look back at. To preserve. To hold still and timeless. Skeptical that our shutter fingers were quick enough, but maybe. Embers danced near our feet at the edge of the firepit where we roasted wieners and marshmallows. Sticky. Greasy. Sweet. Paul Young crooned and we swooned, and rewound the cassette, and rewound it again. *And like a dream, a life, a reason, everything must change.* Ageless, young, growing up. Children and teens and women at once. *And like a world, this earth and seasons, everything must change.* Handstands in packed wet sand. Arguments over pimple-faced boys. Giggles as we passed the Howie Mandel tape, stolen from an older brother, from Walkman to Walkman. Parents are divorcing. Spine-tingling tales of something other than the dog licking the man's hand as he slept. Someone is moving away. Silly songs of meeting bears in the woods. Troubles at home. Musky smoke clouding eyes. Who can be the last to drift off in their satiny sleeping bag on planked wood floor? Some never felt they belonged. Some might never again. Different high schools. Contagious tears. Knowing hugs. *Everything must change*, and we wouldn't all be together as one group again. We knew with each attempt we were seconds too late to catch that bolt of lightning. Film developed weeks later showed only blackness.



Paul Young

"Everything Must Change"

*The Secret of Association*

03/1985

Columbia

# Semi-Charmed

## Emily Banks

Remember being twelve,  
 singing *when I'm with you*  
*I feel like I could die and that'd be alright*  
 to a picture of the boy  
 you sat next to in math?  
 You thought it was a love song.  
 You were seated together  
 by the alphabet. You didn't know  
 his mother's name  
 or if he had siblings, his sign  
 or where he'd like  
 to live when he grew up.  
 You knew the space  
 between his left and your right leg  
 on the blue plastic chairs,  
 the time for one last giddy peal  
 of mirth as the teacher's  
 angry face began to turn.  
 You wore your favorite  
 khaki shorts with camo  
 platform slip-on canvas sneakers  
 but still, it never went further  
 than that. Remember when a couch  
 at a friend's house transformed  
 into a space of fantasy? A boy  
 slipping into the empty seat  
 beside you, the chance for hands  
 to touch, the dance of getting up,  
 shuffling back, afraid almost  
 to breathe lest he might leave.  
 The movie on TV, friends' jokes,  
 blurred hazily against the sharp  
 and constant pricks of desire.  
 Maybe it's just I've always been  
 easily bored. In the desert,  
 I held a soldier's hand  
 while he played guitar and sang  
 in Hebrew though he had  
 a girlfriend and refused to kiss me  
 with tongue. I was convinced  
 that touch was more than touch,



Third Eye Blind

"Semi-Charmed Life"

*Third Eye Blind*

08/2017

Elektra

that my charged body hummed  
in tune with some great truth.  
At 90s night, we danced  
up on the ledge and yelled  
the lyrics—*I want something else*—  
and I wished for it again,  
not the *something* but the *want*  
I knew before I knew  
that song was about drugs,  
the *want* like being sucked  
into a boundless vacuum  
kilometers above the earth's surface  
inside which I could hear  
nothing but the whirr  
of promised paradise.



# Volcano

Lisa Mangini

There is a blond boy who goes to college an hour and a half away. I always drive to him, and while he is gentle and sweet, it is clear to both of us that he is not my boyfriend, despite many mixed CDs between us and my ardent attempts to make it so. I have looked deep into his eyes, have given him my whole body. I have wept into his arms before disembarking from the visitor parking lot, him stroking my hair with a blank expression.

This goes on for the better part of two years.

-----

We are making plans over AIM, and he seems despondent. Perhaps the clue is some cryptic away message. It is hard to tell in a text box, but I do my best to encourage him to explain, choosing smileys carefully to help convey cheerfulness or concern, to deepen my hasty typing. No luck.

*dont worry. i dont wanna talk about it. lets just watch a movie or something ok? come over at like 1pm?*

When he opens his dorm room door, his blond stubble has grown in a bit, his hair falling in his eyes. He is tall, broad-shouldered, handsome, dejected. I can feel my pulse in my throat. It happens every time.

I enter the 12 x 12 room I've come to know well: the institutional oak dorm furniture, the *Trainspotting* poster, iTunes always playing something in the background—sometimes it was Aimee Mann, or something dreamy and unintelligible in Icelandic—making a soundtrack for each visit. Maybe this is why I remember these moments with a sort of cinematic flair. Or maybe it's because I was twenty. This time, Damien Rice's "Volcano" was on when I entered the room.

This time, his knuckles are all cut-up, hands bruised. I pry and pry, and eventually he confesses that he punched a cinderblock wall a few times. This strikes me as out-of-character; I cannot remember if, when I said so, he replied with something like, "well, I guess you don't know me very well," nonchalantly and free of malice. Maybe I am remembering wrong, despite that I can see the rumpled blankets as we sit side by side on his bed, hear it in his voice.

He is unsurprisingly reticent, but eventually tells me about "her." I am unshaken, asking sweetly, my palm on his back, trying to make sure he's OK. I don't really care if he's been seeing someone else. I am weirdly not jealous, perhaps also recognizing that this is part of our unspoken contract. But I want the whole story: how long have you felt this way, what does her smile make you feel, how did she hurt you?

I grow frustrated at his terseness. I want to be a "laid-back girl," want to stop having crying spells in the parking lot, because I know it will mean these visits will come to an end, knowing that people generally don't want to deal with someone else's emotions. But I am wild with intensity, want to gaze deeply into someone's eyes, talk about books and read poems to each other, tunnel into each other's thoughts, interpret lyrics and clouds

damien rice 0



Damien Rice

"Volcano"

0

02/2002

14<sup>th</sup> Floor · Vector

and artsy films together. I want it, by far, more than touch and skin and exclusivity. But the closest I am going to get this time is strings and acoustic guitars, mournful lovelorn harmonies pouring from tinny laptop speakers.

In hindsight, I am angry, and not at the one I admired, but Rice. His suffering and longing is embraced, his rejection applauded as art. Mine is only labeled foolishness, hysteria. I consider how the song includes the lyric, “she’s still too young,” and recall what is likely nothing more than an internet rumor: that the entire album is about the protagonist’s unrequited love for his clarinet instructor’s daughter. Even as a narrative conceit, this seems unfair: listeners are being moved by a troubling fictional scenario while real young women are warned not to be “too needy” or get attached.

“Volcano” was on one of the mixes I’d given him: a heavy-handed move, its chorus about feeling unwanted, unneeded, affection misinterpreted, warnings not to throw oneself at a potential admirer. Hearing it played by my host—that maybe he could relate to these lyrics, too—doesn’t offer the vindication or schadenfreude one might expect. I pull him close to me and mourn his heartache alongside him.

I trace his fingers, scratched red, swollen black-and-blue. He is a volcano in his own way: molten, roiling deep down under a stone exterior. I fall for his suffering the same way I do for the song: everyone else’s feelings are more interesting than mine, of course. I want to know why I don’t get to erupt, to be pegged anything other than maudlin and naive. Instead, I let my feet dangle off the side of the extra-long twin mattress, humming along quietly, waiting for him to tell me all about her.

# If You Don't Want to Be with Me Just Say & I Will Go

Marisa Crane

the thing is, you want to know why I'm crying but it doesn't really work like that, does it? what I mean is, Scott is currently singing about poking at his iris & wondering why he can't cry about an ending & we are drunk in the basement of a church & I am watching you watch me & I am wondering how two people can look at each other from separate dimensions, one-sided on both sides, & I don't have any idea which of his lyrics you assign to us & that's a purgatory I know all too well & would you look at Scott up there, just him & his guitar & his agony singing these words so we don't have to, we, selfish planets orbiting in reverse if orbiting meant *crashing* & reverse meant *everywhere all the time* & you are mouthing the words *you should look through some old photos /I adored you in every one of those* & I want to bite your shoulder & remind you of the aging picture we took on my webcam, since it is 2009 & I am without a smartphone & we are without logic or reason & do you remember which photo I am talking about? my arm is wrapped around your neck & my hand dangles loosely over your collarbone & I am smiling into your cheek & you are laughing, your eyes near-closed crystal balls, & it is one of those photos you never forget as long as you're alive because it reminds you that you're alive even if you don't always want to be & the thing is, when we first met you understood my depression, its fang-in-flesh hold & I understood yours, its out-of-body pull & the thing is, you & I have palindrome pain, we need each other even when we don't need ourselves & nothing good can come from that need, you've said so yourself & I've agreed but only when I've had too much whiskey to stand in front of you & accuse you of giving up on the magnets buried beneath our palms & what if I were to let you go for good & you were to fall in love with someone else? what would that look like & what would that feel like & what / who would that change & would I be the one who doesn't change, the one who still texts you at 2 a.m. expecting all two thousand of your eyes on me, the one that sends you Frightened Rabbit lyrics, *well we can change our partners / this is a progressive dance but / remember it was me who dragged you up to the sweaty floor*, the one that says *don't you remember we said we'd get married on a rollercoaster* because we did, the first week we knew each other, & your best friend shook her head & said *this is ludicrous, even for lesbians* & we laughed her off because she didn't understand the soft of your lips & our midnight organ fights in your too-tiny dorm room & the 7-Eleven hot dogs we ate nakedly in bed afterward & the mixtape you made me the night we met & the way you nicknamed me *Number 12* & hugged me after I hit a game-winning jumper & the first book you lent me, the book I stayed up all night reading so I could see you in the morning before class & the fact that the book was called *No One Belongs Here More Than You* & I hoped that that was a secret message for me, that you meant I belonged in your life & the thing is, it's almost my birthday & I don't even know if I'll wake up next to you or someone I don't know how to love but will find an escape in & that uncertainty is venomous, it bites & bites & comes back for more & here I am on the edge of denial, *I promise we'll make it out alive, won't you please wait for me?* like some kind of beast with grasping hands for cells & I know it oh I fucking know it but that doesn't stop me from kissing you in the dark mist of melody & it doesn't stop you from saying, *what does this mean? what do you want?* & it doesn't stop me from telling you how I miss when the

Frightened Rabbit

"Poke"

The Midnight Organ  
Fight

04/2008

Fat Cat

planet was in this position last year & how you were the first one to text me *happy birthday* while I was blacking out on a friend's roof, pinching all the houses between my pointer finger & thumb, the sun raining on my face, our potential igniting my lungs & how it wasn't long before you whispered *I think I'm too in love with you to speak* & how I told you that whispering counted as speaking & how I then stole the words from your tongue & stored them where no one could get to them, not even me.



# in the summer / it's a pity

Jessie Lynn McMains

the hottest night of a hot summer in the City  
of Stinking Onions, too hot to stay  
in my apartment with no A/C

we wandered the park along the lakeshore  
no lake breeze even but the moon  
was full, a fat low-hanging fruit fermenting

in the purple Chicago sky  
it was 2 am & the whole city was out  
in that park, tossing frisbees, dealing drugs,

cruising—the whole city howling, jacked up  
on jambox beats, 40 ozs. & firecrackers  
we were young ones, wild-eyed anarchists

out fermenting in our own stinking sweat, fried  
on iced coffee & cheap booze, we were  
summer wine, boozy fruit, yes fruit, *fruits*, you

the longhaired butch who mostly fucked  
dudes, me the femme with a shaved head  
& leopard print dress & too much lipstick

the color of sangria who screwed everything  
that moved, the whole goddamn glorious rainbow  
marched through my bed & across the park

in the dark two huge mutts ambled then broke into  
a strange loping gallop & *those are weird dogs* we said  
but they weren't dogs at all, we saw

they were enormous raccoons  
the big-shouldered tattooed butch spirit of Chicago  
brought her trash babies out to play in the summer

night & she was there too, shaking the ash out  
of her hair, giving the finger to the moon  
we walked out to sit by the lake, on the rocks

covered in art & scrawlings more fabulous  
than anything to be found in some dim whispering  
Near North Side gallery or any Poetry magazine



The Lovin' Spoonful

"Summer in the City"

Hums of the Lovin'  
Spoonful

11/1966

Kama Sutra

we sat near where I'd once written *no matter what*  
*I will always love you* about some dude who was not  
the love of my life—not like you, O you

lit a cigarette & we passed it back & forth  
between us, the tip crackling orange in the thick  
summer air & it's a pity that the days can't be

like the nights & babe don't you know summer  
never was like that again—no matter what  
it was never like *that*.

# Wanted

Lisa Fleck Dondiego

Though we're in Queens, it's an open,  
Western sky. The blue goes into Texas.

Boosting you in your cut-off jeans  
to climb a tree, my hands grazing

your skin like it's naked bark.  
Up top in cowboy hat, you whoop,

swing down, fiercely blaze  
that long-ago day into my mind:

your hands on me, my kisses  
on your face—your touch so shy

it made me blush, your tongue so quick  
it took my breath. No *Wanted* poster

would ever tell my crime  
upon that open sky,

when I seized you like a bandit,  
roped you to my side,

my outlaw brand on you,  
burning inside your chest.



Carly Rae Jepsen

"This Kiss"

*Kiss*

09/2012

604 • School Boy •  
Interscope

# On a Maddening Loop

C.C. Russell

I see her puffy winter coat, navy blue. She is swallowed by it, swimming in it. I see these halfhearted snowflakes falling haphazardly around us. I see her eyes—they were tired. We were so tired. Her hair was pulled back into a severe sort of ponytail. Her bare fingers shivered.

In my head this is the last time that we spoke, though I know there were others that followed; quick, awkward conversations when we would pass each other. But there is a finality here in this moment. I knew it enough at the time—those certain neurons firing: File this away. It will come back to this. You will want to remember all of this moment. This freezing cold sidewalk, the traffic slowly passing behind her, all of these layers between us—a lot of protection but no real warmth.

As I walked away, I turned my discman on. “Country Feedback” by R.E.M. I couldn’t have timed it better if I had filmed it, if I had synched up the soundtrack just so. There I am, walking away from her, the sound swelling as she retreats out of the frame.

R.E.M.’s album *Out of Time* came out in March of 1991. It’s a spring album, not this particular winter memory I have of it. I remember buying it day one in that small-town Pamida store. Cassette because they didn’t yet have it on CD, the first album that I would own on multiple formats.

Years later my car’s stereo would eat the tape in the middle of “Losing My Religion” and I would punch the dashboard so hard that I would bruise my knuckles. My friend in the passenger seat would ask me if I was ok and I would offhandedly reply I was fine. Not yet ready to talk about anger, about every emotion that I funneled towards anger because I was too afraid of it otherwise.

The first time that J. and I really talked was in early summer, her birthday party. A week later I called her from a payphone in the rain in Virginia. It was so perfectly filmic. My gut fluttered. It had to mean something.

At one point in our relationship, we decided to buy different albums—always so sure that our discographies would one day be combined. In the initial negotiations, she chose U2. I chose R.E.M.

“Country Feedback” is an elegant mess of a song. It cycles through anger and blame, begging, a bleak sort of yearning, and eventually crawls towards a sort of resolution. It is obvious from the first lines that this is never going to work out for these lovers. They have tried everything. *Fake breakdowns, self-help, plastics, collections...* It’s time to walk away. But they don’t want to, not now that it has come to this. *It’s crazy what you could have had, crazy what you could have had. I need this. I need this.* The repetition feeds the bitter inability to let it go. The song feeds on itself as it devolves.

I remember a particular Thanksgiving. I overhear her mother as I come around the corner telling her not to get too attached. “He’s fickle. He won’t stick around.” It made me angry in the way that only truth can. Too many years passed before I could admit that she had me pegged. I couldn’t tell J. by then but she knew. Of course she knew.



R.E.M.

“Country Feedback”

*Out of Time*

03/1991

Warner Bros. / Concord  
Records



"Country Feedback" is a fickle song in its own way. The song's narrator "needs" this. But does he want it anymore? He's the one who has caused the relationship to fall apart in some way—*these clothes don't fit us right and I'm to blame*. He's worn out, walking away while whining that it is what he still needs. In the end, it's the narrator who is making this choice though it doesn't feel like a choice anymore. There's an innate selfishness to the song. The narrator is, in many ways, the villain of the story. I'm sure that there is an apology buried in the narrative, but if so it comes much later than the final notes we are given.

In the last photograph that I ever took of J., she is in the off-campus trailer that I lived in, the one where the pipes would freeze, where we would wear our coats indoors all winter. She's wearing that same puffy navy blue from my memory. You can tell that it is our last winter together because her middle finger is up, raised towards the camera lens and who is behind it. It doesn't look like a playful gesture.

"Country Feedback" denotes a better history behind its dissolve. As with any story, there had to be a happiness that led to this mad clinging to something that has fallen apart. But our stories so often aren't about that. They're about blame, about anger. They're about a failure to resolve anything. It's such a familiar narrative arc, one we tell over and over. It's how we survive our own stories when it becomes clear that we are the villain. It's an odd way to apologize, but in a way that's what it sometimes is. *It's crazy what you could have had. I need this. I need this.*



Mitski

"Come Into the Water"

Be the Cowboy

08/2018

Dead Oceans

# self-portrait of the artist in love as mitski's be the cowboy with red lipstick & ice (after Kaveh Akbar, after Sara Mae)

Adrienne Novy

*"Maybe I'm the same as all those men / writing songs of all their dreaming."*

-Mitski, "Come Into the Water"

I rest my elbow against the laminate bathroom countertop  
as I paint my eyeliner into a fraternal pair of twins.

I put on drugstore-brand mascara  
& buy a bouquet of sweet peas for myself.

Onstage, Mitski's hands are camera flashes  
& her knees are taped with polaroids.

I collect washing machine quarters & they all adore  
my partner's name. If my body is made

of crushed little stars, then my name is carved  
into a planchette in Texas. I might as well wait  
for the Thursday sky to clear to shine my pellucid joy.

# Sometimes I'm Above Water but Mostly I'm at Sea

Marissa Castrigno

It is September and the waves of the Atlantic keep coming, and coming, and coming; I am safe the whole time, though I feel compelled by the unrelenting tide to keep asking myself whether I am still safe. The ocean is cold and swollen enough that I have to dive with the passing of each wave, feet never quite touching the bottom. Three other swimmers are bobbing just like I am, and we shout between quick breaths. We drift apart as we tread. Whenever I can I glance back at the shore, looking for my house, the pitch of the roof visible above the crest of the dune. The tide is gentle, yet I am certain in the moment before I turn and find my beacon that I have been carried miles away. Then another wave. I dive. When I break through the surface of the water I have just enough time to wipe the salt from my eyes and breathe before I must dive again. The waves begin to overwhelm me, the effort of facing them. Everything feels far away: my companions, the shore, the house. And I realize to stay in the water I will have to dive and breathe and dive and breathe and dive and breathe without end. But the water is cool and the sun is hot, and I am swimming, and nothing is wrong. This should be nice.

*It's an ache and it shines through me*

*A swallow in a cage*

Sylvan Esso sets to music the astonishing sadness that sometimes comes with being alive. The empty recognition of objective goodness. The frustration with what disparity exists between the joy one sees and the joy one feels. Their album *What Now*, on which "Slack Jaw" appears as the ninth of 10 songs, was released two weeks after I got dumped. It is slow, even languorous, and comes after eight electro pop tracks whose fast tempos and heavy production often belie the depth and darkness of their lyrics.

*I was gonna die young*

*(I had it all planned out before you met me)*

*Now I gotta wait for you, honey*

*(I had a plan, you ruined it completely)*

Not long after their album release Sylvan Esso put out *Echo Mountain Sessions*—an EP with "Slack Jaw," and three other songs from *What Now*, performed by a full band. The song's intro, a ticking metronome that carries the first minute and a half, became a single note played on piano. Ringing, then hollow, over and over. Lead vocalist Amelia Meath has spoken about her songs as a love letter to the listener: Here you go, we made this for you. Let it take you away for a little while. The first time I heard *Echo Mountain Sessions*, I listened to "Slack Jaw" six times. I laid on the floor halfway through. I'd spent so much time crying by then, and the song felt like someone else was finally crying for me.

*Is it a sign? Or just a landmine?*

*Or a feeling roaming free?*

*It's overtaken me*

It's just me there, in the ocean. The bobbing heads that once belonged to my girlfriend and our guests are now like the bright outlines of seagulls floating. I am no longer breathing between dives but gasping, and I don't shout when I decide to pull myself along



Sylvan Esso

"Slack Jaw"

*What Now*

04/2017

Loma Vista Recordings

the backs of the waves, heading for the sand. Soon I am collapsed into a towel, a heap, chest and throat burning. From the shore, the ocean seems calm and the waves roll softly up the sloping sand. The sound of them is staticky. For a moment I wonder if any of it was real.

*I got all the parts I wished for  
I've got everything I need  
Sometimes I'm above water  
But mostly I'm at sea*

Sylvan Esso played "Slack Jaw" live when I saw them in 2017, and again in 2018, but I don't remember hearing it. The feeling of the sound couldn't permeate the thickness of the crowd—not like it does in my apartment, vinyl spinning on my cheap turntable with the volume cranked up as loud as it will go. There, the sound becomes the room, becomes the woman I lost years ago, and the one who just moved as far across the world as one can go without falling off it. The sound becomes all the water between us, the vastness of which I have no way to understand. The sound becomes the love I hid from her, and the answer to it.

*If it's me I cannot give up  
I'd rather that she stayed*

In an interview, Amelia told *All Songs Considered* that her "favorite manifestation of heartbreak is wanting to be a piece of music." I found "Slack Jaw" at a time when I didn't feel I was alive, nor did I want to be; the song paid homage to that kind of darkness, made it something impossibly beautiful, and it made me hurt less for three minutes and five seconds.

When I lie on my floor and hear the music and the music becomes an ocean and I am lifted from my body—I know that she has done this for me and I let my lips move with the shape of her words, though what I'm really saying is *thank you*.

# Out of Reaches

Cassandra Caverhill

*I can see you hiding out  
Shrinking like the daisy that you're born to be*  
-Stephen Malkmus & The Jicks

I was attuned to every pale  
beta-male in Essex County:  
Scruffy faced record-raters  
reaching for more depth  
than they possessed, who  
got hard just thinking about  
their own discerning tastes.  
It was considered important  
whenever they said they  
were willing to fuck me.  
Thrilling to be the latest hit  
they couldn't resist  
pressing REPEAT on. A tidbit  
traded between collectors  
searching for the next  
singular sound. I drifted  
toward them in harmony,  
a needle ingraining a groove:  
All those easy targets  
with their slouched stances  
and mum mouths, waiting  
on the periphery. Their brand  
of aloofness belying more  
than they'd ever avow—  
the hope of being prized  
like a rare 45 when pegged as  
a bargain-bin one-hit wonder.

STEPHEN MALKMUS  
& JICKS



Stephen Malkmus &  
The Jicks

"Out of Reaches"

*Real Emotional Trash*

03/2008

Matador Records

# i haven't seen endgame yet, but i've already read what happens at the end

Matt Mitchell

all day i've been crowded by talk  
about missing someone, & i  
sent my roommate to see the  
avengers fight thanos alone while  
i locked myself in an oregon airbnb  
with nothing but my homesick  
skin smelling like redwood  
trees & my partner's lips tasting like  
cherry blossoms. *i have loved you so much  
for so long*, i said as we danced in this  
rented heaven where i've kept my  
heart, a home much different than  
ours back in ohio. as we embraced for  
the first time in a month in the  
iving room, orange-crowned warblers  
serenaded us outside the window  
& i saw nothing but colorful stars  
gleaming like infinity stones.

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*This poem was previously published in [Jam & Sand](#) on August 26, 2019.*



The National

"Carin at the Liquor  
Store"

*Sleep Well Beast*

09/2017

4AD



## Contributors

Rhiannon Conley is a poet and writing instructor living in North Dakota. Her work has appeared in *Occulum*, *Literary Mama*, *Longleaf Review*, *The Penn Review*, *Rust + Moth*, *Exposition Review*, *Stirring*, *Sidereal*, and more. She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2016 and 2018, and for Best of the Net in 2018. Her first chapbook, *Less Precious*, was published by Semiperfect Press in 2017. She writes an irregular newsletter of short poetic essays called *Smol Talks*, and more regularly Tweets @RhiannonAdmidas.

Anri Wheeler is a writer, antiracist educator, and mother to three strong daughters. When not writing or teaching, she is energized by running and baking for loved ones. She is working on a book-length memoir. More at [anriwheeler.com](http://anriwheeler.com).

Jennifer Smith Gray lives, works, and writes in the Scarborough Bluffs area of Toronto. Much of the inspiration for her writing comes from memories of her time in Northern Ontario, where she was born and lived before heading south years ago. Jennifer's work has been shortlisted for the *FreeFall Magazine* Annual Prose Contest, and published in *Birkensnake 6* and *CommuterLit*. There is more at [www.jennifersmithgray.com](http://www.jennifersmithgray.com).

Emily Banks is the author of *Mother Water* (Lynx House Press, 2019). Her poems and essays have appeared in *The Cortland Review*, *The Southampton Review*, *Borderlands*, *Superstition Review*, *New South*, *Glass (Poets Resist)*, and other journals. She lives in Atlanta, where she is a doctoral candidate at Emory University.

Lisa Mangini is the author of a book of poems and four chapbooks of poetry and prose. Her work has been featured in *McSweeney's*, *Mid-American Review*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Memoir Mixtapes*, and *Ms. Magazine*. She holds an MFA from Southern Connecticut State University, and is the Founding Editor of Paper Nautilus, a small press. She teaches English and creative writing at Penn State, and lives in the Nittany Valley with her husband and cat. For more, visit [lisamangini.wordpress.com](http://lisamangini.wordpress.com).

Marisa Crane is a queer writer whose work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Wigleaf* Top 50, *The Rumpus*, *Jellyfish Review*, *Hobart*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Crab Fat Magazine*, *Okay Donkey*, and elsewhere. She is the author of the poetry chapbook, *Our Debatable Bodies* (Animal Heart Press, 2019). Originally from Allentown, PA, she now lives in San Diego, CA, with her wife.

Jessie Lynn McMains is a poet, writer, and publisher. They were the 2015-2017 Poet Laureate of Racine, WI, and currently write a reoccurring column for *Pussy Magic*. They are the author of multiple chapbooks, most recently *The Girl With The Most Cake* and *forget the fuck away from me*. You can find their personal website at [recklesschants.net](http://recklesschants.net), or follow them on Tumblr, Twitter, and Instagram @rustbeltjessie.

Lisa Fleck Dondiego's poems have appeared in *The Westchester Review*, *Haibun Today*, and in several anthologies, including Red Moon Press's yearly anthology and in the Contemporary Women Writers of the Hudson Valley's *A Slant of Light*. She has read locally at Cornelia St. Café and the Hudson Valley Writers' Center, and has taught in the *Learning to See* workshop series at the Greenburgh Library in Westchester. Her chapbook, *A Sea Change*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2011. She lives in Ossining, NY, with her husband.

C.C. Russell lives in Wyoming with his wife and daughter. His writing has recently appeared in such places as *Tahoma Literary Review*, *Word Riot*, *Rattle*, *The Meadow*, and *The Colorado Review*. His short fiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Best Small Fictions, and Best of the Net. He has held jobs in a wide range of vocations—everything from graveyard shift convenience store clerk to retail management, with stops along the way as dive bar DJ and swimming pool maintenance. He has also lived in New York and Ohio. He can be found on Twitter @c\_c\_russell.

Adrienne Novy is a writer, musician, and Bettering American Poetry and Pushcart Prize nominee currently living in Saint Paul, MN. She is the author of *trisomy 22* and *Crowd Surfing With God* (Half Mystic Press, 2018). Her most recent work can be found in ENTROPY's series *The Birds and FlyPaper Magazine*, and has previously been published in *NAILED Magazine*, *Rising Phoenix Press*, among others. She loves My Chemical Romance and she loves being alive.

Marissa Castrigno is an essayist living in Brooklyn or North Carolina, depending on when you read this. Her work has appeared in *Lavender Review*, *Bluestockings Magazine*, *Eater*, and on the HuffPo Blog. She is an MFA candidate at UNC Wilmington.

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**fin.**

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